

Women's Policy Group NI

Key Briefings for Ministers: Minister for Health

6th February 2024

Introduction

The Women's Policy Group (WPG) is a group of policy experts and practitioners who advocate collectively for women and girls by promoting gender equality through an intersectional feminist lens. We challenge systemic injustice and discrimination affecting women and girls by informing society and influencing policy and law. Our work is informed by women and girls' lived experiences and rooted in international human rights law.

There are a number of issues that we have spent several years lobbying for and working towards, that could not be progressed because of the absence of government. Now that the Assembly has returned, we would like to outline our key priorities to every Minister, explain why these issues are important, and highlight what can be achieved if we begin early and focus on the long-term benefits of these actions.

Policy Issues: Women's Health Strategy, Perinatal Mental Health, Abortion Access & Trans Health Care

- **We need a Women's Health Strategy in Northern Ireland, as in other jurisdictions**
- **We need to move ahead urgently on the work to build a Mother and Baby Unit**
- **We need full compliance with the Abortion Regulations NI 2020, including adequate access to abortion services**
- **We need the full commissioning of specialised gender identity services which fit a human rights compliant and culturally competent service model**
- **Restore the DoH core grant**
- **Ban conversion therapy**

Why are these measures important?

A Women's Health Strategy is standard in other jurisdictions in the UK and also in the Republic of Ireland, and is a sensible way to plan for the future; allowing GPs, hospitals and Trusts to make a coherent plan for the specific challenges women face in healthcare and to provide pathways. This is not necessarily a significant financial investment, but it will make a significant difference to patients and women generally.

Northern Ireland urgently needs a Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) so that mothers experiencing perinatal mental health issues and require hospitalisation can be treated alongside their babies. This has been proven to improve health outcomes for both the mother and baby and facilitates bonding. The commitment for a Northern Ireland MBU has been given by the previous Executive and Minister - now we need action.

In 2020 the Abortion Regulations came into force and yet in 2024 the service remains patchy, and most patients cannot access abortion after 9 weeks. This is contrary to the legislation passed in Westminster and we need this to be addressed as a first order of business.

As of 2023, more than 600 people in Northern Ireland were on the waiting list for the Gender Identity Service. This figure is expected to have worsened by February 2024. At present, many patients across Northern Ireland cannot access the healthcare they need and deserve. We urgently need to invest in the GIC and to allow patients to be seen in a timely fashion, as we would expect with any other form of healthcare.

The DoH core grant enabled vital work for the most at risk in society and was a particular cruelty from 2023-24's punishment budget. We need to protect these services now more than ever.

Conversion therapy is currently still legal in Northern Ireland. No LGBTQIA+ person should face attempts to suppress, "cure", or change their gender identity or sexual orientation.

What are we asking for?

- A commitment to developing and implementing a Women's Health Strategy
- Investment in and swift movement on a Mother and Baby Unit
- Full implementation of the Abortion Regulations NI 2020
- Full commissioning of specialised gender identity services
- Restore the DoH core grant

- Introduce a ban on conversion therapy practices

Further information

If you have any questions or queries regarding this briefing, please contact:

Elaine Crory,
Women's Sector Lobbyist,
Women's Resource and Development Agency
elaine.croory@wrda.net