

Welcome to the twenty-sixth edition of DASH

This edition focuses on the impact of COVID-19 and how sexual and reproductive health charities have responded to the global health pandemic and continue to support service users.

The featured articles are from the following organisations:

- Informing Choices NI: Tesco 'Bags of Help - COVID-19 community fund' and social distancing booklets.
- Common Youth: Young people's sexual health and wellbeing during COVID-19.
- NEXUS NI: The provision of telephone counselling during COVID-19.
- Positive Life: Supporting those living with or affected by HIV during COVID-19.

- The Rainbow Project: Rapid STI testing and the LGBTQ+ COVID-19 fund.

In our Horizons feature, the Chief Executive of Informing Choices NI (ICNI), Mark Breslin, discusses the establishment of the charity, how it has adapted to COVID-19 and their plans for the future.

ICNI is contracted by the Public Health Agency to write and produce DASH.

Showcase your project, publicise an event or comment on this edition by contacting the editor, Ruairi Rowan, by email ruairi.rowan@informingchoicesni.org or telephone **028 9031 6100**

EVERY LITTLE HELPS: TESCO BAGS OF HELP

by Informing Choices NI (ICNI)

March 2020 saw everyone thrown into a whole new world and COVID-19 was flooding the headlines and so too was the sudden urge to clear the shelves of toilet rolls. At ICNI, we very quickly noticed that sanitary products were clearing the shelves too.

Therefore, we applied for the amazing opportunity from Tesco 'Bags of Help - COVID-19 communities fund' and were successful and used the funding to buy sanitary products. We created sanitary packs containing varied sizes of sanitary towels, tampons and panty liners and distributed them to learning disability and autism groups throughout Northern Ireland.

This is an area of health that is rarely talked about and during lockdown when many people were unable to leave their homes ICNI delivered over 700 packs of sanitary products to regional learning disability days centres, community groups, schools, supported living, and autism organisations for them to distribute to their members.

As soon as we put the word out that the packs were available, the demand was incredible and we received fantastic feedback.

'These are absolutely amazing for our Girls and Autism Project and we are so grateful to secure some for the girls'
(Manager, Autism NI)

'The packs have been a wonderful addition to our nurture room in school, thank-you so much' (SEN teacher)

'We are so grateful for these. There is a lot of period poverty,



especially since lockdown and I know these packs will go a long way to help people out' (Day Opportunities Manager)
'These packs are a great idea and will benefit a number of our women, thank-you' (Shared Living Manager)

We have created a short video about the packs which can be viewed on our website and social media pages:

Website www.informingchoicesni.org/just-ask

Facebook www.facebook.com/ldsupport

Instagram www.instagram.com/justaskld

Twitter @ICNI2019

YOUNG PEOPLE'S SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING DURING COVID-19

by Arlene McLaren, Chief Executive, Common Youth

Common Youth (CY) is only too aware of the impact of COVID-19 on young people's sexual health and well-being. Over the past six months a picture has emerged of the number of ways that current restrictions have affected our client base:

- Health and wellbeing: increased social isolation resulted in exacerbation of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and self-harm.
- Accessing services: access was limited by parental restrictions of movement. Telephone consultations and postal prescriptions were often difficult especially for younger clients. General lack of privacy made it harder for young people to find a safe space to discuss personal issues around sexual health and to get the information they needed.

Early on in the current crisis I spoke with Barbara Porter from the Public Health Agency (PHA) who commissions our service. She was agreeable that the clinic remained open in accordance with guidelines for contraceptive and sexual health services for vulnerable populations.

Consequently, CY continued to provide a seven-day a week open access service in the centre of Belfast. Apart from Easter Sunday we have been open at some point every day.

The service was able to make rapid adjustments to ensure the continued safety of both staff and young people, and systems were set in place to provide telephone consultations, posting and collecting of supplies, and remote counselling. This enabled numbers attending the clinic at the height of the restrictions to be kept to an absolute minimum.

A text message was sent to all young people currently using the service to let them know we were still open. Many young people contacted us for help and advice as a result of this message.

Services were in the main provided by a small team who saw young people face to face in addition to other staff providing telephone information and support.

Throughout this whole period, from March 2020 until the present date, CY has

seen a number of vulnerable young people for whom no other service was available. These included:

- Clients revealing thoughts of self-harm and suicide;
- Young men and women needing urgent attention for STIs: these included primary syphilis, several patients with symptomatic gonorrhoea, several cases of genital herpes, and a paraphimosis requiring urgent surgical reduction.
- Contraceptive advice and treatment, including emergency contraception and management of side effects from hormonal contraception. A number of new clients who made contact with the service explained they had been unable to get appointments with their usual service providers.

In summary CY is able to adapt rapidly to the changing situation and continue to provide support for the sexual health needs and welfare of young people accessing the service.

For more information about Common Youth and the services they provide please visit www.commonyouth.com



RAPID STI TESTING AND THE LGBTQ+ COVID-19 FUND

by Leo Lardie, Sexual Health Development Officer, The Rainbow Project

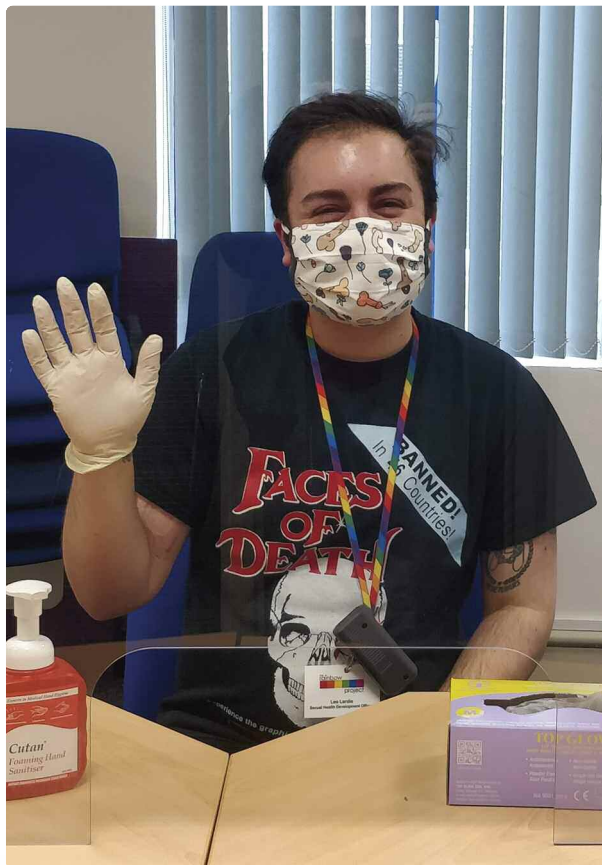
The Rainbow Project is one of Northern Ireland's leading LGBT organisations and we aim to improve the health and wellbeing of LGBT people and their families. Sexual health has always been a vital aspect of our work. In fact, when The Rainbow Project opened its doors back in 1994, largely in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, one of our first services was OUTreach where volunteers would hand out condoms and lube to revellers in what is now known as the queer quarter.

In 2012 after securing funding to create a sexual health development officer role we began providing rapid HIV and syphilis testing for men who are gay, bisexual or have sex with men. We opened up rapid testing to be available to transgender and non-binary people in 2015. Most of our clients say they use our rapid testing service because it is convenient, friendly and LGBT specific.

In the initial months after COVID-19 hit Northern Ireland we quickly transitioned to providing our services such as counselling through the phone or by video conferencing. Unfortunately, these solutions wouldn't work for rapid testing, a service that would be required more than ever as GUM clinics were operating at a very limited capacity whilst staff were relocated for COVID-19 relief efforts. We decided to complete a phone consultation with every client asking for a rapid test, where we could assess their risk through asking about their sexual history. Only clients with the very highest need would be seen at the Belfast LGBT centre, whilst others would be directed to SH:24 (the free postal STI self-test kit).

As the pandemic continued, we, as many organisations and business have, relied on Perspex screens, masks, gloves, monitoring temperatures for signs of fever and frequent disinfecting to minimise

the risk of the virus spreading further. This has allowed us to provide rapid testing to any LGBT person who wants one in a safe environment.



Probably the most difficult aspect of lock down has been our limited ability to reach potential clients as we normally would through OUTreach, Fresher Fayres, regional drop-in clinics and elsewhere. Now we have to reach our clients almost entirely online which honestly can feel less immediately rewarding than being out in the community. However, we've certainly had some successes in regards to social media. Particularly our presence on Grindr has resulted in people accessing testing, safer sex materials and advice who would've never engaged with us previously.

Whilst there are undoubtedly challenges that we will still have to face in the midst of this pandemic, we're feeling incredibly grateful to know that we're now reaching pre-lock down numbers of clients accessing our testing service every week.

The Rainbow Project was also approached by the GB-based LGBTQ+ charity Metro to be their Northern Ireland partner to distribute grants to LGBT-led groups and organisations during COVID-19. Grants can be up to £15,000 and we have drawn together a diverse and representative group of LGBTQ+ people to help us assess the applications and make sure that funds get to the people who need them.

To register and make an application you can go to:

<https://metrocharity.org.uk/LGBTQfund>

For more information about The Rainbow Project and the services they provide please visit

www.rainbow-project.org

HORIZONS FEATURE

ICNI CEO, Mark Breslin, discusses how the charity has reacted and adapted to COVID-19

WHEN WAS THE ORGANISATION FORMED AND WHY?

ICNI was established following the closure of the Family Planning Association (FPA) in May 2019. Through our Board of Trustees and staff team we hold much of the history associated with FPA and the role it played in contributing to the improvement and change in societal attitudes towards sexual and reproductive health in Northern Ireland. This work now continues, and will evolve, through ICNI.

WHAT SERVICES DO YOU PROVIDE?

We provide a sexual health helpline, which also acts as the Central Access Point into early medical abortion services in Northern Ireland; offer non-directive pregnancy choices and post pregnancy counselling; deliver Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programmes to parents and individuals with a learning disability/difficulty or ASD; provide training to health, social services and education professionals; and advocate for sexual and reproductive health services to meet the needs of all citizens in Northern Ireland.

HOW HAVE THESE BEEN IMPACTED BY COVID-19?

COVID-19 has caused ICNI to rethink and adapt our services accordingly and we have used our years of experience and creativity to find new ways to engage with those we work with. By moving to a telephone counselling service, we have ensured that our pregnancy counselling remains accessible for those who are shielding, have dependents or cannot travel. Having trialled telephone counselling over the past six months they know it to be effective and it has shown to significantly improved attendance rates.

All ICNI projects are offering sessions via telephone, ZOOM and more recently face to face work carried out under strict conditions and following current PHA guidance. A small, but very significant



change has been to buy clear facemasks and feedback from participants has indicated that being able to see the project officer's face and mouth has helped them to relax during sessions. Resources for the projects have been adopted to enable them to be used online or sent to an individual/group for completion at home.

All ICNI training programmes are available via ZOOM with information on training available on the ICNI website. As we move through the pandemic, we continue to look for ways to maximise our engagement and programme delivery by learning from each session and listening to feedback.

HAS THE ORGANISATION UNDERTAKEN ANY NEW ACTIVITIES RECENTLY?

Following the decriminalisation of abortion and the introduction of new regulations ICNI worked alongside healthcare professionals to establish an

interim early medical abortion (EMA) service. We act as the Central Access Point enabling people from across Northern Ireland to contact a single telephone number – 028 9031 6100 – to access non-directive information, pregnancy choices counselling and if/when requested, referral into an EMA service in Northern Ireland.

Social distancing has become one of the most widely used phrases, but what does it really mean and how can we explain it in a straight forward manner? ICNI set about developing two social distancing booklets for use within schools at home or within any organisation working within the learning disability/difficulty/ASD world. We have developed a social distancing and personal space app which is now being trialled by several groups/organisations and we hope to have this available in the near future.

ICNI have also been delivering free sanitary product packs and pregnancy tests to organisations across Northern Ireland. If your organisation would like to access our pregnancy tests please visit our website for more information www.informingchoicesni.org/free-pregnancy-tests

HOW DO YOU SEE THE ORGANISATION DEVELOPING OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS?

It is our aim to continue delivering accessible services to all citizens through our helpline, community projects, counselling service and training programmes. We will continue to work in partnership with all relevant statutory and community/voluntary sector organisations to ensure that a high quality, consistent and inclusive approach to the delivery RSE is available within all schools and community settings in order to promote a sex positive attitude within society that does not stigmatise or judge an individual or group for being who they are or the informed choices they make.

THE PROVISION OF TELEPHONE COUNSELLING DURING COVID-19

by Trevor Curran, Clinical Manager, NEXUS NI



At NEXUS NI we wanted to be pro-active in keeping everyone safe as possible in preventing the possibility of spreading the virus. Our face-to-face work in our offices and outreach ceased during week commencing Monday 16th March, one week ahead of the official lockdown date. All current clients were informed we would be working remotely, offering phone and virtual sessions and the majority of clients were thankful that they could still receive counselling.

Admittedly, this way of working was not suited to our younger clients as they are engaged in more 'hands on' work, but we did not abandon them. We kept in constant contact with them to ensure they were still safe and their circumstances hadn't changed.

All NEXUS NI counsellors were determined to continue to offer support for their clients and many of them also volunteered to support the front-line workers. What was not expected was that the clients were now also deeply affected by the pandemic. Multiple media reports on the issues of loss and suffering, individuals losing their jobs and living in isolation, and of drained front-line workers, often included an increase in mental health problems, another by-product of the pandemic.

The response from our counsellors was heart-warming in that they continued to offer support while some were dealing with their own issues in lock down.

Thankfully, all the counsellors adapted well to this way of working which has created an opportunity for a hybrid way of counselling going forward, which will further empower our clients to have additional choice.

We can find ourselves being bored, upset, angry or lonely. Feeling down, worried, restless, or be concerned about our wellbeing or about family or friends. This is a common reaction and we all respond differently to the trials that COVID-19 has caused us. So, it's so vital that we all take care of our minds as well as our bodies.

Life has changed for everyone; most will have experienced some disruption to their normal routine. You might find it helpful to plan for your day or week. Adapt and create positive new routines; try to participate in worthwhile activities such as cooking or exercise, reading or even cleaning!

Maintaining relationships with people you trust is important for your mental wellbeing. If you can't meet in person, think about how you can stay in touch with friends and family via telephone, video calls, social media, or letter.

A CLIENTS' STORY

Sharon (not her real name) said without the phone sessions with her counsellor, she didn't think she'd have been able to cope with being stuck at home and not able to see family and friends, as the difficulties of life in lockdown had added to her stress.

She said being able to talk to a professional counsellor, who doesn't judge her, helps her explore her feelings and discuss practical steps she can take when she's struggling, has been crucial during these difficult and uncertain times.

For more information about NEXUS NI and the services they provide please visit www.nexusni.org

SUPPORTING THOSE LIVING WITH OR AFFECTED BY HIV DURING COVID-19

by **Jacquie Richardson, Chief Executive, Positive Life**

At Positive Life we'd had an eye on what was going on else-where so that when lockdown was imposed in March, we had already done a fair bit of planning. Even with that said though, I think it's fair to say that anyone with responsibility for any organisation was justifiably worried for the future.

Our central concern was maintaining support and care for our service users without physical face to face interaction and I'm proud to say that we responded and remodelled quickly, adjusting to the circumstances to continue to provide the support.

With counselling, family, group and one to one support, and advice clinics being some of the key services we offer – the need to adapt and put in place a virtually accessible support network was vital. Through Zoom we have overcome the physical barriers and so continue to have key conversations and engagement. As Northern Ireland's only dedicated HIV charity and with demand for our services increasing around fivefold since March, we have been committed to continue putting the resources and energy into meeting the needs of our service users regardless of the external difficulties.

RENEWED TRAUMA

Throughout all of this it's been important to consider the unintended effects that lockdown messaging has had on many of the great people we work for. The constant reminders to 'keep your distance' and to isolate as well as the confusion around shielding has made things distressing for our service users forced to re-live public health messaging akin to the 1980's. The risk of standing too close and 'catching' HIV was once wrongly a mainstream understanding around HIV/AIDS. Working with our service users to understand and support them through this unease would not have been possible without the technology at our fingertips.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Another key area we have worked hard to continue has been our engagement with political representatives. Through having important and constructive conversations with policymakers we want to make sure our service users have a voice when it comes to decision making. Zoom and video-chat have enabled us to continue with this piece of our work too. We've continued to advocate for a Sexual Health Strategy and are working to raise awareness around the need for more realistic Relationships and Sexuality

Education (RSE) in schools. When COVID stopped face to face engagement at Stormont we pushed hard and made sure Positive Life continued the conversation. We'll continue to build relationships and drive positive change. It is only through collaboration – albeit through virtual means for now – that real and lasting change can take place.

MOVING FORWARD

The start of December marks World AIDS Day, an important moment in the annual calendar for raising awareness. Whilst this year has seen nothing but upheaval, we remain steadfast in bringing attention to the stigma and challenges faced by those with HIV in Northern Ireland. We call on everyone to use the 1st December as a day in which they undertake a simple action such as a post on social media to help us highlight the fact that HIV is no longer the life sentence it was once publicised as, that getting tested should be an integral part of managing your sexual health and that the all-crippling stigma which is at higher levels in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK is eradicated.

For more information about Positive Life and the services they provide please visit www.positivelifeni.com



SOCIAL DISTANCING BOOKLETS

by the Just Ask Team, Informing Choices NI (ICNI)

Another hot topic during the pandemic was the words 'social distancing'. Nowadays we don't go a day without seeing it written everywhere, hear it being talked about or talk about it ourselves. The 'Just Ask' staff at ICNI understood that for some individuals with a learning disability or ASD that is all it would be – words.

We used our combined years of knowledge, skills and experience to produce a free easy read booklet explaining what social distancing is and how it will impact individual's lives. We distributed the booklets to Special Educational Needs schools and learning disability/ASD organisations across Northern Ireland. The booklets have been very

popular and we have had fantastic feedback on them;
"The book is absolutely amazing. Thank you so much" (parent)
"The books have been a great help. The pictures and bright colours are very engaging for pupils and have helped their learning" (SEN Teacher)
"The books will make such a difference to our trainees and help our staff explain social distancing" (Day Opportunities Manager)
"I love the book. It is easy to read and helped me understand why we need to do social distancing and how to do it" (Day Opportunities service user)
 If you would like receive copies of these booklets please contact the following ICNI employees:

Northern and Western Trust areas
deborah.mcginin@informingchoices.org
 Belfast, South Eastern and Southern Trust areas
claire.hanna@informingchoicesni.org

ICNI also provide free leaflets on contraception and sexually transmitted infections. A full list of all the leaflets we stock is available on our website **www.informingchoicesni.org/leaflets**

HELPLINES NI

Helplines NI is a membership-led organisation consisting of over 30 different helplines operating across Northern Ireland. The helplines provide a variety of vital support services including, information, advice, counselling, a listening ear and be-friending, and offer immediate support to those with a wide-range of

health and wellbeing needs, often for those who are the most vulnerable in our community. Many of the services take place over the phone, but some can help via email, text and in some cases with live web-chat.

A number of helplines have also been established as a result of COVID-19. For a full list of helplines available please visit **www.helplinesni.com**

 Helplines NI listen. support. inform		Action on Elder Abuse  080 8808 8141 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm www.elderabuse.org.uk/in-northern-ireland		Independent Advice Network  0300 303 0898 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm advice@adviceni.net www.adviceni.net		Advice and Advocacy Service  0808 808 7575 8am - 7pm 7 days a week 365 days a year www.ageni.org.uk/advice		Alzheimer's Society Support Line  0333 150 3456 Monday to Wednesday 9am - 5pm, Thursday & Friday 9am - 5pm, Saturday & Sunday 10am - 4pm www.alzheimers.org.uk		Autism NI  028 9040 1729 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm www.autismini.org		Cancer Focus NI  0800 783 3339 Monday to Friday 9am - 1pm www.cancerfocusni.org							
<p>Helplines NI brings together over 30 helplines operating across Northern Ireland.</p> <p>The Helplines NI website (www.helplinesni.com) provides a directory of the helplines within Northern Ireland. The Helplines NI website (www.helplinesni.com) can be used by the public and professionals to find the right helpline and support.</p> <p>#HelplinesNI</p> <p>www.helplinesni.com</p>		<p>What support do helplines provide?</p> <p>The helplines provide a variety of support services, including information, advice, counselling, listening ear and befriending. Many of the services take place over the phone and some provide support via email, text and web-chat.</p> <p>The helplines provide information, support and advice on a vast range of issues, to include debt, mental health, parenting, unemployment, bereavement, substance abuse and housing.</p> <p>For more information on helplines NI contact: Aislin McKeown: aislin@helplinesni.com</p>		<p>Carers NI  028 9043 9843 Monday to Thursday 10am - 4pm www.carersuk.org/northernireland</p>		<p>CAUSE: Helpline  0845 60 30 29 1 Monday, Wednesday & Friday: 10am - 4pm Tuesday & Thursdays: 12pm - 8pm www.cause.org.uk</p>		<p>Child Bereavement Service  028 9066 8333 Monday 9.30am - 12.30pm Tuesday 9.30am - 12.30pm Friday 10am - 12.30pm www.barnardos.org.uk</p>		<p>ChildLine  0800 1111 24/7 365 days a year Online 1-2-1 & Email Service Available at www.childline.org.uk</p>		<p>Christians Against Poverty Debt Help  0800 328 0006 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm www.capuk.org</p>		<p>The Compassionate Friends  028 8778 8016 10am - 4pm & 7pm - 9.30pm 365 days per year www.tcf.org.uk</p>		<p>Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline  0808 802 1414 24/7 365 days a year help@dsahelpline.org Live online chat via website: www.dsahelpline.org</p>		<p>Eating Disorders Association NI  028 9023 5959 24/7 365 days a year www.eatingdisordersni.co.uk</p>	
<p>Family Benefits Advice Service  0800 028 3008 Monday to Friday 8am - 5pm www.employersforchildcare.org</p>		<p>HIV & Sexual Health Helpline NI  0800 137 437 Monday to Friday 10am - 4pm www.positivevelfeni.com</p>		<p>Housing Rights  028 9024 5640 Monday to Friday 9.30am - 4.30pm www.housingadviceni.org</p>		<p>Informing Choices NI  028 9031 6100 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm www.informingchoicesni.org</p>		<p>Kinship Care NI  0800 022 3129 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm www.kinshipcareni.com</p>		<p>Law Centre NI  028 9024 4401 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm www.lawcentreni.org</p>		<p>LGBT Switchboard Cara-Friend  0808 8000 390 Monday to Friday 1pm - 4pm Wednesday 6pm-9pm Live online chat via Website www.cara-friend.org.uk</p>		<p>Crisis Telephone & Counselling Service  0808 808 8000 24/7 365 days a year www.lifelinehelpline.info</p>					
<p>Make the Call  0800 232 1271 Monday to Friday 8am - 5pm Text ADVICE to 67300 makethecall@dfni.gov.uk www.nidirect.gov.uk/makethecall</p>		<p>NSPCC Helpline  0808 800 5000 24/7 365 days a year help@nspcc.org.uk www.nspcc.org.uk</p>		<p>Parentline NI CINI  0808 8020 400 Monday to Thursday 9am - 9pm Friday 9am - 5pm Saturday 9am - 1pm Live online chat via Website www.ci-ni.org.uk</p>		<p>Parent Support Line  0808 8010 722 Monday to Thursday 9.30am - 3.30pm Friday 9.30am - 12.30pm Live online chat via Website www.parentingni.org</p>		<p>Rural Support Helpline  0800 138 1678 Monday to Friday 9am - 9pm (voicemail and support options available at all other times) www.ruralsupport.org.uk</p>		<p>Samaritans  116 123 24/7 365 days a year Jo@samaritans.org www.samaritans.org</p>		<p>SandsNI Helpline  077 4099 3450 Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm www.sandsni.org</p>		<p>Simon Community  0800 171 2222 24/7 365 days a year www.simoncommunity.org</p>					

SEXUAL HEALTH HELPLINE

ICNI provide a confidential sexual health helpline which offers information and support across a range of sexual health issues including contraception and sexually transmitted infections.

The helpline can give details of the opening hours and locations of Contraceptive and Sexual Health (CASH) clinics and Genitourinary Medicine (GUM) clinics. These services and their opening times have been impacted as a result of COVID-19. For the most up to date information please call the sexual health helpline on 028 9031 6100. This helpline is staffed Monday to Friday, from 9am to 5pm.

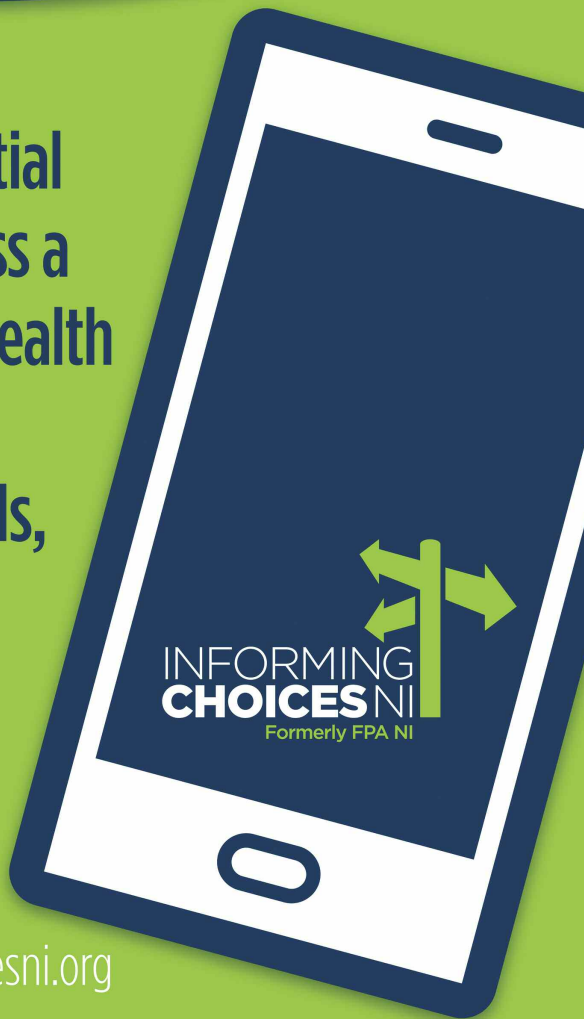
The helpline also acts as the Central Access Point into early medical abortion care in Northern Ireland and can be used to make an appointment for post pregnancy counselling.

SAVE THE DATE

SEXUAL HEALTH HELPLINE
028 9031 6100

Monday to Friday 9am-5pm

Our helpline can provide confidential information across a range of sexual health areas including contraception, STIs, pregnancy and abortion.



 @ICNI2019

 /InformingChoicesNI

 www.informingchoicesni.org

RSE, Learning Disability & Autism – Awareness Training for Professionals

Monday 26 and Tuesday 27 October 2020 10am – 1pm

Facilitated by Informing Choices NI (ICNI)

This online training is over two mornings and aims to enable participants to look at what Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) means for them and to examine how who we are can influence our work. We will help participants become increasingly confident in their use of appropriate language when discussing topics concerning sex and sexuality with people with learning disabilities and autism and look at the barriers of implementing sexuality topics in your work

environment. You will develop a better understanding of the importance of an individual's role around RSE and of having an RSE policy in your workplace. You can register for this training by visiting [**www.informingchoicesni.org/upcoming-training**](http://www.informingchoicesni.org/upcoming-training)

ICNI will be running further online RSE training in the coming months. Further details will be included on our website.

