

PRESS RELEASE

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CHARITY TO WITHDRAW PATHWAY TO LOCAL ABORTION CARE DUE TO THE FAILURE TO COMMISSION SERVICES

- Informing Choices NI (ICNI) are set to withdraw the central access point into early medical abortion (EMA) services if funding is not made available by 1 October 2021;
- The service has been provided outside of a commissioned framework since 15 April 2020;
- A report published today highlights that in the first year almost 2200 women and girls self-referred into the central access point service;
- The withdrawal of the central access point would cause severe disruption to, or the suspension of, all EMA services in Northern Ireland;
- The Secretary of State must now intervene to prevent the collapse of this vital healthcare.

“Failure to act will have devastating consequences for women and girls.”

- Ruairi Rowan, Director of Advocacy and Policy, ICNI.

ICNI has today (22 June 2021) announced that it will be forced to withdraw the central access point into EMA services if funding is not made available by 1 October 2021.

The service was launched in April 2020 and enables people from across Northern Ireland to contact a single telephone number where they can access non-directive information, pregnancy choices counselling if requested, and referral into an EMA service within their local health trust. Post pregnancy counselling support is also available.

Despite the abortion regulations taking effect from 31 March 2020, services are yet to be commissioned and the central access point has been operating outside of a properly resourced framework for the past 14 months. As ICNI are a small charity with limited resources this has placed considerable pressures which we cannot continue to absorb.

The provision of the service to date is outlined within a new report – *‘Beyond Decriminalisation: pregnancy choices and abortion care in Northern Ireland’* - which highlights that 2182 women and girls contacted the central access point between 15 April 2020 to 14 April 2021. The number of EMAs which have occurred in Northern Ireland during this period is unknown, but will be fewer for a number of reasons including the suspension of services in some trusts.

The report highlights that two-thirds of those who contacted ICNI were aged between 20-34, with the average age being 29. The number of people who self-referred into the service is also broken down by parliamentary constituency. While there is a clear need across all areas in Northern Ireland the data shows that there is a greater demand than would be projected in North Belfast, West Belfast, East Belfast, North Down and Upper Bann.

Commenting on the report and the potential withdrawal of the central access point service, ICNI’s Director of Advocacy and Policy, Ruairi Rowan, said:



“Since ICNI began providing the central access point we have made repeated attempts to engage with the Health Minister about its sustainability and development. In doing so we have made clear that an unfunded service of this scale cannot run indefinitely. Despite these repeated warnings we have received no response, despite the Minister publicly signposting women seeking local abortion access to our service.”

“Given the ongoing failure to commission abortion care the Secretary of State must urgently intervene to ensure all services provided for within the Regulations can be accessed in Northern Ireland. This should include providing immediate support to sustain EMA services in all five trusts, and the continuation of the central access point provided by ICNI.”

“Failure to act will have devastating consequences for women and girls by removing the standardised provision of non-directive information on all pregnancy choices, including abortion referral, leave some women unable to access high quality post abortion counselling, and could result in the regional collapse of all EMA services.”

ENDS

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The *‘Beyond Decriminalisation: pregnancy choices and abortion care in Northern Ireland’* report accompanies this press release.

The report focuses on various aspects of the central access point and EMA service from their design and implementation; the provision of counselling support; the provision of the service from a healthcare professionals’ perspective; accessing the service from a woman’s perspective; the impact of protestors; the availability of contraception; the lack of a public health information campaign; and recommendations for future commissioning.

Details regarding the number of people who contacted the central access point by age range and parliamentary constituency are also included within the report.

The lack of commissioning has meant that the current EMA services are under resourced and at times have been withdrawn. On Monday 5 October 2020 the Northern Trust suspended their EMA service. It was subsequently reinstated on 4 January 2021. On 5 January 2021 the South Eastern Trust suspended their EMA service. It was subsequently reinstated on 1 February 2021. On 23 April 2021 the Western Trust ceased accepting referrals for their EMA service and this suspension remains in place.