



INAUGURAL ANNUAL REPORT 2020/2021

*Supporting you
and your sexual and
reproductive choices*



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Message from Our Chairperson

Welcome to the first annual report of Informing Choices NI (ICNI).

ICNI was formed following the closure of the Family Planning Association (FPA) in May 2019. This was as a result of a decision taken by their London based Board of Trustees to place the organisation into voluntary administration, due to concerns regarding a long-standing final salary pension repayment commitment. This decision meant that FPA in Northern Ireland had to cease all activities. In response, ICNI was formed.

A new Board of Trustees was rapidly assembled, who alongside the remaining staff team held much of the history associated with FPA NI. ICNI was formally registered with Companies House on 20 May 2019 and were subsequently granted charitable status.

As this report demonstrates ICNI is committed to continuing the role played by FPA NI in working towards the vision that all individuals in Northern Ireland have the right and freedom to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health.

Underpinning our work is the principle that ALL citizens have the right to access high-quality information, education, and sexual and reproductive services without prejudice or discrimination.

It took several months to complete the financial, legal and statutory obligations associated with establishing a new charity, including renegotiating contracts previously held by FPA NI. Finally, with the determination and hard work of staff and the Board of Trustees, everything was in place and ICNI was firmly established as a leading sexual and reproductive health charity in Northern Ireland.

Then the pandemic arrived and overcoming the many hurdles of setting up a new charity soon paled into insignificance. However, the staff responded magnificently and quickly adapted to working from home during lockdowns whilst creatively responding to the demand for our services.

The pressures on the NHS created by Covid-19 resulted in people experiencing difficulties accessing sexual health services and this resulted in an increase in calls to our helpline. In response to the decriminalisation of abortion, and the introduction of a framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland, ICNI set up the central access point (CAP) service to facilitate access to early medical abortion (EMA) services in the five Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts. Alongside this demand for our counselling service increased significantly.

Nobody has escaped the consequences of Covid-19 but

parents and carers have faced some unique challenges. Speakeasy, our community-based parenting programme, had to quickly adapt to utilising Zoom and other on-line resources.

People with learning, sensory and/or physical disabilities probably experienced more challenges as a result of Covid-19 than any other section of society. Many didn't have the capacity to access Zoom group sessions so our Just Ask programme responded by offering individual sessions, many of which included parents.

Similarly, although the term 'social distancing' became part of the daily vocabulary, people with learning disabilities had difficulties understanding the concept so Just Ask developed information booklets specifically written and designed on this topic.

Contributing to the improvement and change in societal attitudes towards sexual and reproductive health in Northern Ireland was always a major goal for FPA NI. I am proud that this is now evolving through all of ICNI's activities spearheaded by a vigorous advocacy and lobbying strategy. We now have well established links with all political parties, senior civil servants, health care professionals and human rights organisations. Much has been achieved but there is still much to do if we are to achieve our vision.

The Board of Trustees reviews the delivery of our strategic plan and the financial management and budget monitoring attached to this. Importantly it identifies the operational risks to ensure the effective achievement of the strategic goals and this year the Board approved a risk strategy which includes a quarterly review of the risk register.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the Board of Trustees for their support and advice since ICNI was formally established. They have all been there from day one and willingly and enthusiastically agreed to help set up the charity. ICNI is lucky to have people with such extensive experience in sexual and reproductive health.

I also wish to thank our funders who supported ICNI following the closure of FPA and enabled the continuation and evolution of our work and services.

Finally, I wish to pay huge thanks to every single member of staff, all of whom enabled ICNI to continue to work for sexual and reproductive rights for ALL in Northern Ireland. Covid-19 may have produced many challenges but as this report will show, our staff were more than capable of overcoming those challenges.

Dr Audrey Simpson OBE

Strategic Goal One

“Improve the quality, consistency and accessibility of ICNI’s services so we can continue to support and serve the diverse society in which we live.”

KEY STATISTICS

119,490 Contraception and STI leaflets delivered

45,475 Website views

3,323 Calls to our helpline

2,500 Free pregnancy tests distributed

714 Counselling sessions booked

OVERVIEW

Despite the outbreak of Covid-19 ICNI experienced an increase in demand for our services, and made adjustments making them even more accessible during what was often a challenging and ever-changing year.

Following the long-overdue changes to abortion legislation in Northern Ireland we launched the CAP service into local EMA care. This meant that our sexual health helpline acted as the first point of contact for people seeking information and access to this new service.

Given the lack of information in the public domain regarding the availability of abortion services in Northern Ireland callers seeking this healthcare often began a conversation by stating, *‘I don’t know if I’m through to the right number;’* or *‘Do I have to go to England if I need help?’* It was the role of our helpline to provide initial reassurance and ongoing assistance as required.

General sexual health queries to our helpline also changed due to Covid-19. It was noticeable that not only were individuals requesting information, but anxiety levels had increased due to the uncertainty over contraception and sexual health provision and the changes to how GP services operated. A large number of callers said that ICNI’s helpline was one of the few that actually had a person answer it and not an answering machine with various other numbers.

Our pregnancy counselling service also successfully adapted to telephone provision. This provided a solution to the fact that face-to-face counselling rooms were not designed with the need for social distancing. It also ensured that the service was accessible for people who have dependents or could not travel, expanding its reach across Northern Ireland which improved accessibility. Attendance rates also increased due to the flexibility of telephone provision.

With local abortion services available in Northern Ireland and ICNI providing the CAP service, the number of people requesting counselling support rose substantially in

2020/21. In total 714 counselling sessions were booked during this period, the majority of which were for post pregnancy counselling.

One in thirty women who requested access to abortion care through the CAP service during this past year referred into our post pregnancy counselling service for support following treatment. For the majority of women who sought support following an abortion, it was often for the existing stressors in their life which had been exacerbated by a crisis or unplanned pregnancy rather than for grief in relation to the pregnancy loss itself.

It is not uncommon for a stressful situation to trigger previous traumas and one third of women who referred into the post pregnancy counselling service during this period had been impacted by historical sexual abuse/violence and this was the first time they had been offered a supportive space where they could discuss these traumas.

Despite the counselling service being available to all genders, all referrals received were from females. Our hope is that in this next year the counselling service is sufficiently resourced to reach all those who require it, regardless of gender.

During 2020/21 ICNI continued to distribute a full range of contraception and sexually transmitted infection leaflets. Despite the downturn in people attending face-to-face appointments, and the closure of some offices and services we still delivered almost 120,000 leaflets and this remains a much valued and vital source of information.

We also distributed 2,500 free pregnancy tests to a range of women’s organisations and local charities for their service users to access. These were accompanied with ICNI’s pregnancy choices and post pregnancy counselling leaflets.

Our Dialogue Around Sexual Health (DASH) publication was re-branded and new editions focusing on the impact of Covid-19 and how sexual and reproductive health charities responded to the global pandemic, as well as sexual health and education services for young people were produced.

We continue to develop our website which received over 45,000 visitors last year. This is a resource that will we continue to expand in order to ensure that sexual and reproductive health information remains readily accessible for all citizens in Northern Ireland.

Strategic Goal Two

“Sexual and reproductive health services will be readily accessible to meet the needs of all citizens in Northern Ireland.”

KEY STATISTICS

2,182 Women and girls self-referred into the central access point
29 Average age of people requesting support

OVERVIEW

While a new modern framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland was introduced in March 2020, the outbreak of Covid-19 meant that many women struggled to access abortion care due to travel restrictions impeding access in Great Britain, and a lack of services available locally.

Continuing to expect women to travel to England in the midst of a pandemic was not a safe or reasonable option. Therefore, ICNI worked alongside healthcare professionals and members of the Northern Ireland Abortion and Contraception Taskgroup (NIACT) to establish an interim EMA service which was integrated into existing sexual and reproductive health services in HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland.

A vital part of this process was the ease of the referral pathway through the CAP service provided by ICNI. This enabled people to contact a single telephone number where they could access non-directive information, pregnancy choices counselling if requested, and referral into an EMA service within their local HSC Trust.

During the first year 2182 women and girls contacted the CAP service seeking support and information regarding an unplanned or crisis pregnancy. Two-thirds of those who contacted us were aged between 20-34, with the average age being 29.

While there is a clear need across all areas in Northern Ireland the data shows that there is greater demand than would be projected in North Belfast, West Belfast, East Belfast, North Down and Upper Bann.

Clients valued this service as was highlighted by the feedback from client evaluation surveys:
“Informing Choices were the only people to help me get the proper services and help.”

“Fantastic service, put me at ease from the very first phone call.”

“I was very nervous making the call but the people I spoke to were very reassuring and I never once felt judged.”

“Very helpful and comforting. They ensured I understood

what was being said and made the situation easier.”
“Really informative and explained the process thoroughly.”
“So professional and instantly made me feel at ease and reassured.”

The provision of the service has resulted in local and national media attention. ICNI participated in a series of webinars to discuss the service which were attended by varied audiences including politicians and healthcare professionals and were facilitated by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health, Amnesty International UK, the Family Nurse Partnership, Doctors for Choice NI, the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare, The Royal College of Midwives and Ulster University.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission recommended, ‘sufficient, long-term, ring-fenced funding for a central access point’ to ‘ensure the continuation and effective delivery of a referral pathway for termination services that upholds the privacy and confidentiality of women and girls’ and NIACT published a report outlining a series of recommendations including that there should be a funded regional central access point to which women can self-refer, and to which they are directed by a public health information campaign.

ICNI stepped in to provide an interim CAP service as an emergency response to Covid-19 and ensured that there was no delay in EMA services being established in Northern Ireland. By doing so the organisation demonstrated how a service can operate and the willingness of healthcare professionals in Northern Ireland to provide such a service. Most importantly a vital local service was provided to women and girls during a global health pandemic. Such a ground-breaking service would not have been possible without our involvement.

Despite resistance from the Health Minister and Northern Ireland Executive to commission full abortion services, the dedication of local healthcare professionals and ICNI resulted in over 1,300 women and girls accessing abortion services in Northern Ireland during 2020/21. We will continue to work to advance sexual and reproductive rights and to ensure that no one is forced to leave Northern Ireland to access abortion care that should be available locally.

Strategic Goal Three

“High quality, consistent and inclusive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) will be available within all schools and expanded within community settings.”

KEY STATISTICS

113 Speakeasy sessions delivered
70 Parents and carers supported through the Speakeasy programme

OVERVIEW

Without a doubt, the impact of Covid-19 has presented various challenges for all of us, but particularly for parents and carers. The entire dynamic of the parenting role changed dramatically with the onset of a global pandemic and subsequent restrictions.

The world of parents and carers was dictated by the home-schooling, home-working, online learning, extra caring responsibilities for their own elderly parents coupled with reduced or no childminding support. On top of this their homelife was rigorously controlled by a more intense hygiene system. These were just some of the stories that the Speakeasy programme was listening to, and worked to support, throughout the 2020/21 lockdowns.

Speakeasy is a community-based parenting project funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA). It aims to encourage and support parents and carers to effectively communicate with their young people about growing up, relationships, sexuality and sex education. It recognises the significant role that parents and carers play in their young people's understanding of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and it is our experience that parents and carers can often feel a sense of dread regarding this issue.

Speakeasy aims to increase confidence and self-assurance in parent-child communication. The project is informative and engaging and provides the opportunity for parents and carers to discuss and explore solutions that are relevant to them.

Due to Covid-19 Speakeasy quickly adapted and provided sessions via the telephone, online using Zoom, and face-to-face, when possible, whilst adhering to social distancing and in line with government guidance.

Parenting during a global pandemic has been nothing short of extraordinary and each family has faced their own set of challenges and intergenerational dynamics.

One such dynamic that the Speakeasy programme encountered on multiple occasions was the reality of parenting much older children – the late teen and/or young

adult who still, ‘lived under their parent’s roof’. As one parent openly expressed in one of our socially-distanced groups that took place after the first lockdown, *‘I feel awful. I am disciplining my 19-year-old in the same manner as my 13-year-old – it’s just not right’.*

The parent explained that in order to keep herself, her partner and her vulnerable elderly parents safe, she banned all her children from hanging out with friends and boyfriends or girlfriends. In the case of her 19-year-old son, she stopped him from seeing his partner.

She continued *‘I can’t believe it, me who always tried to be more open-minded and supportive of my kid’s right to sexual relationships and here I am, banning him from even leaving the house’.*

This parent was not alone. Another gave their 16-year-old an ultimatum – your girlfriend or your friends – not both! While a third parent reported family arguments over similar in-house restrictions imposed on the now adult young people!

This is just one such emerging issue that was addressed within the framework of the Speakeasy programme. Others include body and puberty knowledge; my private space; conception, pregnancy and ‘Where do I come from?’ conversations; sex and the law – consent; contraception and STI prevention; nurturing relationships; and healthy digital relationships.

The Speakeasy programme has continued to listen, assist and provide educational support to parents and carers during what has been an incredibly challenging time for them.

Alongside the Speakeasy programme ICNI also developed a series of online community information sessions focused on the importance of understanding the date of your last menstrual period. These hour-long information sessions are designed for both individuals and professionals and provide key educational tools aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding around the menstrual cycle and the importance of this when it comes to making decisions around pregnancy. This now has added significance as the law in relation to abortion in Northern Ireland has changed.

We initially launched these as part of Sexual Health Week and due to their popularity and positive feedback we are continuing to run them on a monthly basis.

Strategic Goal Four

“People with learning, sensory and/or physical disabilities will have access to high quality information, education, support and training programmes.”

KEY STATISTICS

510 Social distancing leaflets delivered
308 Individuals participated in our Just Ask programme
289 Just Ask sessions delivered
108 NOW Group sessions delivered
60 Individuals participated in our training programmes programme

OVERVIEW

ICNI's Just Ask project is a unique RSE programme working specifically with people with a learning disability, difficulty or autism. Like everyone else, April 2020 put up so many challenges for our work. Face to face sessions were cancelled and we were all working from home but our phones didn't stop ringing and our emails were bombarded with requests for help and support.

We worked quickly to adapt our sessions for Zoom. Due to the nature of the Just Ask programme, a lot of people we had booked in weren't able to access Zoom sessions, so instead we started working with lots of parents as well as individuals with a learning disability, autistic people and their support staff.

The online world became the main source for connecting and communicating for a lot of people and so we set up a Facebook and Instagram page for the Just Ask project which immediately had a great response and continues to grow. We designed resources for the pages around RSE that would be fun for families to do at home. People could also self-refer directly through private messages.

Social distancing was talked about everywhere and the Just Ask staff quickly recognised that for some individuals with a learning disability and autistic people there was very little information to explain what it meant.

We received funding from the PHA to create an easy read booklet explaining what social distancing actually means and why we have to do it. These booklets went out to all the Special Education Needs schools, learning disability and autism organisations, as well as some mainstream schools throughout Northern Ireland, and we received great feedback.

We applied for funding from the Tesco 'Bags of Help' fund and distributed over 700 packs of sanitary products to schools and organisations across Northern Ireland. We made a video about these packs which can be viewed at the following link
<https://studio.youtube.com/video/FKBNBrKNfk/edit>.

We also successfully applied for funding from the Community Foundation NI to create an app around personal space which was developed alongside the award-winning technology company Kippie.

Yes, it was a challenging year resulting in longer waiting lists and high demand from schools, but the staff at the Just Ask project rose to that challenge, adapted sessions for Zoom, created resources and made lots of new contacts. We worked with the NOW Family Services project focusing on developing resilience and self-confidence with parents who had a learning disability, difficulty or autism. 108 sessions were delivered which enabled parents to make informed choices about their sexual health with a focus on contraception and pregnancy choices.

Our Relationships and Sexuality Education Awareness Training was already very successful and we had requests from various organisations in Northern Ireland to have their staff trained but then all face-to-face work stopped. We took this challenge as an opportunity to look at how we could develop and restructure our training and now the majority of our courses can be accredited through the Open College Network. We also designed new courses including accessing health care for people with a learning disability.

We created a new online training brochure showing our excellent portfolio of courses from Relationships and Sexuality Education Awareness Training through to Programme Development Training. We also adapted all our training to be completed via Zoom.

One of the advantages of the last year is how Zoom has become another part of our working day and this has enabled us to have a further reach when it comes to training and we made a lot of new contacts across the UK and further afield.

We were asked by the South Eastern HSC Trust to make a video about our work. The video was put on their website for Sexual Health Week and can be viewed at the following link
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtEiphpHdr0&t=629s>.

Over the past year we have trained professionals both locally and across the UK. Organisations in Northern Ireland such as Apex, The Playtrail, Foyle Down Syndrome Trust, Parent Action and the Belfast HSC Trust. We have also trained Learning Disability Community Nurses in Sussex NHS Partnerships and staff from a Further Education College in Wales.

All our training over the past year has had first class feedback and we continue to grow and develop ensuring it is of a high standard at all times.

Strategic Goal Five

“Be a resilient and robust organisation equipped to respond to the demands of the external environment.”

KEY STATISTICS

£284,848 Total income
£263,547 Total expenditure
£21,301 Net income
£8,952 Unrestricted funds
£39,705 Reserves

OVERVIEW

Since the first Covid-19 lockdown ICNI has had to anticipate hurdles and adapt services to suit a changing environment. The team were quick to do this maintaining existing workloads and stepped up to provide new essential services.

With the rise in counselling sessions, we were successful in securing a small grant from the Halifax Foundation to support the increasing demands of this service. We also responded to the need for sanitary products for individuals with a learning disability, difficulty or autism during the pandemic by securing funding from the Tesco Community Fund and developed the social distancing app ‘Bubble Bear’ thanks to funding from the Community Foundation NI.

ICNI is a non-profit making organisation and the Statement of Financial Activities can be found within our audited accounts. The net incoming resources for the year were £21,301. Of this amount £8,952 were unrestricted funds, increasing the charities reserves to £39,705. We have sufficient reserves to cover four months running costs.

The majority of the funding received came from the Department of Health and the PHA. Due to Covid-19, contracts were rolled over from the previous year allowing for an inflationary increase.

The Department of Health also allocated an additional 25% to the funding they provided in 2020/21. This amounted to £14,662 and was to be spent in the first quarter to 2021/22. These additional funds were allocated to all organisations who received core funding support, and were granted due to the increasing pressures organisations faced as a result of Covid-19.

In addition to our government contracts, we were also successful in securing a two-year grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust to continue our advocacy work in Northern Ireland.

ICNI's training department continued to generate unrestricted income. By adapting the training from in

person and group sessions to online delivery via Zoom, ICNI were able to reach an even greater geographically diverse audience.

We continued to monitor expenditure and whilst Covid-19 changed how some services were delivered we kept costs to a minimum. We also negotiated re-profiling budgeted expenditure to allow for extra resources to be targeted at the areas of our work most in need.

Cashflow continued to be strong throughout the year with all funders continuing to pay on time.

Throughout 2020/21 ICNI proved itself to be resilient and the organisation continues to grow into a robust and leading sexual and reproductive health employer and brand.

ICNI Staff, Board of Trustees & Funders

ICNI STAFF

Mark Breslin	Chief Executive
Liz Cutler	Finance Manager
Claire Hanna	Just Ask Project Officer
Roisin Flanagan	Administrative Officer / Speakeasy Project Officer
Deborah McGinn	Education and Training Manager
Carrie Montgomery	Counselling Services Coordinator
Ruairi Rowan	Director of Advocacy and Policy
Lorna Smyth	Associate Counsellor/Support Worker

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Grainne Clarke	Trustee
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FUNDERS

Department of Health

Public Health Agency

Community Foundation NI

Halifax Foundation

JRSST Charitable Trust

Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust

Sigrid Rausing Trust

NOW Group

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