

INFORMING CHOICES NI



ANNUAL REPORT 2022/2023

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Message from Our Chairperson

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

Last year our report highlighted how ICNI significantly developed its services and activities despite the many challenges of operating within the environment of a global pandemic. I am delighted that this report will demonstrate that in 2022/2023, as we gradually emerged from the pandemic restrictions, ICNI built on that development including forming new partnerships at a political, statutory and community level.

We live in a world where most information is electronically available almost instantly, yet our telephone helpline continues to be in demand. Callers are looking for clear factual information on a diverse range of sexual health issues as well as support and at times reassurance. However, a high volume of these calls is abortion related and reflect the ongoing challenges faced by women and girls in Northern Ireland trying to access local abortion services.

Significantly demand for our post pregnancy and pregnancy choices counselling service continues to exceed our current resources evidenced by an eighteen-month waiting list. Securing additional resources will be a priority for 2023/24.

Our sexual health and patient information leaflets are distributed across Northern Ireland to a range of healthcare and community settings. As patients, post pandemic, continue to experience difficulties in accessing health care professionals these leaflets are an accessible and valued source of information.

Advocacy and campaigning initiatives continued throughout this year and we particularly welcomed the opportunity to support the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office in the commissioning of local abortion services. Another major milestone was the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill receiving Royal Assent in February 2023. This will pave the way for the creation of safe zones outside settings where abortion care as well as information and counselling services are provided.

Speakeasy, our community-based Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme for parents and family carers successfully and creatively adapted to the aftermath of the impact of lockdowns on community groups. I am pleased to report that all targets were met.

The success story of Just Ask continues but demand far exceeds current staffing levels. The waiting list for one-to-one work now extends into 2025 so a priority for 2023/24 will be to secure additional funding. Its excellence was also recognised at the National Learning Disability and Autism Awards where it won the Making a Difference (Team) Award.

Learning from this project also informed the development of two new initiatives focussing on bereavement and menopause. All initiatives are covered in greater detail in the report which also outlines how we have managed our finance, governance and risk matters in line with legal, statutory, and financial obligations.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our funders without whom none of the above would have been achieved. And of course, huge thanks to the staff team for their collective input and resilience enabling ICNI to meet its strategic goals. And finally, thanks to my fellow Board members, who bring a diverse range of skills and knowledge to ICNI. Their support and help over the last twelve months enabled ICNI to contribute to the sexual and reproductive health of the population of Northern Ireland.

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

155,000

Contraception and STI leaflets delivered

38,455

Website views

1,512

Calls to our helpline

337

Counselling sessions provided

Helpline

In the months following the withdrawal of ICNI’s central access point into local early medical abortion care, our sexual health helpline continued to facilitate a high volume of abortion-related enquiries. Our primary goal was to ensure that women, GPs, and communities were adequately informed about the new referral service provided by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service.

A transition period and reduction in call volumes was expected, however, it became increasingly clear that for many people, the reality of accessing local abortion services had become more of a struggle. This was particularly true for those living in Northern Ireland but without a health and care number, such as students, or those who had recently relocated, as the new referral system required them to provide GP details.

After making a referral it can take up to five working days for a clinic to contact a client to conduct a medical assessment over the telephone. Not knowing when the call would be made, or the location of the clinic they would be attending caused heightened anxiety for many women. It also caused difficulties for them if they needed to contact a clinic. The location of the booking system in England also led some women to question the legitimacy of the service. This was further fuelled by the existence of rogue agencies in Northern Ireland providing false

information about access to abortion, causing additional doubt around local service provision.

Throughout 2022/23 our helpline continued to provide a local, safe, trusted, and frontline voice for all those seeking information around abortion and callers frequently voiced their reassurance following conversations with our helpline operators. Whilst these complexities continued to dominate our helpline enquiries, a wide-range of sexual health issues and discussions started to again filter through and we expect this to continue into the next financial year.

Counselling Services

Our pregnancy counselling service provided 337 sessions. Of these 287 were for post pregnancy counselling and 50 for pregnancy choices counselling. Despite receiving much needed additional support from the Halifax Foundation to increase the provision of post pregnancy counselling, demand for this service continued to increase beyond our funding capacities, with an eighteen-month waiting list at the end of 2022/23.

Our counselling service continues to show an above average attendance rate at 88%. Clinical outcomes and routine evaluation (CORE) reported 81% clients showed clinical or reliable change as a result of the counselling support they received, placing ICNI in the top 25% of UK psychological therapy services.

One counselling service beneficiary explained that, *“It’s hard to put into words just how much this has helped. I’m feeling emotional about ending counselling, but also know I have so many skills to reply on if I encounter any bumps.”* Another said, *“I had been suffering for so long with low self-esteem and feeling worthless. I now feel like my whole mindset has changed and no longer feel vulnerable.”*

Whilst there was no waiting list for referrals received into our pregnancy choices counselling service, given our funding constraints it was not always possible to provide timely access to this support (within one week of referral). It is our hope that in 2023/24 our counselling service will be fully resourced in order to best meet the needs of all people who may wish to avail of this support.

Strategic Goal One

Sexual Health Leaflets

Our contraception and sexual health patient information leaflets continued to be a much valued and vital source of information with 155,000 copies distributed to healthcare settings and community organisations throughout Northern Ireland. As stated in our previous report ICNI worked in collaboration with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and Health and Social Care (HSC) to produce a new leaflet focusing on options and considerations before and after taking emergency hormonal contraception. This accompanied a new scheme launched in July 2022 where pharmacies across Northern Ireland began providing emergency hormonal contraception free of charge. This was accessed by 9,835 women and young people between July 2022 and March 2023. We also produced two editions of our Dialogue Around Sexual Health (DASH) publication which can be viewed [here](#).

Podcast

We continued to increase our online and digital presence. Our website is continually reviewed to ensure all information is accurate and up-to-date and received over 38,000 hits in 2023/24. In February 2023 we also launched a sexual health podcast called [Big Sexy Talk](#). It is produced in mini-series format, with each collection of episodes focusing on a different area of sexual and reproductive health. The first series focuses on abortion in Northern Ireland, and plots a journey from the 1980s through to the present day. We are planning a second series on RSE in 2023/24.

Strategic Goal Two

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

KEY STATISTICS

100m to 250m

The distance covered by a
Safe Access Zone

26

MLAs and Councillors attended our
Big Sexy events

Roe v. Wade

On Friday, June 24, 2022, the United States Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, the landmark judgment that made access to abortion a federal right. The decision dismantled 50 years of legal protection and paved the way for individual States to restrict or ban abortion rights. As a pro-choice organisation ICNI were devastated by the ruling and the impact it will have on women’s reproductive healthcare in the United States. As we are aware, banning abortion does not remove the need to end a pregnancy. It forces women to either travel or access services that may not be regulated. ICNI highlighted these issues in various media outlets, and discussed access to abortion in Northern Ireland.

Abortion Commissioning

While reproductive rights were being curtailed in the United States, advances were made to progress the commissioning of local abortion services. In May 2022 the Secretary of State introduced new regulations which conferred additional powers to ensure the implementation of the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the report from the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). He also established a small expert team within the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to assist with the commissioning of abortion services. During the months that followed ICNI engaged with the expert team, officials in the NIO and the Department of Health, as well as the Secretary of State. Then, in December 2022 the Secretary of State instructed the Department of

Health to commission services. Information regarding abortion was also included on the [NI Direct website](#).

Prior to this the early medical abortion service within the Western Trust recommenced in October 2022, following an 18-month hiatus, and subsequently the Northern Trust began providing medical abortion up to 12 weeks in pregnancy. HSC Trusts also began recruiting additional staff, and making preparation for the establishment of surgical abortion care.

Safe Access Zones

Unfortunately, people accessing abortion across Northern Ireland continued to face intimidation and harassment from anti-choice protestors. The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill, brought forward by former Green Party leader, and ICNI Trustee Clare Bailey, was referred to the Supreme Court by the Attorney General for Northern Ireland. A two-day hearing took place in July 2022 and the court was asked to determine whether the omission of what is known as a “reasonable excuse” defence meant that the Bill was within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. In December 2022 the court ruled unanimously that the Bill did not “disproportionately interfere” with protestors’ rights. In delivering his judgment Lord Reed said that the restrictions were “proportionate”, “rational” and “necessary”. He also said the Bill had a “legitimate aim” and the ban will ensure the safety of medical professionals working at abortion services.

The legislation received Royal Assent in February 2023 and enables the establishment of Safe Access Zones of between 100m-250m outside healthcare premises offering abortion care, as well as premises where information, advice or counselling about abortion are provided. All HSC Trusts are planning to introduce Safe Access Zones in 2023/24.

Big Sexy Events

In the lead up to the Northern Ireland Assembly election in May 2022 ICNI hosted a “Big Sexy Hustings” event alongside Positive Life. This provided an opportunity for individuals from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors, to interact with a cross-party section of politicians. The panel comprised of politicians from seven political parties who each reflected on their memories of RSE growing up and what their parties would do to

Strategic Goal Two

prioritise sexual and reproductive health services. We received excellent feedback both from attendees and politicians, who praised the innovation of the political speed-dating format.

We followed this event with a “Big Sexy Lunch,” which took place in Parliament Buildings in June 2022. As with our previous “Big Sexy Breakfast” event its purpose was to strengthen relationships between policy makers across the political spectrum, while also challenging the stigma surrounding sexual health. The theme of this event was contraception and reproductive choices. In October 2022 we held a “Big Sexy Survey” event which focused on RSE and highlighted a recent poll of MLAs attitudes on this subject. Our series concluded in 2022/23 with an event on Valentine’s Day surrounding how individuals with a learning disability experience relationships, sexuality, and sex, with three participants sharing their lived experience. 26 MLAs and Councillors attended these sessions, with more events planned next year.

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

102

Speakeasy sessions delivered

212

Parents and guardians supported through the Speakeasy programme

47

Participants took part in our Understanding Masculinity programme

Speakeasy

Following two years overshadowed by Covid-19, the biggest success in 2022/23 for our Speakeasy programme was a return to face-to-face groupwork. Speakeasy was greatly impacted by lockdown as many host organisations, including schools, had no choice but to prioritise the needs of children and young people, over those of parents and guardians.

In early 2022, Speakeasy encountered resistance in “getting past reception” at many community groups, which again related in part to the aftermath of Covid-19. So, we decided to change tactic and went back to basics, by offering to meet with family workers in their community centres for a cup of tea and informal chat about their experiences of lockdown.

This was a huge success and Speakeasy has now grounded itself with key contacts within the community, especially within women’s centres. From these contacts Speakeasy secured various programmes and workshops, delivering a total of 102 sessions with 212 participants in the Belfast and South Eastern Trust areas. However, we had negotiated a total of 150 sessions, but, 32% were subsequently cancelled. Again, the high cancellation rate was another potential looming effect of delivering community work following lockdown.

Through our engagement with community groups,

we discovered that many had similar struggles with online workshop delivery. As one manager of a women’s centre said, *“It’s not for us. It didn’t work, it was chaotic, and it’s not what we are about.”*

Equally, Speakeasy continued to adapt its way of working throughout 2022 to meet the social distancing and preventative measures still being enforced at community level. For example, ICNI brought flasks of tea/coffee for parents to ensure that participants didn’t use the staff kitchen at one venue and at another premises, participants were encouraged to sit apart and wear facemasks. Despite the significant impact this had on group-work and group-engagement, some of the most successful programmes, were those whose preventative measures were rigid.

Whilst the primary goal of Speakeasy was RSE, for many parents the opportunity to meet with others in the aftermath of a two-year lockdown, was incredibly important to them. For many groups, the chance to talk openly and honestly, not just about RSE-related issues, but also the impact of Covid-19 on their health, their families, their maternity-care, and their social-lives was incredibly insightful. For instance, ICNI informed one centre that a breast-feeding support group available prior to lockdown was really missed by the women from that community.

Towards the end of 2022/23, there was a sense of normality beginning to return to groups; social-distancing eased, and participants were able to engage with work in a way that was not available throughout lockdown, such as using markers/flipcharts and small group discussions.

Speakeasy also continued to work on specific-themed workshops including reproductive health and menopause, LMP-Abortion, and intergenerational sessions that included parents and young people. We intend to continue developing these in the year ahead.

Taster RSE Awareness Raising Training was also delivered in Carrick Academy, with the view to delivering further full school training in 2023/24.

Understanding Masculinity

ICNI extended our Masculinity work in 2022/23 and secured funding from the PHA Making Life Better Through Short Term Funding Programme for a pilot

Strategic Goal Three

masculinity project within the Belfast Trust area. The programme encouraged participants to examine their understanding of masculinity, the role it plays in their daily life, and their ability to become role models with an opportunity to positively influence those around them. We delivered sessions to 41 participants from the Glentoran FC Elite Scholars Programme, the NOW Group, and the Greater Whitewell Community Surgery. Participants aged from teenagers to men in their 70s. You can read our project evaluation [here](#). We also delivered this work with young men from Ballybeen in October 2022.

MLA Survey

In the summer of 2022 ICNI **commissioned a survey** of political attitudes around RSE. The results showed overwhelming support amongst MLAs to reform the teaching of RSE in Northern Ireland. It highlighted that only 17% of MLAs believed RSE in schools is “satisfactory”; 78% agreed that there should be a standardised curriculum used in all schools, regardless of their ethos, and 60% agreed that information regarding the availability of contraception and access to abortion should be included within RSE in all post-primary schools.

This survey sent a clear message to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that there is overwhelming political support to reform the teaching of RSE and ICNI will continue to campaign for the education curriculum to be updated to ensure that our children and young people are provided with the comprehensive and scientifically accurate information and support they need to make informed choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health.

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

369

Just Ask sessions delivered

445

Individuals participated in our Just Ask programme

Just Ask

As usual ICNI’s Just Ask programme was in high demand with schools, day opportunities, learning disability and autism organisations, and social work teams across Northern Ireland seeking group work and one-to-one support, alongside staff training. Referrals from parents and guardians also continued to increase with those who took part in our programme signposting other parents to our services.

It continues to be challenging trying to accommodate all requests with only two Just Ask project officers and increasing referrals. For one-to-one work, there is now a waiting list extending into 2025. Additional funding and staff are required in order to meet the demand. However, despite these challenges we were delighted that Just Ask won the Making a Difference (Team) Award at the National Learning Disability and Autism Awards in March 2023. Our Education and Training Manager was also a nominee the individual category.

Ideas Fund

Our Talk Together Project with Ulster University, funded by the Ideas Fund, looked at the impact of loss and bereavement on people with a learning disability and autistic people, their families and professional support network. The initial project finished in January 2023 and we had a very successful launch of our final report **“It’s Difficult But It’s Not Rocket Science”** at the City Hotel, Derry. This was attended by project participants, local

Councillors, MLAs and representatives from learning disability, autism, and palliative care organisations.

One of the recommendations from the report was the lack of support and appropriate information for professionals supporting an autistic individual or someone with a learning disability. The Ideas Fund agreed to a further grant for ICNI to design and deliver a training programme for staff around loss and bereavement. This will come to fruition in 2023/24.

We were also successful in securing funding for a project idea around menopause and women with a learning disability from Round 2 of the Ideas Fund’s grant cycle. This project is again in partnership with an Ulster University researcher and will run from January 2023 until March 2024.

New Resources

Following the creation of our Bubble Bear App, we were successful in securing additional funding from the Community Foundation Northern Ireland to design and develop a comic. This was again produced alongside the award-winning technology company Kippie, and was called, “The Adventures of Bubble Bear.” This incorporated themes around personal space, boundaries, appropriate/inappropriate touch, and public and private space. We piloted the comic in schools and it received wonderful feedback from students and staff. We are hoping to develop more comics with various themes that are important to young people and complement the school curriculum.

We were also successful in securing funding from Open College Network NI to create a video animation around **sexual consent** that is specifically catered to individuals with a learning disability, difficulty, and autistic people. Together with four young people from the Bud Club, and animators from Slackpress Studios, we created a great resource which was launched in March 2023.

Training and Development

ICNI ran weekly relationships sessions on Zoom for the English based learning disability charity Guideposts. This is ongoing and has had brilliant feedback from participants and staff. Our RSE Awareness Training continues to be very popular and

Strategic Goal Four

we have trained staff from Middletown Centre for Autism, Barnardo's, Glenraig Community, Foyle Down Syndrome Trust, Western Trust, Kilronan School, Clifton School, Bangor Academy, Ulster University, Queen's University, Positive Futures, and Triangle Housing Association. All of our training has received first class feedback and we continue to grow and develop ensuring it is always of an excellent standard.

Our staff continue to develop their skills through various courses and training to ensure our projects remain at a high standard. We now have a staff member fully qualified as a CEOP Education Ambassador. This allows us to be better equipped to inform individuals, parents, and guardians, as well as our whole staff team, around online safety and develop our projects accordingly.

Our Education and Training Manager was a guest speaker at the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's annual conference in Bristol in December 2022 and shared information and experiences of the Talk Together Project and working in partnership with Ulster University. They have also joined the Northern Digital Steering Group and have been asked to join a new collective of Ulster University staff and community representatives to look at ways to improve public engagement.

Strategic Goal Five

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

KEY STATISTICS

£13,000 Restricted opening balance
£326,326 Total income
£317,472 Total expenditure
£16,583 Restricted carried forward balance
£5,271 Unrestricted funds
£52,272 Reserves

Finances

With rising inflation and a cost-of-living crisis throughout 2022/23, ICNI continued to anticipate hurdles and adapt services accordingly.

ICNI is a non-profit making organisation and the Statement of Financial Activities can be found within our audited accounts. The surplus for the year including opening and closing balances was £5,271 (unrestricted funds), increasing the charities reserves to £52,272. We now have sufficient reserves to cover six months running costs.

Funders

Our main funders include the Department of Health and the PHA. Our contracts with these statutory bodies were rolled over from the previous year, with PHA contracts allowing for an inflationary increase.

In addition to our government contracts, we were awarded a three-year grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust to facilitate our advocacy work in Northern Ireland. This enables ICNI to

continue to campaigning to for all citizens to have the right to access high-quality information, education, and sexual and reproductive services without prejudice or discrimination.

As outlined in Strategic Goal 1 we were again successful in securing a grant from the Halifax Foundation to support the ever-increasing demand for our post pregnancy counselling service.

We received a small grant from the PHA Making Life Better Through Short Term Funding Programme for a pilot masculinity project within the Belfast Trust area. Further information is provided in Strategic Goal 3.

ICNI were also successful in securing further grants from the Ideas Fund. One has enabled us to build on our Talk Together research report, and the other is for a new menopause project, both of which are described in Strategic Goal 4.

We also received small grants from the Open College Network NI and the Community Foundation Northern Ireland to expand our learning resources for individuals with a learning disability, difficulty, and autistic people.

Despite increasing costs and utility charges, we continued to monitor expenditure and kept costs to a minimum. The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the PHA also granted additional cost of living funding during the year.

Growth

ICNI's training department continued to generate unrestricted income, with a combination of in person and online training.

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

Throughout 2022/2023 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
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
Robyn Steele / Emma Rogan	Just Ask Project Officer

ICNI BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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Georgette McCormick	Vice Chairperson
Mary Crawford	Secretary
Roger Gowdy	Treasurer
Clare Bailey	Trustee
Grainne Clarke	Trustee
Dr Sandra McDermott	Trustee

FUNDERS

Department of Health

The Ideas Fund / British Science Fund

Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust

Halifax Foundation

Open College Network NI

Public Health Agency



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