
WELSH GOVERNMENT: TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY PROVISION FOR WOMEN FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

Response from Humanists UK, February 2018

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted by over 65,000 members and supporters to promote humanism. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

We campaign in favour of women's sexual and reproductive rights, in particular with respect to abortion. Our position on abortion is 'pro-choice'. We are a member of the steering group of Voice for Choice, the coalition of UK pro-choice groups. We also work with and support Alliance for Choice in Northern Ireland, being a member of the Trust Women Coalition, as well as other pro-choice groups across the UK such as Abortion Rights, FPA, Brook, Education for Choice, and the Abortion Support Network.

In 2017, we intervened in the case of A and B at the Supreme Court surrounding charging for abortion services for Northern Ireland women by NHS England. Our submission focused on the impact of the policy on women who do not wish to continue with a pregnancy and who are faced with the limited options of obtaining an unlawful and/or unsafe abortion in Northern Ireland. The submissions argued that forcing women to continue carrying their foetus to full-term or sustaining the unanticipated expense of a paid abortion outside of Northern Ireland would cause an unacceptable level of stress and trauma.

Disappointingly, the Supreme Court ruled 3-2 against the claimants. However the subsequent public outcry directly led to the changes the Welsh Government is now proposing. We were part of the campaign that occurred after the Supreme Court decision, for example working with Julie Morgan AM to lobby for change.

Response to consultation questions

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6. We are seeking your response to these proposed changes. Please use the space below for your response.

We support the proposed changes. However, we think it is imperative that, *at a minimum*, women from low income backgrounds are able to have their transport and accommodation paid for, as is now the case in England. We also believe a central booking system must be established in order to make accessing services as easy as possible.

We welcomed the announcement last July by First Minister Carwyn Jones that Wales will join England and Scotland in funding Termination of Pregnancy (TOP) services for women traveling from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. In that announcement, Jones indicated that the three nations would work together to agree how this support will be provided, from travel and accommodation considerations, to aftercare and support. However, such provision must take account of, and try to reduce, the particular burdens experienced by women in Northern Ireland due to the need to travel to access these services.

We support the proposal of the Welsh Government to make a written Direction requiring Local Health Boards (LHB) to waive the normal residency test to enable UK citizens normally resident in Northern Ireland to be treated as a normal resident of that LHB for the purposes of accessing TOP services. This will allow women from Northern Ireland to access medical services through the NHS, without the unnecessary financial and emotional burdens of being charged up to £2,000 for such access, as was previously the case.

However, we are concerned that the Welsh Government framework for the introduction of this provision should not be premised on providing parity or an equal footing with women ordinarily resident in Wales. Such an approach would fail to recognise the particular set of circumstances and burdens facing women from Northern Ireland travelling to the UK, which are not experienced by women living in Wales. These include but are not limited to:

- The cost and delay to accessing TOP services by the need to travel from Northern Ireland. This will most likely involve airfares in excess of £150. There is currently no direct ferry service from Northern Ireland to Wales.
- The cost involved in providing accommodation in Wales. For the majority of women accessing TOP services will involve two or more visits to a hospital or clinic over a series of days.

- The cost and logistical arrangements for the repatriation of fetal remains. For some women experiencing a late abortion on the grounds of fetal abnormality, they may face obstacles in returning remains to Northern Ireland.
- The possibility that women who are minors may need to be accompanied whilst travelling.
- Provision for aftercare. Women from Northern Ireland may need additional provision to manage the aftercare from an abortion procedure whilst travelling or once they have returned to Northern Ireland.
- Difficulties in linking up GP referrals and navigating a booking system from Northern Ireland to Wales.

The additional burdens placed upon women from Northern Ireland accessing TOP services when in Wales means that an approach based on parity with local residents would still make these services inaccessible, especially for women with low incomes. This would undermine that core principle of the proposed changes in Wales, which is to make TOP services freely accessible to Northern Ireland women.

Instead of focusing on parity with Welsh resident women, the Welsh Government should focus, *at a minimum*, on a parity of provision for women from Northern Ireland in accessing these services in across all parts of Great Britain. In October 2017, the then Women and Equalities Minister Justine Greening announced that Northern Ireland women with low incomes travelling to England for TOP services would be able to apply for funding to cover the cost of travel between Northern Ireland and England.¹ A similar provision is being considered in Scotland, where Public Health Minister Aileen Campbell stated, 'I recognise the barriers that women from Northern Ireland face when they travel to access abortion services which is why we are exploring what more we can do to address them.' We were pleased that Mr Jones confirmed that reimbursement for travel costs and arrangements for ongoing care following a procedure are being considered by the Welsh Government.

We recommend that in addition to the written Direction, the Welsh Government provides a central booking system for women from Northern Ireland in which they or their GP can easily refer and book TOP services in Wales, and through which they can be refunded for expenses for travel and accommodation. Such a system should also provide an ongoing line of communication between the women and the TOP service provider in order to manage the aftercare of the procedure.

¹<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/northern-ireland-abortion-grants-travel-uk-nhs-free-terminations-a8016056.html>