

Organisation Biographies

The following groups presented to the Assembly on Sunday, 5 March.

Each group was asked to provide a brief biography of their organisation and these are provided below.

Session One

Doctors for Life Ireland

Doctors for Life Ireland is an organisation for doctors who wish to uphold the practice of medicine as a service to human life at all stages. It was started in 1992 and is open to medical practitioners of every specialty, both working and retired. It aims to provide evidence-based and factual information to doctors and others who are concerned about the ethical questions relating to patient care and practitioner responsibility at all stages of life. It is not affiliated to, or part of, any other organisation. It is entirely funded by supporters who come from a range of medical specialties including general practitioners, psychiatrists, occupational health physicians, obstetricians and others.

Doctors for Choice

We are a group of doctors practicing in Ireland who believe that women are best qualified to make decisions regarding their pregnancies, in their individual circumstances. Our group includes doctors who practice in different disciplines e.g. Psychiatry, Obstetrics and General Practice, and who, like all doctors practicing in Ireland, are faced with patients who have unwanted pregnancies and who are seeking access to safe abortion. We see first hand the harm to health experience by our patients due to the 8th amendment, and lack of clinical abortion services in Ireland.

We wish to provide Irish women with comprehensive compassionate reproductive healthcare in Ireland, respecting the choices women and girls make regarding continuing, or ending their pregnancies through abortion, and do not believe that a woman should be forced to complete a pregnancy against her wishes.

We contribute to discussions about abortion, using evidence-based, peer-reviewed research, and challenge untruthful claims used to frighten women e.g. that abortion “increases the risk of breast cancer”, as uncovered in recent

investigations into bogus “advice” clinics in Dublin. Similarly the oft repeated, and incorrect, misquoting of academic papers to mislead listeners into wondering if abortion has adverse long term effects on mental health.

Session Two

Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the national representative body for higher and further education students in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 354,000 students in forty colleges across the island of Ireland.

USI believes a referendum should be held to remove the Eighth Amendment from the Irish Constitution and to allow a ‘free, safe and legal’ abortion services in Ireland.

Youth Defence

Youth Defence is a volunteer-based organisation which works to raise awareness of the fact that abortion kills babies and hurts women, and believes that a compassionate and progressive society loves and protects both mother and child. We believe that every human being has the right to life, regardless of their age, gender, level of dependency, ability, or any other circumstance, and that this right to life is an inalienable right, without which there can be no other rights. We believe that there is always a better answer than abortion, and a truly progressive society endeavours to help eliminate the crisis or problems that may be faced by women in pregnancy, rather than eliminating their children.

National Women’s Council of Ireland

Founded in 1973, the National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCI) is the leading national women’s membership organisation in the country. We represent and derive our mandate from our membership, which includes over 180 groups and organisations from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations across Ireland. Our membership is made up of large and small, national, regional and local groups, and umbrella organisations and networks. We advocate on behalf of older women, young women, women living in poverty, women workers, carers, Traveller women, migrant women, women seeking asylum, lesbian, bisexual and trans women, victims of gender-based violence, women with disabilities, healthcare professionals, women in business, women in politics, women working in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths, women in the Arts, and women living in rural, urban and suburban locations.

We also have a growing number of individual members who support the campaign for women's equality in Ireland. Our mission is to lead and to be a catalyst for change in the achievement of equality for women. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential and there is full equality for women.

NWCI is the chair of the National Observatory on Violence against Women, convenor of the Women's Human Rights Alliance and a member of a broad range of networks including the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment, the Community Platform and Community and Voluntary Pillar. At a European level, NWCI sits on the Executive Committee of the European Women's Lobby.

NWCI's expertise in informing the development of government policy and legislation has been widely recognised. We currently sit by invitation on the Monitoring Group of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence and the Oversight Group of the Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Our role in contributing to government's task of addressing all areas of concern for women in Ireland has been explicitly recognised in the National Women's Strategy 2007-2016, prepared by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The Strategy acknowledged, in particular, the value our organisation can provide 'by identifying the needs of [our] member organisations and their members'. Indeed, NWCI was invited to present to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children on the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill 2013. We were also invited to inform the Constitutional Convention in its consideration of Article s 41.2 – the 'women in the home' clause – and other areas of the Convention's deliberations impacting on women.

NWCI seeks to address the full range of inequalities that women experience. We operate specific policy programmes in relation to women in politics, gender and health, gender and local development, and young women and feminism. We also focus on economic equality for women, reducing the gender pay and pensions gap and tackling low pay and precarious work.

One of NWCI's core values and beliefs, as stated in our Strategic Plan 2016 - 2020 Driving Women's Equality, is the "protect[ion] and respect for the bodily integrity and security of women and girls. NWCI believes that bodily integrity is a human right and the right to make one's own choices about one's body for oneself is a basic personal freedom. The violation of this right is at the heart of every act of gender based violence, it is at the core of the prohibition of abortion. It is essential that the rights of women and girls to bodily integrity worldwide are protected and vindicated within every state provided legal system."

NWCI has worked on the issue of abortion for over thirty years with women and women's organisations throughout Ireland. Our position on abortion has developed over time in recognition of the diversity of views and perspectives which women have on the issue. We have been mandated by our membership since 2009 to support free, safe and legal abortion as a choice in pregnancy. This position is rooted in an analysis of gender equality, women's human rights and social inclusion. Our role is to give voice to the experiences of women in Ireland who remain largely voiceless in this debate due to the stigma that surrounds abortion in Ireland and to support women's access to reproductive health services.

For a full list of our membership, please go to: www.nwci.ie. Thank you.

Women Hurt

None Received.

Session Three

Parents for Choice

Parents for Choice in Pregnancy and Childbirth Ireland (Parents for Choice) originated as Facebook group set up in 2013 to discuss issues around choice and autonomy in pregnancy and childbirth, and developed into an activist group in the aftermath of the case of Ms Y in 2014.

The purpose of Parents for Choice is to provide a platform for parents to inform themselves, and campaign on issues surrounding reproductive rights, maternity care and abortion in a family-friendly and accessible manner.

As parents, we have been through the Irish maternity system. Some of us have had abortions - before we were ready to become parents, or at a time when we couldn't welcome a sibling into the family. Some of us may never consider abortion for ourselves, yet feel strongly about the right to choose when to become a parent - not least for our own children as they grow up. Our members have had miscarriages, fatal foetal diagnoses, and all manner of pregnancies and births in the Irish maternity system. It is safe to say that we have all been impacted by the Eighth Amendment. We know that parenting is one of the toughest jobs in the world, and we think that every parent should be a willing parent - every child a wanted child. We are also adamant that those who do choose to continue a pregnancy deserve to be cared for with the utmost respect, granted the right to full, informed consent, and given the opportunity to refuse any unwanted intervention.

The Eighth Amendment is currently a barrier to our bodily autonomy in the Irish maternity services. We campaign with the aim of seeing our core objectives of free, safe, and legal abortion, and full bodily autonomy for all people in Ireland realised by way of a repeal of the Eighth Amendment and a reform of the HSE National Consent Policy. We work with and alongside other groups

such as the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services (AIMS) Ireland and the Repeal Project, and are members of the Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment.

Every Life Counts

Every Life Counts is a support network for families where a child is diagnosed with a life-limiting condition. We believe that better support, such as perinatal hospice care, is what best supports babies and families, enabling precious time together and offering a pathway to healing.

www.everylifecounts.ie

Irish Family Planning Association

- **A Leading Provider of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services**

The IFPA operates two not-for-profit medical clinics in Dublin, and eleven centres nationwide where we provide free pregnancy counselling services. In 2015 we delivered over 12,000 sexual and reproductive health consultations, including cervical screenings, STI screenings and contraceptive services.

The IFPA's medical team comprises nine doctors and six nurses. The pregnancy counselling team consists of 11 counsellors, all of whom are accredited counsellors or psychotherapists. These teams are supported by the clinic administrators, clinic receptionists and a helpline operator for our National Pregnancy Helpline.

Health promotion is a key aspect of the IFPA's work. For example, we work in partnership with the HSE's Cervical Check programme to promote cervical screening through our annual Pearl of Wisdom Campaign.

- **Nationwide Pregnancy Counselling**

The IFPA is the leading provider of pregnancy counselling in Ireland: our counselling services is fully funded by the HSE and free to women and girls. 50% of women who attend for pregnancy counselling in Ireland attend an IFPA service. In 2015, for example, we delivered over 3,700 counselling services, including crisis pregnancy counselling and post-abortion support.

The IFPA is the only nationwide service in Ireland that provides non-directive information on all options—abortion, adoption and parenting—to women.

IFPA pregnancy counselling services support women in relation to an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, or a pregnancy that has become a crisis, whether their decision is to continue or end the pregnancy. Every pregnancy counselling client's experience is different and a pregnancy can become a crisis for many reasons. But all women and girls in Ireland who come to a decision that continuing a pregnancy is not the right option need additional support in relation to the denial and criminalisation of abortion services.

- **Best practice**

IFPA services are operated in line with best international practice. We develop and review our policies and protocols drawing on the expertise of health policy and standard setting organisations, such as the HSE and HIQA, and also the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (RCOG), the International Federation of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (FIGO) and the World Health Organisation. The IFPA is one of the 154 member associations of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, a global federation of sexual and reproductive health and rights organisations.

The IFPA is committed to sharing our knowledge and expertise by delivering continuing professional development (CPD) training to other professionals, including our Contraception Foundation Course for Nurses and Midwives.

- **An Advocate for the Right to Sexual and Reproductive Health**

At various times throughout our history, the law in Ireland has restricted the IFPA's ability to provide the highest standard of care to our clients. This has led to our involvement in high-profile legal cases, including landmark cases such as *McGee v. Attorney General* in 1973, which established the constitutional right to avail of contraception. More recently, the IFPA gave counselling and practical support to three women who took a case (*A, B and C v. Ireland, 2010*) to the European Court of Human Rights challenging Ireland's abortion laws. The Court found Ireland in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights for its failure to give effect to the constitutional right to abortion where a woman's life is at risk.

The IFPA has been raising the issue of Ireland's abortion laws before United Nations human rights monitoring bodies since the 1990s: every such expert body that has considered the law in Ireland has been critical of its denial and criminalisation of abortion.

Family & Life

Family & Life was founded in 1996, and is one of Ireland's largest pro-life organisations, with a network of supporters across the country. It seeks to promote an awareness of the dignity of human life from conception until

natural death. It also works to assist and promote the life and welfare of mothers during pregnancy and of their children from the time of conception up to, during, and after birth.

It engages in a range of activities to promote its objectives, including very practical projects providing material assistance to women facing crisis pregnancies, research work, educational work, and public policy, both nationally and at the United Nations.

Session Four

Pro Life Campaign

The Pro Life Campaign is a non-denominational human rights organisation, drawing its support from a large cross-section of Irish society. The Campaign promotes pro-life education and defends human life at all stages, from conception to natural death. It also campaigns for resources to support and assist pregnant women and those in need of healing after abortion.

Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global membership-based human rights organisation. In Ireland we have 20,000 members. We are independent of any political, religious or other ideology.

The Iona Institute

None Received.

Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment

Who We Are

The Coalition to Repeal the Eighth Amendment, is an alliance of organisations set up early in 2014, shortly after the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 was signed into law. Established by 12 founding members, the Coalition is now an alliance of over 80 organisations.

The far-reaching implications of the Eighth Amendment are reflected in the Coalition's diverse membership. Our members include feminist, pro-choice and human rights organisations, trade unions, health organisations, NGOs, student and youth organisations, community organisations and many others. We are working together under the Coalition banner to raise awareness of the urgent need for a referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment. Our membership represents over 1.5 million people, making the Coalition the largest ever civil society grouping in Ireland working for social and constitutional change on this issue.

Session Five

Irish Catholic Bishops Conference

None Received.

Atheist Ireland

Atheist Ireland is a representative and advocacy group founded in 2008. We are a voluntary organisation with no paid staff. We receive no government funding or grants and are reliant on membership contributions and donations. As a political lobbying group Atheist Ireland is registered with SIPO (Standards in Public Office). Atheist Ireland promotes atheism and reason over superstition and supernaturalism, and we promote an ethical, secular society. We are participants in the dialogue process between the Government and religious and philosophical bodies. We campaign for separation of Church and State, the repeal of blasphemy from the Irish Constitution and worldwide, the right for ex-Catholics to formally defect from the Catholic Church, the removal of discriminatory religious oaths and for a secular education system in Ireland. Please visit our website www.atheist.ie for more information on our campaigns.

The General Synod of the Church of Ireland

The Church of Ireland has around 378,000 members – 249,000 in Northern Ireland and 129,000 in the Republic of Ireland. Our history is the story of almost 1,600 years of Christian worship and witness in Ireland.

The Celtic Church, which emerged in Ireland following the mission of St Patrick in the 5th century, is still recognised as the source of the modern Church of Ireland. A strong diocesan and parochial structure has existed for almost 1,000 years.

The Reformation in the 16th century stressed the importance of the individual's relationship with God and refocused the Church on its biblical foundation.

The Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, in 1871, led to the creation of its current structures. A new General Synod replaced Parliament as the legislative body responsible for the rules governing the Church and the Representative Church Body was incorporated as the trustee body for the Church.

The Church maintained its unity following the partition of Ireland in the 1920s and continues to serve its membership and wider society across the island's two political jurisdictions.

Our Structures

The Church of Ireland believes in the equality, within the Body of Christ, of all the baptised. All have a distinctive task or vocation to fulfil and authority in the Church is entrusted to and exercised on behalf of the whole body.

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Every lay member of the Church who is aged 18 or older is entitled to be registered as a member of the **general vestry** of their parish.

The general vestry elects the **select vestry**, which is responsible for parish finances and the care of its property. A select vestry includes **church wardens** (responsible for the control of church services) and **glebe wardens** (responsible for care and management of church property and land).

Each diocese is overseen by a **diocesan synod** consisting of the Bishop, the clergy and lay representatives from each parish. The Church of Ireland comprises twelve dioceses, which are grouped within two provinces – each led by an Archbishop.

The Province of Armagh consists of seven dioceses:

- Armagh
- Clogher
- Connor
- Derry and Raphoe
- Down and Dromore
- Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh
- Tuam, Killala and Achonry

The Province of Dublin consists of five dioceses:

- Dublin and Glendalough
- Cashel, Waterford, Lismore, Ossory, Ferns and Leighlin
- Cork, Cloyne and Ross
- Limerick, Ardfert, Aghadoe, Killaloe, Kilmacduagh and Emly
- Meath and Kildare

Diocesan synods meet annually and elect members to the **General Synod** which acts as the 'parliament' of the church and decides questions of liturgy, church teaching and government.

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The General Synod consists of three orders – the bishops, the clergy and the laity – who sit together as two houses: the House of Bishops and the House of Representatives. The Archbishop of Armagh presides at meetings of the General Synod and it elects four Honorary Secretaries – two clerical and two lay – to oversee the running of the Synod and its Standing Committee.

The **Representative Church Body** (RCB) acts as the charitable trustee and 'civil service' of the Church, holding property and administering funds on its behalf. It consists of the archbishops and bishops, lay and clerical members elected by the dioceses, and twelve co-opted members.