

From: SOS Lewis <sos.lewis@nio.gov.uk>
To: Oliver Legard <oliver.legard@nio.gov.uk>, [NR]@nio.gov.uk [NR]
[NR]@nio.gov.uk
Cc: SpAds PS <spads.ps@nio.gov.uk>, PS SOS <ps.sos@nio.gov.uk>
Subject: Fwd: Urgent: Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regs and COVID-19
Date: Wed, 8 Apr 2020 10:22:55 +0100

Oliver [NR] [NR] to be aware, we received the below email from Naomi Long last night on the issue of access to abortion services during Covid-19, which provides more colour and another perspective on the NIE discussion yesterday. I'll test with officials on how/when they advise we respond - my sense is that we should wait until we have clarity from Robin Swann's team about the Belfast Trust option and any NIE discussion this afternoon before drafting something or offering Naomi a call on this.

[NR], please could you set this up with [NR], copying [NR] - I'll flag to her it's coming.

Thanks,

[NR]

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Long, Naomi <naomi.long@mla.niassembly.gov.uk>
Date: Tue, 7 Apr 2020 at 19:35
Subject: Urgent: Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regs and COVID-19
To: SOS Lewis <sos.lewis@nio.gov.uk>
Cc: DoJ SpAd <DoJ-SpAd@justice-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk>, stephen.farry.mp@parliament.uk
<stephen.farry.mp@parliament.uk>

7th April 2020

FAO: Secretary of State for NI, Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE PC

Dear Brandon,

I am writing to you regarding the lack of abortion services in Northern Ireland, particularly during this Covid-19 crisis. Further, I am extremely concerned that, based on what happened at the Executive on 6th April, we also face a significant and longer-term issue in respect of the ability of the Department of Health to commission services.

Addressing the immediate crisis first: the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations came into effect on 1st April 2020. As an interim measure between decriminalisation, the Regulations being made and services being commissioned by the Department of Health, women were still required to travel in order to access terminations in all but the most extreme cases, eg. where a termination was a result of a medical emergency. However, travel either to GB or Republic of Ireland is all but impossible, with flights between NI and GB reduced to one per day from Derry City Airport, train and bus timetables reduced to a skeleton service, the cost of ferry travel increased and hotel accommodation unavailable for women who can afford to travel.

I am extremely concerned that, without access to safe abortion care women will again resort to drastic measures, including physical trauma and ingesting dangerous substances. At least one woman has already tried to take her own life last week due to flights being cancelled. Faced with continued lockdown, increased levels of domestic and sexual violence, the consequent exacerbation of mental health crisis and a health service on its knees, this is one issue with an immediate remedy.

Northern Ireland is the only part of these islands where telemedicine is not available during the COVID-19 crisis. Women in Northern Ireland have been left in an extremely distressing and untenable situation, which would not be tolerated elsewhere.

A proposal to provide for telemedicine in Early Medical Abortion (EMA) was brought to the Executive yesterday by the Health Minister, as he deemed that the matter was controversial and therefore required Executive approval. Ignoring the solutions contained within his own paper, he proposed the establishment of a sub-committee to discuss the matter further, which would only have added to delay with no prospect of consensus being achieved. This proposal was defeated. A further proposal, centring on providing a model of telemedicine EMA, was also defeated with the Health Minister abstaining on this, despite this being an option contained in his own paper. A final proposal was made to refer the matter back to the Health Minister to take forward independently, as a healthcare issue, but this was also defeated. So-called “cross-community” votes were triggered on each occasion, so whilst both of the latter proposals achieved a simple majority, neither met the cross-community test. Furthermore, whilst I voted, my vote was essentially discounted in the result.

LPP/LAP

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I look forward to your urgent response.

Yours Sincerely,


Naomi

Naomi Long MLA | Alliance Party Leader | Justice Minister

naomi.long@mla.niassembly.gov.uk
doj.minister@justice-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk

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NIO Private Office
1 Horse Guards Road, London
Stormont House, Belfast
Ciarán Hayes (PPS)

NR

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