
**PRO LIFE CAMPAIGN
PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2023**



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campaign

INTRODUCTION

This submission is made on behalf of the Pro Life Campaign (PLC). The PLC is a human rights organisation which advocates in the public sphere for policies which prioritise the right to life and human dignity. It draws its support from a cross-section of Irish society and seeks to reflect and represent the beliefs of a considerable constituency of the Irish population. The PLC campaigns for greater supports for pregnant women, children, and families.

The PLC has been at the forefront of advocating policies to defend the right to life and support women and their children for over thirty years. The organisation actively monitors the wide-ranging impact of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 and has sought to engage with the ongoing review into the abortion law and draw attention to several glaring problems associated with its operation.

This submission is made in response to the annual invitation by the Department of Finance from interested parties to present their proposals on areas of public policy and expenditure which the government should prioritise. The PLC has presented examples of a range of initiatives which would reorder the state's priorities to provide greater supports to families and pregnant women, particularly those facing unplanned pregnancies. These suggestions are indicative of successful models elsewhere and should be considered by the Irish government. If enacted, the pro-women and pro-family policies outlined in this submission would undoubtedly produce a reduction in the annual abortion rate without the requirement to necessarily amend the present abortion law. There is a correlation between a robust pro-family social welfare system and a reduced abortion rate.

The primary focus of this submission relates to areas of social welfare, housing, and greater supports for women in unplanned pregnancies.

TACKLING THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF ABORTION

A common theme during the 2018 abortion referendum campaign was that abortion is a human tragedy and is never something to be celebrated. There appeared to be a mutual consensus that no woman should ever feel compelled by socioeconomic factors – such as economic concerns, financial insecurity, or social stigma – into having an abortion. Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the referendum and the consequent introduction of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, there has been a sharp downturn in discourse surrounding the need to combat socioeconomic pressures on women in unplanned pregnancies which leave many feeling they have no alternative but to proceed with an abortion.

The Pro Life Campaign believes it is incumbent upon the government and all politicians to take steps not just to address social problems which lead to abortion, but to proactively introduce pro-family policies across the board. The state should ensure that families, particularly expectant mothers, feel sufficiently supported and empowered to raise children.

The PLC proposes that the government should explore adopting a streamlined raft of policies rooted in a pro-family ethos. This would make economic sense and would help to futureproof Irish society which, on current demographic trends, is rapidly ageing. Successful pro-family initiatives have already been overseen elsewhere in the EU, and similar proposals should be considered for implementation in Ireland.

Childcare benefits proposals:

- As the financial costs of having a baby do not begin with a child's birth, the PLC proposes the government should consider starting child benefit payments prior to a child's birth. Payments should begin during the final three months of a pregnancy, providing the family with important financial support in advance of the child's birth. Child benefit rates should further be expanded and gradually increase on a progressive annual rate during the early years of the child's life.
- The PLC proposes that the government should consider introducing a state-issued, zero-interest loan, initially proposed at approximately €25,000 (rate to be reviewed annually in the budget to be adjusted for inflation and other factors), to be provided to all new parents who are expecting their first child. This would act as a considerable boon for new parents and could make an important contribution toward securing a deposit on a home, finding secure and tenable long-term rental accommodation, or making other positive impacts on the life of the new family elsewhere. The loan would be subject to review upon the birth of future children; if a second child is born, the loan would be remitted by thirty per cent; if a third child is born, the loan would be fully remitted.
- The PLC proposes a specific childcare benefit should be considered which would provide a guaranteed rate of income equivalent to one parent to stay at home and raise the child for the first three years of the child's life. Payment would be the equivalent to a state pension, based on average PRSI contributions to date in the case of a contributory pension.
- A continuation of the above-outlined childcare benefit provided to a stay-at-home parent of three or more children, from age 3 to 8 (of the youngest child), should be considered.

Housing and homelessness

Opinion polls show that Irish voters frequently rank the ongoing housing crisis as one of the most pressing issues that requires urgent attention and remedy. The impact of the housing crisis on young people has also been noted well in public commentary and political discourse. Runaway rental prices and mounting property prices are negatively impacting young people and prospective first-time buyers looking to own their own home. This extremely negative housing situation is trickling into all aspects of social and cultural life.

Undoubtedly, housing insecurity has impacted the spiralling annual abortion rate. As such, the PLC proposes that government housing policy should prioritise schemes aimed toward helping young families whilst also alleviating the burden placed on the most vulnerable people who find themselves homeless. Below are proposals which have worked elsewhere and which, we believe, the Irish government should explore and consider adopting:

- The PLC suggests that the government examine the feasibility of introducing a policy whereby families with at least three dependent children would be eligible for a subsidy grant toward the purchase or construction of a new home, valued at approximately €25,000 (to be reviewed annually and adjusted to account for inflation and other factors).
- Greater funding should be made available to organisations like Anew, which directly assist homeless pregnant women.

Addressing domestic violence

Domestic violence is a grave problem which needs to be urgently addressed. The Programme for Government commits the government to implement and properly resource 'a plan for future refuge space on the publication of a review of domestic violence accommodation provision.'^[1] The need to progress with this commitment is highlighted by the alarming impact of the Covid-19 crisis which has exacerbated already existing problems in Irish society.

As part of resourcing efforts to limit domestic violence, the government should consider ending telemedicine abortion. This policy was introduced at the start of the pandemic by the government as a temporary measure. In a 2022 journal article co-authored by one of the appointees of the three-year review, it was claimed that taxi drivers and other couriers have been funded by the HSE to deliver abortion pills to women due to the policy of telemedicine.^[2] The HSE has acknowledged the heightened risks of coercion and domestic abuse in telemedicine abortion: 'In-person consultations allow provision of personalised care and allow potential problems to be identified and mitigated. Meeting the woman in person increases the likelihood of the provider identifying any coercion or domestic abuse.'^[3]

For the government to realistically honour its commitments to tackling domestic violence in Irish society, it must take steps to end telemedicine abortion, owing to the dangers it poses regarding coercion and the demonstrated health risks involved. It should further stop funding the transportation of abortion pills, which impinges an individual's right to freedom of conscience to remove themselves from being involved in the abortion process.

Real supports for women in unplanned pregnancies

€1.8 million was spent in 2020 on the MyOptions phone line and webchat, which claims in its mission statement to provide 'non-directive' support and advice to women in unplanned pregnancies on all their options, including abortion and continuing with their pregnancy. Approximately the same amount of funding was allocated to the service for 2021.[4] A report released in January 2022 pointed to serious shortcomings with the operation of the HSE MyOptions service and indicated a repeated tendency on the part of counsellors to engage in directive counselling toward abortion as a solution. The full details of the report released by Students for Life are available below.[5] There has been a regrettable tendency on the part of staff involved in the HSE's Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme to ignore the report's findings and to continue treating MyOptions as a panacea to the issue of unplanned pregnancy.

In 2002 the government signalled its intention to set up a 'Crisis Pregnancy Agency' with an annual budget of €6 million to provide practical help to women in unplanned pregnancies. Although the issue of providing help for women in unplanned pregnancies was repeatedly a focus of discussion throughout the proceeding years, concrete proposals failed to take root and serious efforts simply did not materialise. The Crisis Pregnancy Agency provided funding to various initiatives during the 2000s but has since been subsumed within the HSE's Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme. There has been little serious attempt by successive governments to establish and operate a single-purpose agency seeking to provide women in unplanned pregnancies with genuine supports, including counselling and practical information. This requires a total overhaul of the current MyOptions service to ensure it is fit for purpose and that all staff are trained in and required to provide comprehensive information on alternatives to abortion for women who ask for them.

The PLC proposes that greater resources be made available to providing alternative options to abortion. State-backed organisations should be properly resourced and staff should be adequately trained to provide positive options to women in unplanned pregnancies, particularly those who have expressed uncertainty about whether they wish to proceed with an abortion. These proposals would not impact the legal status of abortion in Ireland as governed by the 2018 Act but would simply provide a much-needed service to often vulnerable and desperate women who may otherwise feel compelled to have an abortion. Undoubtedly this would prompt a decrease in the annual number of abortions, which is an outcome that should be welcomed by all sides.

CONCLUSION

As Ireland faces a period of belt tightening owing to the cost of living and energy crises, it is important that the Budget protects the most vulnerable members of society. Women in unplanned pregnancies suffer greater insecurity and thus need to be prioritised, particularly in the areas of housing and social protection.

This Pre-Budget Submission has outlined a path whereby the state's social welfare apparatus could gradually be reorientated toward prioritising the flourishing and growth of families. By adopting pro-family and pro-children social welfare policies, the government would undoubtedly oversee a decrease in the total abortion rate as the root causes of socioeconomic abortions are directly challenged. This would also lead to an increase in the Irish population, which is necessary if Ireland is to remain a competitive and youthful country.

We believe the recommendations outlined in this Pre-Budget Submission would help to achieve several of the issues identified at the start of this document. We urge the Department of Finance to review these proposals and incorporate them within the new Budget.

Pro Life Campaign
September 2022

[1] Programme for Government,

https://www.finegael.ie/app/uploads/2020/06/ProgrammeforGovernment_Final_16.06.20-1.pdf, p. 98.

[2] Mishtal, Joanna, Reeves, Karli, Chakravarty, Dyuti, Grimes, Lorraine, Stifani, Bianca, Chavkin, Wendy, Duffy, Deirdre, Favier, Mary, Horgan, Patricia, Murphy, Mark and Lavelanet, Antonella F (2022) 'Abortion policy implementation in Ireland: lessons from the community model of care', *PLoS One*, 17 (5).

[3] HSE reply to PQ11178/22, 3 March 2022.


[4] HSE reply to PQ5186/21, 17 February 2021.


[5] 'MyOptions Project', November 2021–January 2022, <https://studentsforlife.ie/myoptions-project/>.


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