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PRO LIFE CAMPAIGN PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION




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PRO LIFE CAMPAIGN - AUGUST 2024

This submission has been made by the Pro Life Campaign (PLC) in response to the annual invitation from the Department of Finance for interested parties to present proposals to inform public expenditure.

The PLC is a human rights organisation which has been at the forefront of advocating for the protection of human life and espousing pro-life public policies in Irish society for over three decades. Since the passage of the 2018 referendum and the subsequent introduction of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, which came into effect on 1 January 2019, the PLC has focused on tracking and offering a pro-life critique of the impact of abortion policy in Ireland. We have consistently called for a comprehensive reform of how Ireland approaches unplanned pregnancies, urging for the adoption of pro-life and pro-family policies which would mitigate against socio-economic abortions, which are the major reason underlying Ireland's spiralling abortion rate.

Every year, the abortion rate has climbed dramatically. Whilst there is an obvious gap in the accuracy of data collection, it is an undeniable fact that in recent years the abortion rate has been rising sharply. For example, according to the Department of Health's own notifications reports, in 2021 there were approximately 6,700 abortions[1], by 2022 this had risen to 8,156 abortion notifications, and last year in 2023 there were a record 10,033 abortion notifications. Clearly, the abortion rate is continuing to rise dramatically. An early release of GP claims figures for the first five months of 2024 indicates that the abortion rate is set to yet again climb even higher this year, breaking yet another tragic "record" with regards to the ending of unborn human life.[2] In the first three and a half years (2019 – mid-2023) of the new abortion regime, there was an estimated €46,000,000 spent purely on rolling out and facilitating abortion.[3] This makes it very clear that considerable funds are being expended, footed by the tax-payer, for the establishment of an abortion regime which every year is resulting in a higher number of lives prematurely ended.

The purpose of this submission is to make the case for measures which would honour that well-worn phrase made by the then-Taoiseach around the time of the May 2018 referendum that abortion in Ireland should be "rare". A majority of voters in 2018 voted with such promises in mind, including claims that somehow introducing a form of regulated, state-backed abortion would actually "reduce" or stabilise the abortion rate. The inverse has proven to be the case. But this situation has played out due to a lack of comprehensive social policies which could alleviate some of the root causes of abortion, which are chiefly socio-economic in nature.

[1] The notifications in this year (2020) were said to be inaccurate and thus only 4,577 notifications were reported. However, the DOH supplied a supplementary note which admitted this and suggested that the GP claims for second consultation abortions of just under 6,700 is likely a more accurate figure.

[2] PQ: 31899/24, Health Service Executive to Sean Canney TD, 6 August 2024.

[3] www.prolifecampaign.ie/abortion-statistics-report; €45,928,018 is estimated to have been spent on abortion between 2019 and June 2023.



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POSITIVE SUPPORTS FOR UNPLANNED PREGNANCIES

HSE My Options must be reformed

The government launched HSE MyOptions in 2019 ostensibly as an independent phone service for women in unplanned pregnancies which would provide them with “all your options”, including information on abortion but also information on “continued pregnancy supports.” But since its launch, MyOptions has become little more than a hotline to quickly access an abortion. It provides nothing in the way of positive supports to women who may be interested in continuing with their pregnancy, such as information on financial entitlements, support schemes for new parents, or adoption services.

A woman interviewed for a 2022 article published in the BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health said: “I imagined MyOptions was going to give me different options available to me rather than an abortion...I really wish it had been more obvious online that you just need to call MyOptions to get a list of GPs!”^[4] This suggests that MyOptions has a signposting problem. Women in unplanned pregnancies are misled and assume MyOptions is an objective counselling service which fulfils its mission statement of providing women with “all your options”.

A research study published in 2022 alarmingly showed how MyOptions counsellors are totally unequipped to provide women with information on life-affirming supports. Moreover, several instances in the study pointed to directive counselling on the part of counsellors, who urged undecided women to “make an appointment [for an abortion] anyway.”^[5] Despite largely failing to meet its mission statement, €834,324 has been spent on advertising MyOptions in its first four years of operation.^[6]

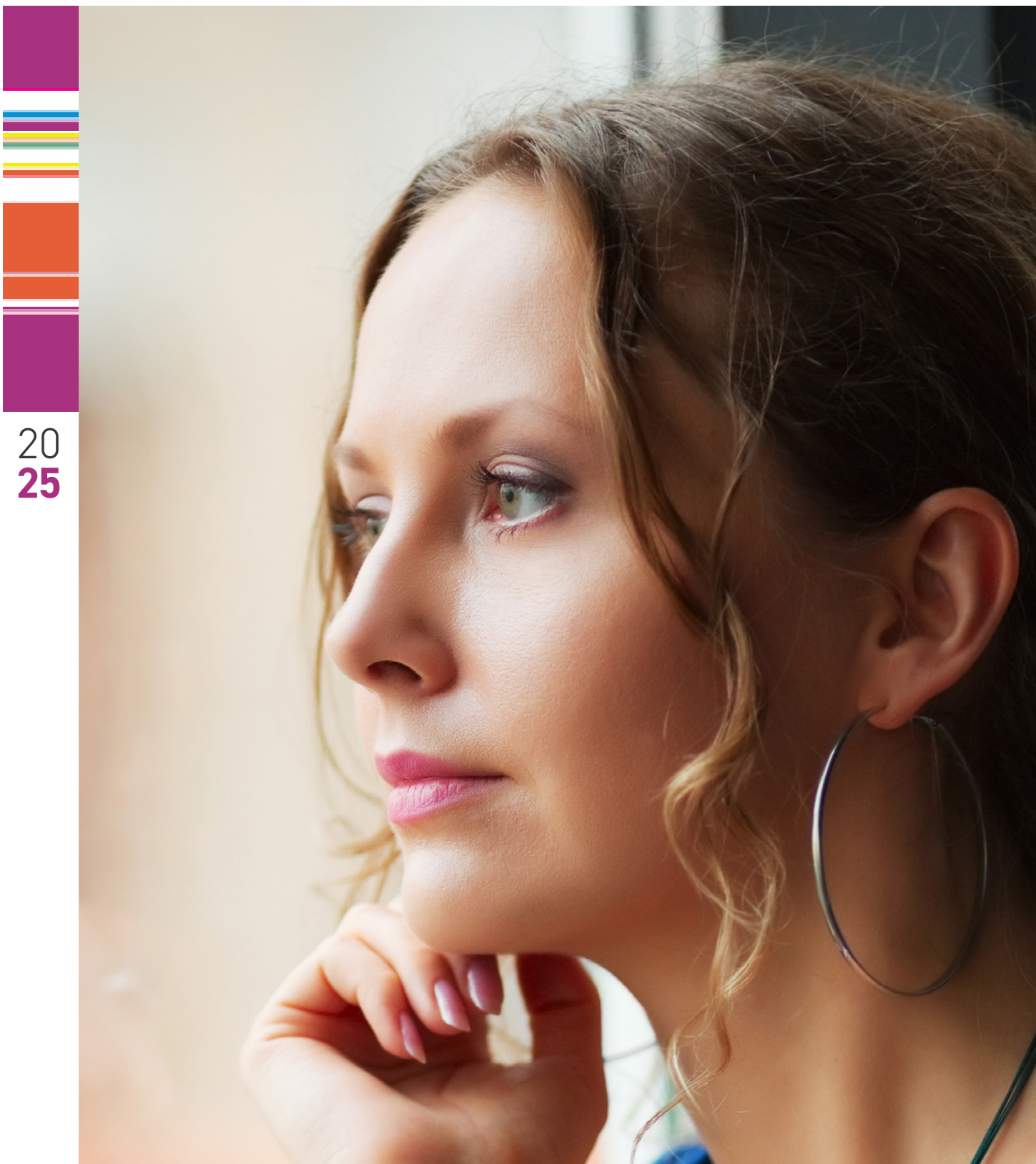
HSE MyOptions is failing in its mission statement to provide non-directive counselling, its counsellors have been recorded advising women to make abortion appointments and suggesting abortion to undecided women as a “solution”. This could be seen in the 2024 RTÉ Investigates programme “Ireland’s Abortion Services” and in the 2022 report by Students for Life.^[8] Funding for MyOptions must be redirected towards specific services which provide women in unplanned pregnancies with positive alternatives to abortion. Meanwhile, MyOptions must be overhauled and its counsellors should receive comprehensive training that enables them to offer information to pregnant women on supports available which would allow them to continue their pregnancy, including information on adoption services, social welfare supports, counselling, and other programmes (e.g. the Teen Parents Support Programme).

^[4] Grimes, Lorraine, O’Shaughnessy, Aideen, Roth, Rachel, Carnegie, Anna and Duffy, Deirdre Niamh (2022) ‘Analysing MyOptions: experiences of Ireland’s abortion information and support service’. *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health*, 48 (3). pp. 222-6.

^[5] <https://studentsforlife.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/MyOptions-Research-Revealed.pdf>.

^[6] HSE reply to PQ Ref 7260/23.

^[8] <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-02-22/230/>.



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Resourcing positive options for women in unplanned pregnancies

Pro-life citizens have provided a much-needed lifeline to women in unplanned pregnancies through non-profit counselling and support services for decades. Thousands of women have received help from such agencies, which have often received public funding in the past. Unfortunately, since the introduction of the 2018 Act, the government has tried to compel counsellors offering advice to pregnant women to begin providing 'information' on abortion, even if it runs contrary to their ethos and life-affirming mission. Most recently, the attitude towards any counselling organisation which doesn't provide abortion from the government has been intensely hostile.

The Minister for Health says he has taken steps to clamp down on pro-life counselling agencies, which he mischaracterised as "disingenuous" simply because they follow a pro-life ethos. He revealed that the HSE has been "combatting the promotion of disingenuous messaging" by spending money on Google ads to promote MyOptions and abortion-providing agencies, ensuring they appear at the top of Google searches which relate to unplanned pregnancy. A bid management strategy has even been set up to "automatically increase their bids if another website appears ahead of theirs".^[7]

This use of taxpayers' money to promote websites and services which provide abortion to women in unplanned pregnancies, who may be vulnerable and stressed, is inappropriate and must end. The government already engages with state-funded agencies which actively campaign in favour of abortion, such as the Irish Family Planning Association, and frequently direct women who come to MyOptions to groups like the IFPA. Meanwhile, pro-life agencies are treated as "disingenuous" and "rogue". This attitude must end. In order to reduce the spiralling abortion rate, the government must commit to listening to the perspectives of the agencies and individuals who have been at the forefront of providing women in unplanned pregnancies with positive supports for decades.

In addition to ending the practice of funding an automatic bid management system to marginalise online results for pro-life counselling services, this money should be redirected to ensure an equal proportion of positive pro-life counselling services are promoted by state agencies. At present only abortion advocacy organisations like the IFPA are promoted. Organisations which have a specific focus on helping women in unplanned pregnancies with positive alternatives to abortion (such as supports, advice, and adoption information) should be far more prioritised than is currently the case.

Tackling the economic 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.

^[7] <https://studentsforlife.ie/myoptions-project/>



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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 child-care 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 child-care 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 proposes 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, which directly assist homeless pregnant women.

Challenging 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.'^[9] 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.^[10] 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.'^[11]

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.

^[9] Programme for Government, https://www.finegael.ie/app/uploads/2020/06/ProgrammeforGovernment_Final_16.06.20-1.pdf, p. 98.

^[10] 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).

^[11] HSE reply to PQ11178/22, 3 March 2022



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CONCLUSION

In a representative democracy, all sides must be listened to. During the recent three-year review of the abortion law, there was a disappointing lack of engagement with perspectives outside a narrow ideological bubble. The state must recognise its responsibility when setting and funding public policy, that it has to take into account the views of all citizens – including the considerable proportion of the electorate (one-third) who voted against introducing abortion in 2018.

This Pre-Budget Submission has made the case for an Ireland which proactively offers positive supports to women in unplanned pregnancies. This must include comprehensive, non-directive counselling coupled with the broader reorientation of the social welfare system to alleviate the burdens placed on people with children. 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 ask that the Department of Finance considers these policy proposals as part of the forthcoming Budget.

Pro Life Campaign
August 2024