

## FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Mr Colm Gildernew MLA  
Chair, Committee for Health  
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Your Ref: C219/21  
Our Ref: CORR/2472/2021  
Date: 25<sup>th</sup> August 2021

Dear *Colm,*

Thank you for your correspondence of 19 July 2021 requesting an update on any action my Department is taking regarding the ongoing protests being held at Health and Social Care (HSC) premises.

My previous correspondence of 16 June 2021 regarding this issue (CORR-2055-2021) outlined my view regarding these protests and advised that Trust Chief Executives would be best placed to advise on any measures they are taking to protect patients and staff at an operational level. I am therefore pleased that the Committee has had an opportunity to hear directly from a number of Trust Chief Executives about these issues and the mitigations that have been put in place. These are undoubtedly sensitive issues, and my Department stands ready to support Trusts as required, however the bottom line remains that the legal right to protest should not be used to obstruct or intimidate anyone who is accessing lawful healthcare services, or staff who are providing them.

Whilst these are operational issues best managed by Trusts in conjunction with the relevant authorities, the underlying issues require democratic resolution through the appropriate Assembly processes.

You are aware that my Department is developing a draft service commissioning specification for abortion services which will be subject to agreement by the Executive in due course, in line with the requirements of the Ministerial Code. Whilst the service delivery model itself is not expected to resolve all issues around protests at HSC facilities, this work will be cognisant of these issues and will seek to recommend a model in which Trusts can feasibly provide these services in the longer term in a way that mitigates the risk of obstruction or intimidation of patients or staff.

Lead policy responsibility in matters relating to alleged intimidation, investigation and enforcement lies with the Department of Justice (DoJ). I have previously advised that I would be happy to work with the Minister for Justice on this cross-cutting matter to implement any measures which she and the Executive consider appropriate to resolve these matters as soon as possible. Officials from my Department and the DoJ have been liaising in this regard, however we are not aware of any firm proposals being brought forward at this stage.

The Committee will also be aware that a draft Private Members' Bill seeking to introduce safe access zones for abortion services has been submitted to the Speaker's Office. I have agreed to meet the Bill's sponsor to discuss its contents and the policy intent.

I trust you find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', is positioned above the typed name.

**Robin Swann MLA**  
**Minister of Health**