

## **Royal College of Nursing**

### **Call for evidence by the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health in respect of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill**

#### **Introduction**

- 1 The Royal College of Nursing [RCN] is a trade union and professional organisation representing registered nurses, nursing assistants and nursing students in all practice settings across Northern Ireland. The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in practice and shapes health policy.
- 2 The RCN welcomes the opportunity to provide brief written evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health in respect of its current scrutiny of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill.

#### **Policy background and RCN position**

- 3 In December 2019 and following extensive internal discussion with our membership in Northern Ireland, the RCN responded to the consultation by the Northern Ireland Office on a new legal framework for abortion services in Northern Ireland: implementation of the legal duty under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019. Within this consultation exercise, question four asked respondents whether abortion without time limit should be available for fetal abnormality where there is a substantial risk that [a] “the fetus would die in utero (in the womb) or shortly after birth” and [b] “the fetus if born would suffer a severe impairment, including a mental or physical disability which is likely to significantly limit either the length or quality of the child’s life”.
- 4 On the basis of the views of our members, the RCN responded affirmatively to both these scenarios. We also commented: “The RCN believes that this is a straightforward human rights

issue and the autonomous choice of the woman must be the key factor. Again, the current lack of accessibility of fetal abnormality testing in Northern Ireland is a further consideration relevant to this question.” This, therefore, represents the established position of the RCN on this issue.

- 5 Given this established position, which has been determined and endorsed by our membership in Northern Ireland, the RCN is unable to support either the provisions of, or the intent behind, the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill.

### **Concluding comments**

- 6 The RCN hopes that the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health will find this brief submission to be helpful and we wish the Committee well in its continuing consideration and scrutiny of the Bill.

May 2021