

UK Government moves to ensure abortion services are commissioned in Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will today (Thursday 19 May) take further legislative steps to ensure abortion services are commissioned for women and girls in Northern Ireland.

This follows inaction from the Department of Health and Northern Ireland Executive, which have not guaranteed relevant healthcare services are available by the 31 March 2022 deadline set by the Secretary of State in July 2021.

Today, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is laying regulations that remove the need for the Department of Health to seek Executive Committee approval in relation to commissioning abortion services in Northern Ireland. This means the Department of Health will have no further barriers to commission and fund services.

The UK Government is steadfast in its belief that, as a devolved matter, the Department of Health should drive forward the commissioning of abortion services without further delay.

Today's regulations will also allow the Government to intervene if there is further inaction delivering safe and high-quality abortion services. The Secretary of State will be seeking a clear and unambiguous commitment from the Minister for Health Robin Swann that he will progress this matter without further delay.

If the Department of Health does not commission and fund abortion services as directed, the regulations give the UK Government the power to do anything that a Northern Ireland Minister or department could do for the purpose of ensuring that abortion services are provided as decided by Parliament in 2019.

To ensure the Secretary of State has all the information required in those circumstances, a small team of experts in the medical field has been established in the Northern Ireland Office to work alongside the Department of Health and report back to him on progress.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, said:

“Women and girls of Northern Ireland must have access to safe, high-quality abortion services in Northern Ireland, as is their right.

“It is absolutely unacceptable that the Executive and Department of Health have failed women and girls, meaning that they cannot currently access the

same basic abortion healthcare that is available to women and girls in the rest of the UK.

“That’s why I am acting to remove any further barriers to delivering services.

“The Department of Health must drive forward the commissioning of abortion services without further delay to ensure that safe abortion becomes embedded into the health and social care system in Northern Ireland.”

Notes to editors: