Written submission from Paula McKeown (ANI0561)

1) DEVOLUTION
It is with deep concern that I write as I feel that the people of Northern Ireland are not being respectfully consulted on the matter of abortion when our local assembly is suspended. The politicians and ideally the people should be directly consulted on any change to law. A committee which has no representation from Northern Ireland would be considered as wholly insensitive to the local landscape to act on changing a law at this time without any mandate from local people.

2) DISTINCTIVE LAW AND CULTURE
I previously worked as a Speech and Language Therapist and was privileged to work with a large number of families who had a child with a disability. The greatest mark of a society is how it cares for the most vulnerable. When I consider my own morning today I was one of many parents awaiting disability services for their child. In this room of other parents we knew support, we delighted in one another's children and we recognised the strain that is a part of life but certainly not the full picture. All of our children with their varying levels of need bring joy. Our child was the only one in the room who's disability became apparent after birth. I would wonder if the other children with Spina Bifida and Down's Syndrome would have been there today if our laws were different and the law and society were urging abortion rather than preparation for family life with a disabled child.

3) HUMAN RIGHTS & EQUALITY
I would ask the Women's and Equalities Committee to prioritise its energy into ensuring that sexual crimes towards women are addressed as a priority. Addressing rape and sexual violence is fundamental as abortion is not a solution to rape but rather further trauma for a victim of sexual crime. Let us stop sexual crime - this is the greatest dignity we can offer to women. The latest release of findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales shows more than 510,000 women – an estimated 3.1% of all women aged 16 to 59 – experienced some type of sexual assault in the past year. Of those assaults 41,186 were rape offences reported to the Police. In Northern Ireland almost 1,000 rapes were reported to the Police Service of Northern Ireland in the last 12 months – an 18% increase on the previous year. In the year ending 2017 rapes in Scotland had risen by 4% in the past year to 1,755, and attempted rapes by 5%. In total across the UK in one year we know that 43,941 women reported that they were victims of rape. These are the women we need to prioritise. This is an issue for which we have laws, an issue that has a mandate right across the UK. Let us prioritise correctly and make the necessary changes in society so that no one is a victim to sexual violence.

In the recent referendum in the Republic of Ireland many are reported to have voted YES to allow for women carrying a child with a life-limiting condition to be terminated in the womb. My desire would be that we prioritise pre&peri natal hospice care. We need to provide and speak of outstanding care for mother and baby allowing a death to occur naturally with great care and support for the whole family at the time of death and the following bereavement.

4) PERSONAL STORIES

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