

# NSS: religion shouldn't restrict access to abortion in NI

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The National Secular Society has urged the UK government not to allow religion to limit women's access to abortions in Northern Ireland in response to a consultation.

The government is [consulting](#) on a legal framework for abortion services in NI in the wake of an act of parliament which [legalised](#) abortion there in October.

**In [response](#) the NSS argued that institutions with religious objections to abortion "must not be allowed to dominate" debates about it.**

**"Their beliefs must not be prioritised over women's rights to bodily autonomy, to appropriate medical care and to make their own decisions about their family lives."**

**The society said attempts to control women's bodies and restrict access to sexual and reproductive health "have been a consistent feature of religious dogma and of societies where religious values are politically privileged".**

In response to specific proposals, the NSS said:

- Women and girls should have unrestricted access to abortions up until 24 weeks' pregnancy, as there was "no medical reason for a distinction at any time until viability". This was in response to a question over whether the gestational limit should be up to 12 weeks or 14.
- Abortion should be available without time limit when a foetus has a high probability of dying in utero or shortly after birth. That should also apply where a foetus has a severe impairment likely to limit either the length or quality of the child's life significantly.
- There should be no requirement to certify an abortion, as this would risk enabling healthcare professionals who strongly oppose abortions to obstruct women's ability to have them.
- There should be powers to introduce buffer zones around abortion facilities when anti-abortion protests impede women's right to access medical care and the zones are a proportionate means of protecting it.
- Current British law achieved a reasonable balance between the rights of patients to access safe and legal healthcare and the rights of healthcare professionals to avoid providing abortions. This should be replicated in Northern Ireland.

**Explaining the NSS's position, spokesperson Megan Manson said: "Religious groups' ability to restrict women's bodily autonomy is weakening in Northern Ireland, and that's a welcome trend."**

**"The government must now ensure it doesn't water down its proposals for fear of aggravating them."**

## Recent background

- Until October, abortion was only [allowed](#) in Northern Ireland if a woman's life was at risk or there was a risk of permanent and serious damage to her mental or physical health.

- Last year a UN committee [told](#) the government it should ensure women in Northern Ireland could legally terminate their pregnancies. The new consultation document considers how to ensure consistency with the committee's recommendations.

## NSS lobbying at UN human rights council

- The NSS [submitted evidence](#) to a UN human rights council consultation in 2016 as the council reviewed the UK's record on human rights. The society said Northern Ireland's restrictions on abortion were out of touch with international human rights norms.

## Consultation timetable

The consultation timetable is due to enable a new legal framework to be introduced by 31 March 2020.

*[The consultation is open until 11:45pm on Monday 16 December.](#)*

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