

Marie Stopes clinic closes after five years



Amanda Ferguson

in Belfast

Abortion rights charity's clinic closes today in Belfast following changes to British legislation

During its five years of life, the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast dealt with thousands of women. The oldest was 52; the youngest was 13 who had become pregnant after she was raped by a relative.

When it opened in 2012, the clinic faced protests from hundreds of anti-abortion demonstrators outside its Great Victoria Street offices.

Protests continued during the years that followed, remembers Dawn Purvis, who led the clinic for three years after she had lost her seat in the Stormont Assembly, where she served for a time as the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party.

No one was ever turned away. Now, the office is closing following the British government's move earlier this year – one forced on it by British Labour Party MP Stella Creasy to fund abortions for women from Northern Ireland in England, even though Marie Stopes itself argues that such abortions should be available in Belfast.

Given the change to the legislation, the numbers contacting the private Belfast clinic have dropped dramatically, making its presence in the city unsustainable, so the decision was taken, after five challenging years, to shut the non-profit-making clinic and focus resources to help Northern Irish women access funded treatment in England.

On Marie Stopes's opening day in 2012, hundreds of anti-abortion activists gathered outside the Great Victoria Street building in central Belfast, and protests continued during the hours it was open, on two days a week, and beyond.

'No one was ever turned away'

Its closure has been welcomed. "Fabulous news. Marie Stopes have closed their Belfast Office. Precious life have held vigils etc outside and their work has borne fruit. Could it also have anything to do with the Coastal Rosary held last Sunday? Deo Gratias," commented one anti-abortion campaigner this week.

Ms Purvis helped set up the Belfast clinic and was its director from 2012 to 2015. If women could not afford to pay the clinic then women's groups, charities and other funding sources were found.

"No one was ever turned away, there was always help available," says Ms Purvis.

This year, the Belfast clinic will deal with more than 700 women.

The numbers, however, coming to its doors dwindled in the weeks since the change in Westminster legislation.

Most of those who came were poor, or with the freest of choices and means to arrange their own abortions.

Many were in unhealthy relationships, with injuries from abusive partners, and every year around January and February there was a spike in the numbers arriving after being raped and abused by controlling partners over the Christmas period.

"From day one the protesters were there and the tactic was to harass and intimidate and publicly shame the women who were coming to use services, but similarly to intimidate staff on a daily basis," Ms Purvis said.

"When you support women and young women and girls in very difficult circumstances it can't help but affect you particularly knowing what they have gone through and suffered, to witness them being shouted at and chased down the street was horrific."

The oldest woman attending the clinic about an abortion during Ms Purvis's tenure was 52 and the youngest was a 13-year-old rape victim.

"The 13-year-old, while she was with us, disclosed she was being sexually abused by a relative," she said.

Women who ask for abortions "cannot be stereotyped", she argues. Research by Marie Stopes throughout the UK indicates that most women who come to it for abortions are in relationships, have children and had been using contraceptives.

Abusive relationships

"This society has moved on from the 1960s and 70s talking about girls getting themselves into trouble," she said. Women from the Republic represented up to 40 per cent of the clients arriving at the clinic while Ms Purvis was overseeing it, with the majority travelling from Border counties and Dublin, but over the years numbers fell.

"Many women from the Republic go direct to England, Marie Stopes and Bpas in England discount the cost of treatment for women travelling from the Republic.

"In many respects coming to Belfast was more expensive for them."

Ms Purvis believes there has to be a change in the law across Ireland to offer all women choice and notes women in abusive relationships and those living in Northern Ireland with visa difficulties are in desperate need of help.

On anti-abortion groups in Northern Ireland claiming the Marie Stopes Belfast closure as a victory, Ms Purvis remarks, "they would say that, wouldn't they?"

"The decision at Westminster came about because of a lot of things but that included Marie Stopes opening in Belfast, pushing the issue up the agenda along with other campaigners and activists across the island," she said.

"We continue to export the problem



Abortion in the North Recent trends

Fewer women from Northern Ireland are travelling to England for an abortion because they are increasingly buying abortion pills online, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (Bpas) has said recently.

The number of women who travel to England has declined by 24 per cent in the last five years, with 833 doing so in 2015.

A total of 724 women living in the North had an abortion in England or Wales in 2016, along with another 3,265 who gave addresses in the Republic of Ireland – these women accounted for 83 per cent of all abortions carried out in England and Wales on women who did not live in England or Wales. The information about abortions in Scotland is more vague.

Women on Web, a website that refers women to licensed doctors to obtain the abortion pill after an online consultation, reported that 1,438 women from the North and the Republic used the service in 2015 – up from 548 in 2010.

A woman living in the North can face up to life imprisonment for terminating a pregnancy. Two years ago, a woman was given a three-month suspended sentence for buying the pills. One woman faced trial for buying pills for her daughter.

The number of legal abortions carried out in the North has fallen to a record low. Two years ago, 16 were carried out compared with 43 in 2010/11. It could be down to fewer doctors feeling they are able to sanction terminations, even if they would be legally permitted to do so, argues Bpas.

■ Dawn Purvis, who led the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast for three years after she had lost her seat in the Stormont Assembly, where she served for a time as the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party, and anti-abortion protesters outside the clinic when it opened in Belfast in 2012.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES/PA



Background How the law changed

Abortion law in Northern Ireland is covered by the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 and the Criminal Justice Act (NI) 1945. Access to abortion is only permitted if a woman's life is at risk or there is risk to her mental or physical health that is long term or permanent.

Life-limiting foetal abnormalities, rape and incest are not circumstances in which abortions can be performed legally.

Marie Stopes independent provider of sexual and reproductive health services opened in Belfast in 2012 to offer: short and long-term contraceptive options; emergency contraception; HIV testing; STI testing and treatment; ultrasound scanning; and

medical (pills) abortion up to nine weeks' gestation (costing £546), subject to legal criteria being met.

Earlier this year the UK supreme court in London upheld a ban on NHS-funded abortion care in England for women from Northern Ireland due to "respect" for decisions of the region's

Assembly, which is not currently in place. British Labour Party MP Stella Creasy (left) then proposed an amendment to the queen's speech calling for Northern Ireland women to have access to free abortions in England, where the 1967 Abortion Act allows for abortion up to 24 weeks.

The new provision was subsequently introduced by the British government.



companied out.

Two escorts, one wearing a body camera, the other holding a walkie-talkie with an emergency button that was linked to the clinic, were always available.

One would stay with the woman and the other would act as a buffer between her and the protesters, making clear they didn't want any leaflets, conversation or interaction with them. Ms Bailey says this would be ignored, "every single time."

"I had clients who were crying, who were terrified because protesters were using phones to record them, threatening to upload them to social media, threatening to report them to the police," she said.

"I had one client who ran into oncoming traffic in the city centre to try to get away from them."

"In my time as a Marie Stopes escort I have been spat at, splashed with holy water, had my hair pulled, I've been threatened, abused, intimidated, harassed, all sorts of behaviour."

With the closure of the Belfast clinic there is concern about the women who find themselves in a crisis pregnancy but who cannot, for a range of reasons, travel to England.

Instead, the National Health Service in the North, says Ms Bailey, should "step up" in Northern Ireland and offer women free, safe, legal abortions.

"I don't believe it is anybody's decision, apart from the pregnant woman," she said.

Private decision

"I don't see how this is a matter of state control and I certainly don't see why it needs to be backed up with the punitive threat of life imprisonment. This is a private decision."

Marie Stopes UK managing director Richard Bentley paid tribute to the staff and volunteers for the support they provided to women accessing the clinic in difficult conditions over the last five years.

"They are incredible," he said. "I am just full of admiration for them and the other organisations that have supported them."

He, too, rejects the claims made by anti-abortion activists that the closure of the Belfast office is a win for them: "It is actually a vindication of us being there and although it's not ideal that people have to travel to England to get treatment the upshot is they can now get treatment free at the point of delivery.

Have they won? Absolutely not."

The solution now for women, he says, is a change to Northern Ireland's abortion law.

On his visit to Belfast this week a taxi driver highlighted to him that the DUP want to have parity with the rest of the UK in terms of the Brexit talks but not on other matters.

"Our wish would be that women in Northern Ireland would actually have parity with the rest of the UK in terms of access to services. There has to be equality," he said.

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NOTICE OF SUBMISSION OF SIGNIFICANT FURTHER INFORMATION TO AN BORD PLEANÁLA

In respect of South Dublin County Council's application for approval of the proposed 'Dublin Mountains Visitor Centre' development (An Bord Pleanála Reference Number 06S.JA0040).

In accordance with Section 175(5)(d) of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, South Dublin County Council gives notice that further information containing significant additional data has been furnished to An Bord Pleanála in relation to the application for approval of the proposed 'Dublin Mountains Visitor Centre' development (An Bord Pleanála Reference Number 06S.JA0040).

The further information may be inspected free of charge or purchased for a fee not exceeding the reasonable cost of making a copy, during public opening hours for the period from Friday 8th December 2017 to Monday 8th January 2018 at the following locations:

- An Bord Pleanála, 64 Marlborough Street, Dublin 1 (opening hours Monday to Friday, 09h15 to 17h30);
- South Dublin County Council, County Hall, Tallaght, Dublin 24 (opening hours Monday to Thursday 9h00 to 17h00 and Fridays 09h00 to 16h30);
- Ballyroan Library, Orchardstown Avenue, Rathfarnham, Dublin 14 (opening hours Monday to Thursday 09h45 to 20h00, Fridays and Saturdays 09h45 to 16h30).

The further information may also be downloaded at <http://www.sdcc.ie/services/parks-and-recreation/dublin-mountains-project/>

Submissions or observations on the further significant information in relation to the proposed development may be made in writing to An Bord Pleanála at 64 Marlborough Street, Dublin 1 on or before 17h30 on Monday 8th January 2018.

Submissions and observations on the further information in relation to the proposed development may be made free of charge by persons who have already made submissions or observations on this application to An Bord Pleanála. Submissions or observations on the further information may also be made by persons who have not already made submissions or observations on this application to An Bord Pleanála, but these submissions or observations must be accompanied by a fee of €50 (except for certain prescribed bodies).

The site of the proposed development is Coillte's Hell Fire forest property from productive conifer forest to mixed deciduous woodland; (b) modifications to the existing trail networks; (c) construction of a 'tree canopy walk'/pedestrian bridge over the R115, with a 'bridge house' at the Hell Fire end of the bridge; (d) conservation works to the Hell Fire Club building (South Dublin Record of Protected Structures ref. 388) and the architectural heritage of the Massy's Wood property including the walled garden (part of South Dublin Record of Protected Structures ref. 384); (e) installation of heritage interpretation signage along the network of trails; (f) construction of a new parking area for 275 no. cars (including 14 no. accessible spaces) and five coach spaces; (g) construction of a visitor centre comprising two buildings (one single storey and one two-storey) at an elevation of c. 300m on the Hell Fire forest property, with a combined gross floor area of 980 sqm, accommodating: audio-visual/exhibition facility (101 sqm), education room (55 sqm), café (175 sqm), servery (36 sqm) and kitchen (60 sqm), 'Ramblers' Lounge' (43 sqm), retail (45 sqm), kiosk (27 sqm), toilets (26 sqm), facility management offices (55 sqm), and associated reception, circulation, plant and storage spaces; (h) construction of a stand-alone electricity substation (23 sqm); (i) installation of a new watermain line and sewage pipe under the R115 from the Hell Fire property to the existing watermain and public sewer network; (j) construction of a network of swales and ponds for attenuation of surface run-off, and a culvert beneath the R115 to channel overflow of surface water into the Glendoo Brook; (k) modifications to the existing entrance to the Hell Fire forest property; (l) installation of new fences along sections of the Hell Fire property boundary; (m) all ancillary works and landscaping on the Hell Fire and Massy's Wood properties.

It is proposed to make modifications to the stretches of the R115 and R113 roads, including the provision of a footpath (minimum 1.5m width) and an advisory cycle lane (1.5m width), and the retention of a carriageway of sufficient width for two-way traffic except at one location where a single lane traffic shuttle is proposed. The proposed modifications to the roads do not require encroachment into adjoining private lands, but do require localised widening of the R115 by 1.2m into the Massy's Wood property for a stretch of c.100m.

An Bord Pleanála may, in respect of this application for approval-

- approve the proposed development,
- make such modifications to the proposed development as it specifies in the approval and approve the proposed development as so modified,
- approve, in part only, the proposed development (with or without specified modifications), or
- refuse to approve the proposed development, and may attach to an approval such conditions as it considers appropriate.

A person may question the validity of a decision by An Bord Pleanála by way of an application for judicial review, under Order 84 of the Rules of the Superior Courts (S.I. No. 15 of 1986), in accordance with section 50 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000, as amended. Practical information on the review mechanism can be accessed under the heading Publications - Judicial Review Notice on An Bord Pleanála's website www.pleanala.ie or on the Citizens Information Service website www.citizensinformation.ie.

Web: www.sdcc.ie