

**Closing Remarks by Chairperson, Ms. Justice Mary Laffoy,
at the second meeting of the Citizens' Assembly
on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution
The Grand Hotel, Malahide, Sunday 8 January, 2017**

Good afternoon everyone.

We have had another very successful Assembly meeting on the Eighth Amendment.

This weekend we saw firsthand and in some detail how difficult, emotive and complex the issues around the Eighth Amendment are.

Once again the Assembly has benefitted from some excellent speakers who have addressed many of the most pressing issues identified by the citizens during the brainstorming session on the first weekend.

Peter McParland provided us with a very comprehensive insight into the work of a foetal medicine expert. We heard from him details about definitional issues, including information on the range of conditions, as well as statistical information on incidence and prevalence.

We also heard about how abnormalities are diagnosed and what screening is available. We also heard about what a diagnosis means in terms of a woman's options at different stages of gestation and he

described the care path options which are available to women, including continuing with the pregnancy or termination of pregnancy.

To compliment this Dr. Foran provided us with details of the care paths for women and their babies who receive a diagnosis of a fatal foetal abnormality and decide to continue with their pregnancies. She also gave details about what is known in terms of prognosis for these conditions.

What we didn't hear from today or course is the information in relation to the medical procedures involved when a women does decide to travel for a termination in these circumstances. This will be covered in our next weekend.

In relation to the law we also heard from Eileen Barrington, Senior Counsel, who provided us with an overview of Irish law in relation to fatal foetal abnormalities. We also heard from Dr Noelle Higgins, who provided the members with an overview of the difference between national, European and international law.

Yesterday afternoon we had a very interesting session about the ethical arguments around the termination of a pregnancy from Dr. Helen Watt Prof. Bobbie Farsides.

Earlier today we heard from Dr David Kenny on how laws are made and changed. The information the members received in that session allowed you to have a very productive group work exercise and round table discussion this afternoon.

As I mentioned yesterday, it should be noted that the Agenda for this weekend originally including two sessions on ethics; the first on the Moral Status of the Unborn/ Foetus and the second on Reproductive

Autonomy with Dr. Dónal O'Mathúna and Dr. Joan McCarthy. Due to serious illness of a family member of one of the speakers, the session on Reproductive Autonomy has been postponed until the February meeting of the Assembly.

I would like to thank each and every one of the speakers who has addressed the Assembly this weekend. Meeting so soon after the Christmas break has meant that many of them were working during their holidays. Their commitment, professionalism and courtesy is very much appreciated by myself and the Secretariat.

I would also like to thank the members of the Expert Advisory Group who have given so generously of their time and expertise in preparation for this weekend.

I would also like to say a special word of thanks to the facilitators and note-takers for all their work this weekend. Their role is an important one and I know from feedback received from the members to date that they have been doing an excellent job. Information on the role of the facilitators and note-takers is available on the website, for anyone interested in finding out more.

Work Programme for Remaining Weekends

At the last meeting we asked, the members, to tell us what further issues you wish to hear about in relation to the Eighth Amendment. This is to ensure that you are equipped with sufficient knowledge and a range of relevant perspectives to confidently be able to make recommendations to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

As I said at the close of the last meeting, the task ahead of us is a large one which was exemplified by the long list of areas identified and requiring exploration.

The Secretariat has prepared a report of the feedback from that brainstorming session, which provides a full list of the issues identified at each table together with a useful summary. Each member was provided with a copy of this report in advance of this weekend's meeting and it will also be available on the Assembly's website later today.

Using this report and the issues identified within it, with the assistance of the Secretariat and the Expert Advisory Group, I prepared a draft work programme for the remaining weekends on the Eighth Amendment.

This was presented to the Members in advance of today's meeting and it will also be available on the Assembly's website later today.

Further to this and in considering the feedback from Members and the range of issues to be covered, I concluded that an additional weekend on the Eighth Amendment was required in order to give full consideration to the issues identified.

This matter was put to a vote of the Members in private session this weekend, and they agreed with my recommendation.

This will bring the total number of weekends set aside to considering this topic to five.

It is important to note that this does not affect my previous commitment to complete the work in respect of the Eighth Amendment within the first half of 2017. I am determined that we will deal swiftly and

comprehensively with this matter and report and make recommendations to Government as soon as possible.

In the coming weekends we will look at a wide range of issues including the complex and difficult area of rape, both from a medical and legal perspective. We will also look at the availability of legal terminations in other jurisdictions and learn more about the UK regime. We will also look at the Regulation of the medical profession and issues arising including conscientious objection.

We will also hear the personal stories of women in crisis pregnancy. We will hear of their experiences to allow the members to hear first-hand about how the matters we are discussing at these weekend effect women and their families.

We will also consider how crisis pregnancy affects vulnerable groups in Irish society.

We will also invite a number of advocacy groups in this space to present to the Assembly. The selection of the advocacy groups will be made with reference to the submissions the Assembly received and, as provided for in the Assembly Rules and Procedures, will be approved by the steering group. I will say more about that in a moment.

Our final weekend will focus on making recommendations to the Oireachtas. I felt, and the members agreed, that ample time needs to be dedicated solely to this task. It would be inappropriate after being provided with a wealth of information and material on the issue to shoe-

horn making recommendations into a single morning or afternoon session.

This Draft Work Programme is subject to further change, and any amendments/ additions will be made by the Chair in consultation with the members of the Assembly.

A revised work programme for the life time of the Assembly will be made available on the website to reflect this decision.

This revised programme, includes a further change in relation to the remaining topics in our Work Programme. In Private Session, the members also decided this weekend that they wished to consider the topic of Climate Change earlier than intended. As such Climate Change will now be considered at the second last weekend and fixed term parliaments and the manner in which referenda are held will be the last topics this Assembly considers.

Submissions

I would like to briefly refer to our submissions process which closed last month. The Citizens' Assembly sought submissions on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution between the 14 October 2016 and the 16 December 2016.

The Assembly received in excess of 13,500 submissions. Approximately 8,000 were received online and almost 5,500 by post. The volume demonstrates the high level of public engagement with the issue.

Publication of submissions has already begun and over 1,000 have already been published. The publication process involves reading, reviewing and in some cases redacting submissions and as such is time consuming. We are working as quickly as possible, and it is envisaged that it will be 4-6 weeks before all submissions are available online.

This weekend in Private Session the members discussed how best the Secretariat might assist them in making the best use of these submissions.

It was agreed that dedicated sessions on submissions will be held during the 3rd and 4th weekends of the Assembly.

In addition, given the reference to representative groups in the Assembly's agreed rules and procedures, and members' feedback from the first weekend, the Secretariat will compile all of the submissions received from advocacy groups, political parties and other organisations and these will be given priority in terms of publication (outside of chronological order).

In light of the interest shown by citizens at the first weekend in hearing from women with experience of the topic, all personal stories received from women will also be given priority in terms of publication (outside of chronological order);

The members will of course also continue to be able to review the submissions as they are published on the website.

I will continue to consider other ways to best engage with the submissions received and I intend to consider further options in this

regard based on feedback from the Members and on suggestions made by the Expert Advisory Group.

In conclusion, I will say that as the feedback session we just finished has shown, it is evident how engaged you are in this topic. The content being put before you is informing you and resonating with you, and it is clear how committed you are to fulfilling the task set for us by the Oireachtas.

On that note I will conclude the Assembly's proceedings today. All that is left for me to say is to thank each and every one of our members for their contribution this weekend and to say I look forward to seeing you all at our next meeting on 4th and 5th February.

ENDS