

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

'Lives like my son's cannot be lost'



Nicola Woods with her seven-year-old son Daniel

GRAEME COUSINS hears from two people who fear new abortion laws could impact the disabled community in NI



A mother of three fears a change in abortion legislation will have a devastating impact on the Down's Syndrome community in the Province. Nicola Woods, whose seven-year-old son Daniel has Down's Syndrome, said when she was given the diagnosis at 24 weeks pregnant it was presented in a very negative way. She believes that given the stigma attached to Down's Syndrome parents-to-be could be swayed to opt for abortion if the strict legislation in NI is relaxed. She recalled the moment she was presented with the information about her unborn child: "To be honest that diagnosis wasn't particularly well delivered."

"The language was apologetic, 'we're very sorry', talking about it being 'bad news'. The thing that kind of struck me most about it was when I was handed a leaflet which outlined the possible health problems that Daniel could have. There was a one-in-two chance of him having a congenital heart defect, a one-in-three chance of problems with his digestive system. This is flawed as they are only speculating and in any case, the baby is only a problem if you see it that way. We know that one out of two people will have cancer, one-in-three people will have

Implications of July vote

On July 10 Westminster voted in favour of an amendment to the Northern Ireland Executive Formation Bill that would liberalise abortion legislation in Northern Ireland. The bill, including this amendment, will take effect after October 21 if the Stormont Executive is not reinstated before then. This bill will remove legal protections allowing abortion on demand, for any reason, up to 28 weeks.

mental health problems. "When I was pregnant with my two other children who didn't have Down's Syndrome I wasn't told about the possibility of them having cancer or mental health problems. There's a negative way in which the diagnosis of Down's Syndrome is given to parents. The initial diagnosis was negative and sad, and was delivered in a way that the medicals clearly thought this was a problem that needed solved. Having said that, because of the way the law is here that was where the discussion ended. My next appointment I came to the midwife was so

nice. She asked if we'd got a name for our baby boy. "I told the midwife his name was going to be Daniel. We didn't share it with our families until he was born. From then on the doctors and healthcare professionals were really positive. My pregnancy with Daniel was honoured and respected. This kind of approach to pregnancy diagnoses is what families want, medical staff to recognise the humanity and value of each baby, no matter how many chromosomes." Daniel is Nicola and her husband's eldest child. They have two other boys - Rory, four, and Finn, 20 months. Their mum said: "All of the boys are equally wonderful and worthy of life. Daniel loves going to the park, reading books and eating as much ice cream and cake as his parents allow. He loves football, he's introduced his two younger brothers to football. We're a football-mad family." She added: "What worries me is that when you're told your baby has Down's Syndrome you're given the negative side but not the positive side. They've done really expensive research in America where 3,000 people with Down's Syndrome were inter-

Concern that human rights only begin at birth

Both Lives Matter is an organisation that wants to create a "life-affirming culture" that values each woman and her unborn child and to safeguard the current abortion law in Northern Ireland. Dawn McAvoy from the group said: "Tragically the fact is that without a functioning Assembly termination of pregnancy would be permissible in Northern Ireland for any reason and on request."

"We are extremely concerned that some groups and individuals, including the NI-HRC, are claiming that human rights begin at birth, the implicit suggestion being that there is a human right to end a human life. There is no human right to abortion on request and any claim that this is the case must be refuted. We warmly welcome that the two main parties have

both now stated publicly that any change to abortion law here should properly be dealt with, not at Westminster, but by locally accountable politicians in the Assembly. Moreover five local council boroughs have also rejected the imposition of this radical abortion regime by Westminster and have called for the return of Stormont. We add our voice to theirs and urge the reconvening of Stormont with immediate effect. "With the return of the Assembly, locally elected representatives will be in a position to address directly this issue of a diagnosis of an abnormality which may be fatal. Around 100 families every year receive this tragic news and they deserve to have world-leading care services, including the development of perinatal palliative care provision."

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NICOLA WOODS

viewed, 97% of them said they are happy with themselves. "If you asked the general population if they are happy about themselves, it would be nowhere near 97%. There's this idea that people with Down's Syndrome are to be pitied, that they're suffering. That's not the case." She went on to say that having a child with Down's Syndrome brings families closer together: "Marriages where you have a child with Down's Syndrome are less likely to end in divorce. Those may seem like trivial things, like you're trying to put a positive spin on it, but it does make for a much happier

Information only legal in NI where there is serious risk to mother

At present abortion is only lawful in NI where there is a serious risk to the life of a woman. The potential punishment is life imprisonment for breaking the law. Last month two massive rallies took place in Belfast - one supporting and one opposing the pending reforms. In 2016, Stormont MLAs voted against relaxing abortion laws by 59 votes to 40. In a High Court judgment last week, Justice Keegan indicated that in the narrow and specific cases where a baby may not survive outside the womb, existing law in NI is not compliant with international human rights legislation, as it does not permit the terminations of pregnancies based on such diagnosis. Church leaders in NI have expressed concern at "an almost unregulated abortion regime" being imposed. A joint statement was issued by the leaders of the Church of Ireland, Methodist Church, Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church and the Irish Council of Churches calling on their congregations to pray, call for change, and to lobby their locally elected representatives.



The Woods family

family." Nicola added: "People are deluded if they think the proposed changes won't have a negative impact on the Down's Syndrome community here in Northern Ireland. Across the water more than 90% of antenatal diagnosis with Down's Syndrome are aborted." Recent figures from the Department of Health in Northern Ireland show that while 52 children with Down's Syndrome were born in 2016, in the same year only one child from Northern Ireland with Down's Syndrome was aborted in England and Wales. Nicola said: "Whenever I was having Daniel I went on to an online support group for parents who were having babies with Down's Syndrome. There were four of us who were due to have our babies at the same time. Two of them in GB had to write in marker pen on the outside of their maternity file 'do not discuss abortion - we are keeping our baby' as it was brought up at every appointment. In GB, routinely when a Down's Syndrome diagnosis is given you are told the available abortion slots for the week. The assumption is that you will want to abort. There comes a point

where women will be thinking, 'Am I doing the wrong thing here?'. "People maybe haven't given it much thought and it sends them down the route of abortion. You're under time pressure and you're handed a leaflet with a lot of negative information. It's difficult to make the right choice. "If the way in which the medicals deliver information doesn't change and the abortion law changes then I can't see how we would be naive to think there wouldn't be a significant increase in the number of abortions we have here. "We live in the safest place to be diagnosed with a disability. If the government's legislation comes into effect, it would allow babies with Down's Syndrome to be aborted up to 28 weeks simply because they have a disability. This would likely lead to a big increase in abortion for disability in Northern Ireland and would reduce the numbers of the Down's Syndrome community. "People with Down's Syndrome aren't stupid. They understand that the screening and abortion statistics around Down's Syndrome, and other disabilities, implies their lives are not worth living and the absolute opposite is the case."