



Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
Northern Ireland
BT4 3XX

Via email to: linda.dillon@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

23rd October 2025

Dear Linda Dillon MLA,

Due to pressure of time and workload we are unable to complete a full response to your consultation on the Breastfeeding Bill. We wish to fully endorse the Women's Policy Group (WPG) response (of which we are a member).

Therefore, please accept this letter as the Women's Regional Consortium¹ response highlighting the following issues:

- **The MAS project** (Maternal Advocacy and Support) provides maternal mental health support to women who are pregnant and/or who have children up to the age of 3. It has a number of Women's Centre partners including Windsor Women's Centre, Ballybeen Women's Centre, Atlas Women's Centre, Women's Centre Derry and Strathfoyle, and Grace Family Centre, North Belfast. Long-term funding for projects like MAS is essential so that all women can access quality perinatal mental health care. Community support services are a life changing early intervention service that need long term financial support.
- Research conducted by Women's Regional Consortium member WRDA into the impact of the Maternal Advocacy and Support (MAS) Project made recommendations to increase breastfeeding rates in Northern Ireland. The

¹ The Women's Regional Consortium in Northern Ireland consists of seven established women's sector organisations that are committed to working in partnership with each other, government, statutory organisations and women's organisations, centres and groups in disadvantaged and rural areas, to ensure that organisations working for women are given the best possible support in the work they do in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. The seven groups are: Training for Women Network (TWN), Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Women's Support Network (WSN), Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network (NIRWN), WomensTEC, Women's Centre Derry and Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

report argued that peer-led, community-based maternal mental-health support, such as MAS, would strengthen breastfeeding support across Northern Ireland. MAS explicitly lists increasing breastfeeding awareness/support among its campaign aims and the project's model — combining peer support, practical workshops and advocacy — is a promising platform to deliver more accessible breastfeeding help, especially where statutory services are inconsistent.

- In 2022 Windsor Women's Centre MAS Group undertook a Breastfeeding on Public Transport Campaign which was successful. The women in the group had a vision for change, they contacted Translink, the Department for Infrastructure and the Public Health Agency to campaign for breastfeeding to be welcomed on public transport. This resulted in Translink signing up to the Breastfeeding Welcome Here scheme and highlights the importance of these local community support services.
- **Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK with no dedicated perinatal Mother and Baby Unit.** Mums who need to go into hospital for perinatal mental health issues should not be separated from their babies. We endorse the comments made by the Women's Policy Group in their response as follows:

“Mothers requiring inpatient mental health care are forced to be separated from their babies. This has a detrimental impact on both infant and maternal mental health. It also creates challenges to the practice of breastfeeding and attachment. We would urge the Health Minister to commission the building of a Mother and Baby Unit for Northern Ireland and to explore interim measures as a matter of urgency.

Mothers who require hospital care and are unable to have their baby with them should be supported to breastfeed by staff who can help them access advice and support. They should be provided with the necessary resources and space to express milk with access to the hospital-grade electrical double pump. It is also important that women have access to a fridge and sterile bottles for storage. Staff should receive training on the needs of breastfeeding mothers and be encouraged to understand that for some women who are separated from their baby, breastfeeding is an important way of maintaining the bond.”

- The Women's Regional Consortium support the WPG in **welcoming this Bill but agree that more is required in order to positively impact breastfeeding rates in Northern Ireland including the need to improve attitudes, practical support for new mothers and addressing wider inequalities and safety concerns.** We agree with colleagues in the WPG that incorporating these measures would make the Bill stronger.
- The Women's Regional Consortium **agrees that legal protections such as the measures proposed in this Bill can help improve breastfeeding rates in those communities where rates are lower.** However, we agree with the WPG that in order to truly address the stigma around breastfeeding in public and improve breastfeeding rates in deprived and marginalised communities

much more is required. This should include, as suggested by the WPG, a public education campaign and crucial practical support for mothers who want to breastfeed. Priority should be given to ensuring regular and consistent health visitor support throughout post-natal care especially for women from marginalised communities.

- The Women's Regional Consortium **agrees that protecting the right to breastfeed in public spaces through legislation would help to normalise breastfeeding.** However, we agree with the WPG that real change requires broader cultural and practical support. As the WPG outline in their response *"together, education and practical support create the conditions in which breastfeeding is not just legally protected, but genuinely supported and valued across society."*
- The Women's Regional Consortium **supports the creation of a new offence, with appropriate penalties for individuals or organisations who intentionally prevent, discourage, or discriminate against someone breastfeeding in a public space.** We agree with the WPG that fixed penalty notices and the requirement for businesses to provide staff training would be appropriate penalties.
- The Women's Regional Consortium **strongly believes that public information campaigns should accompany any legislation to help improve breastfeeding rates.** We support the WPG's suggestions that any such campaign must be widespread and include changes to the school curriculum.
- The Women's Regional Consortium believe that any public information campaign should include information on:
 - Legal rights to breastfeed in public
 - Health benefits of breastfeeding for baby and mother
 - Tackling stigma and normalising breastfeeding
 - Information for employers and businesses on their responsibilities
 - Support services for new mothers (e.g. helplines, peer support groups)
- The Women's Regional Consortium **believes that businesses and other venues should be required to ensure that their premises are breastfeeding-friendly.** We agree with our WPG colleagues that staff training and prominent, welcoming signage are particularly important. This is critical in settings such as public transport, workplaces and health and medical settings.
- The Women's Regional Consortium **sees a significant challenge around addressing non-compliance with any legislation introduced.** We agree with the WPG that a public awareness campaign will be needed to raise awareness of this legal obligation.
- The Women's Regional Consortium **believes there should be no age limit for children the Bill seeks to protect.**

- The Women's Regional Consortium **believes that the proposed Bill has the potential to make a positive impact on public health outcomes for mothers and babies if it is accompanied by the right supports.**
- The Women's Regional Consortium **believes that the financial implications of this proposed Bill will be minimal.** We agree with WPG colleagues that the costs associated with inaction in this area are greater and that breastfeeding initiatives will ultimately be cost-saving.
- The Women's Regional Consortium **believes that this Bill will enhance the human rights of mothers and children.**
- The Women's Regional Consortium **believes the Bill would have a positive impact on equality.**

Kind Regards



Siobhán Harding
Research & Policy Officer
Women's Support Network