



Assisted Dying: who decides?

Danielle McIlroy

The moral and ethical issue of assisted dying has been a focal point of social and political debate for many years. There have been contributions from clinical, legal, religious and ethical perspectives on this contested issue (Fontalis et al., 2018). Assisted dying refers to the legal act of assisting a terminally-ill person to end their life. While available since 1942 in Switzerland, since then other countries have implemented assisted dying legislation, including Australia, New Zealand, Spain and Canada.

The introduction of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill for England and Wales in the House of Commons in October 2024, followed by ongoing debates, has prompted many to express their views on the issue (British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2025; Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), 2025). In 2025, the Isle of Man became the first parliament in the British Isles to legalise assisted dying, with Jersey in the Channel Islands considering a similar trajectory. Progress on assisted dying legislation is also being made in Scotland with the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill passing the first stage on 14 May 2025. This Policy Brief explores the current legal stance in Northern Ireland (NI) and potential policy considerations relating to assisted dying, especially as debate and legislative change are taking place within neighbouring jurisdictions. In particular, it highlights the changing role of social workers within the debate.

Legal context in Northern Ireland

Assisted dying is currently illegal in Northern Ireland. The Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 1966 decriminalised suicide but makes provisions for criminal liability for complicity in another's suicide. Following the introduction of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill in England and Wales, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland released a statement in February 2025 indicating that there are currently no plans to implement the legislation on assisted dying in Northern Ireland (UTV, 2025). Potential legislation to address assisted dying in Northern Ireland is required to be brought forward by an MP by introducing a Member's Bill. While some political parties (for example, SDLP and Sinn Féin) have said that they are open to considering a change in the law, other parties (such as DUP) are against it. To date, no political party members have indicated they will bring forward a Member's Bill.

Decision-making process

There has been much legislative debate about the criteria and provisions relating to eligibility and safeguarding. In the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, a person must have mental capacity to make the specific decision about ending their life and have a prognosis of living six months or less.

Originally the Bill had stipulated that a High Court judge should make a ruling about an individual's wish to die. However, in February 2025, sponsor of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, Kim Leadbeater MP, proposed an amendment to the Bill by recommending additional safeguards in the legal process. Following approval by two doctors, an 'Assisted Dying Review Panel', which will include a senior legal expert, a consultant psychiatrist and a social worker, will make the decision that an individual can be assisted to end their life (Sky News, 2025). Medics have long voiced their concerns on their involvement in the assisted dying process (Royal College of Physicians (RCP), 2025a). However, the proposed addition of social workers to the decision-making process is new territory.

Currently in Northern Ireland, specially trained social workers (Approved Social Workers) play a key role in the decision-making under the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016, chairing the Trust Panel for decisions in respect of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards, with one medic and one other appropriately trained professional. Leadbeater commented that the inclusion of a consultant psychiatrist and a social worker in the decision-making process will ensure that issues of assessment of capacity and coercion are addressed (Sky News, 2025). The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) commented "Individuals considering assisted dying, and their families, need holistic advice and support. The multi-disciplinary panel also potentially provides the framework to resolve issues of mental capacity and adult safeguarding, both issues which sit with social workers" (BASW, 2025). Assurances surrounding social workers conscientiously objecting to participate in Assisted Dying Review Panels has been agreed by Leadbeater in a parliamentary committee debate in March 2025 (UK Parliament, 2025). The need for social workers to receive "relevant professional registration, training, supervision and accreditation for ensuring that the professionals involved are appropriately qualified and supported" to participate in Assisted Dying Review Panels has been raised by BASW (BASW, 2025).

Ethical considerations

In the UK, many doctors take the Hippocratic Oath or a similar professional oath upon graduation, committing themselves to the preservation and protection of human life (Green, 2017). Although the oath can be interpreted widely, it may be argued that practices such as assisted dying are contrary to this oath (Askitopoulou and Vgontzas, 2018). However, medical professionals also must respect patient autonomy. There are a number of reasons why an individual may seek assistance to die including pain, poor quality of life and a wish for self-determination including how to end their life (Wittrock, 2025). The General Medical Council (GMC) issued updated professional standards in December 2024 regarding what medical practitioners should do when a patient seeks advice or information about assistance to die (GMC, 2024). There is an emerging school of thought that individuals should have the right to choose how to die which should be equated to an individual's right to life (Wittrock, 2025). The RCP and RCGP have both adopted a neutral position on assisted dying meaning that they neither support nor oppose a change to the law (RCP, 2025b; RCGP, 2025).

Social workers are responsible for upholding an individual's autonomy, while balancing this with safeguarding the individual from harm which may make their role in the assisted dying decision-making process particularly complex. Social workers have a specific role in adult care assessments including undertaking a comprehensive assessment of need and risk (BASW, 2024). Social workers may also receive training on completing mental capacity assessments and are central to the role of safeguarding individuals who are at risk of harm. BASW argues that for those individuals with significant care needs, there should be "genuine choice" in respect of the option of assisted dying (BASW, 2024), and that the option of assisted dying should not be offered as an alternative to inadequate and inappropriate palliative care services.

Public opinion

There are many campaigners on both sides of the assisted dying debate. The progression of the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill has been criticised by many religious and disability groups. Christian Church leaders in Northern Ireland are united in their opposition to the introduction of assisted dying being introduced. Furthermore, disability groups have raised concerns that individuals with disabilities may be at risk of feeling pressured into ending their lives prematurely.

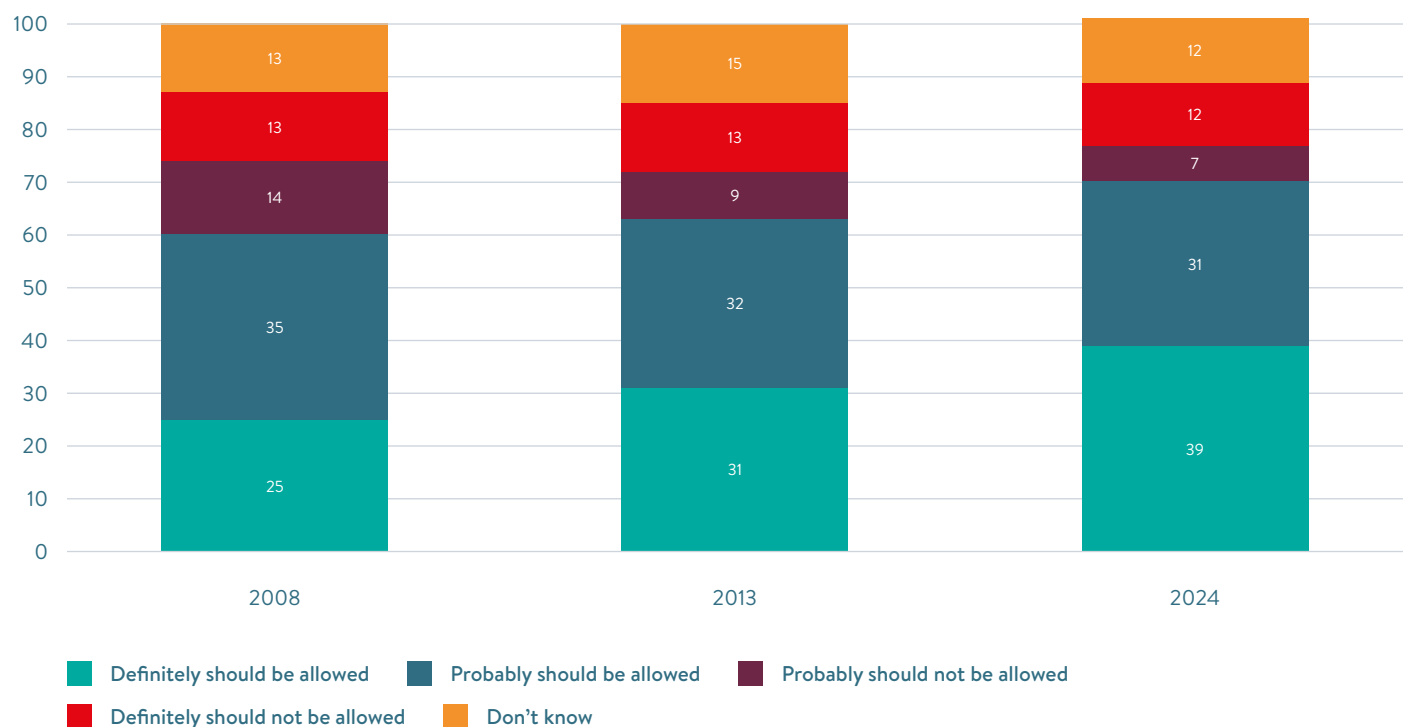
There are also many activists for assisted dying, with one of the most high-profile advocates being Dame Esther Rantzen. Dignity in Dying, a campaign group in the UK, advocates for the opportunity for terminally ill adults who have mental capacity to have the choice to end their lives. They argue that many terminally ill individuals from Britain travel to Dignitas in Switzerland for help to die. They also state that many terminally ill adults end their lives without access to a legal framework to support their

decision and their death (Dignity in Dying, 2025). More locally, the campaign group My Death, My Decision (Northern Ireland) has called on the Northern Ireland Assembly to organise a Citizens' Assembly to debate the issue of assisted dying.

Public attitudes to this issue have been recorded in the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey in 2008, 2013 and 2024, with respondents being asked: 'Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?'.

Figure 1 shows majority support for assisted dying in this scenario. While in 2008 one quarter of respondents felt that assisted dying should 'definitely be allowed' this strong support was expressed by 39 per cent of respondents in 2024, an increase of fourteen percentage points. Nevertheless, across all years, one in six did not know how to respond.

Figure 1: Should assisted dying be allowed in this situation (%)



Looking at the most recent data, there was no significant difference in attitude between males and females. However, younger people were more likely to indicate that assisted dying definitely should be allowed than older people (Table 1).

Table 1: Should assisted dying be allowed in this situation, by age group (%)

| | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
|----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
| Definitely should be allowed | 45 | 43 | 40 | 42 | 35 | 33 |
| Probably should be allowed | 38 | 32 | 31 | 23 | 37 | 28 |
| Probably should not be allowed | 9 | 8 | 8 | 6 | 6 | 5 |
| Definitely should not be allowed | 2 | 7 | 9 | 16 | 12 | 21 |
| I don't know | 7 | 12 | 12 | 14 | 12 | 13 |

Catholic respondents were slightly more likely to strongly support assisted dying than Protestant respondents (39% and 26% respectively saying 'definitely should be allowed'). However, those with no religion were most likely to say it should definitely be allowed (60%). In contrast, only 18% of regular church attendees took that view.

Table 2 shows variation in opinion according to political party affiliation. Definite support for assisted dying ranges from 19 per cent among DUP supporters to 46 per cent among Sinn Féin supporters.

Table 2: Should assisted dying be allowed in this situation, by political party affiliation (%)

| | DUP | Sinn Féin | UUP | SDLP | Alliance |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----------|-----|------|----------|
| Definitely should be allowed | 19 | 46 | 33 | 33 | 45 |
| Probably should be allowed | 35 | 30 | 32 | 39 | 33 |
| Probably should not be allowed | 12 | 7 | 11 | 7 | 5 |
| Definitely should not be allowed | 27 | 4 | 15 | 15 | 7 |
| I don't know | 7 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 10 |

Conclusion

This Policy Brief has outlined some of the ethical, moral and legal dilemmas which the topic of assisted dying presents. For medical practitioners and social workers, there are no easy answers with legal, ethical and humane considerations needing to be carefully balanced. The NILT survey results indicate that the majority of respondents believe that assisted dying should probably or definitely be allowed in a specific scenario. However, the

complexity of the topic and growing interest show that it deserves more in-depth investigation. Developments on the legal framework for assisted dying are progressing in other neighbouring jurisdictions. However, at the time of writing, it is uncertain if Northern Ireland will follow suit as there are no current plans to introduce legislation, or even legislative debate, on the matter.

References:

Askitopoulou, H. and Vgontzas, A.N. (2018) 'The relevance of the Hippocratic Oath to the ethical and moral values of contemporary medicine. Part I: The Hippocratic Oath from antiquity to modern times', *European Spine journal*, 27 (7), pp.1481-1490

British Association of Social Workers (BASW) (2024) *Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill: Second Reading: Significant Problems regarding Mental Capacity and Adult Safeguarding*. Available at: <https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/Terminally%20Ill%20Adults%20%28End%20of%20Life%29%20Bill%20Second%20Reading%20-%20November%202024.pdf>

British Association of Social Workers (BASW) (2025) *Role of social work recognised in assisted dying legislation. BASW Reaction*. Available at: <https://basw.co.uk/articles/role-social-work-recognised-assisted-dying-legislation-basw-reaction>

Dignity in Dying (2025) *Campaign for Dignity in Dying*. Available at: <https://www.dignityindying.org.uk/>

Fontalis, A., Prousalis, E. and Kulkarni, K. (2018) 'Euthanasia and assisted dying: what is the current position and what are the key arguments informing the debate?', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 111 (11), pp.407-413

General Medical Council (GMC) (2024) *When a Patient Seeks Advice or Information About Assistance to Die Summary*. Available at: <https://www.gmc-uk.org/professional-standards/the-professional-standards/when-a-patient-seeks-advice-or-information-about-assistance-to-die>

Green, B. (2017) 'Use of the Hippocratic or other professional oaths in UK medical schools in 2017: practice, perception of benefit and principlism', *BMC research notes*, 10 (1), 777

Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) (2025) *Assisted dying RCGP Position*. Available at: <https://www.rcgp.org.uk/representing-you/policy-areas/assisted-dying>

Royal College of Physicians (RCP) (2025a) *Deficiencies in protecting patients and professionals*. Available at: <https://www.rcp.ac.uk/news-and-media/news-and-opinion/deficiencies-in-protecting-patients-and-professionals-rcp-publishes-its-position-on-the-terminally-ill-adults-end-of-life-bill/>

RCP (2025b) *RCP position statement on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill*. Available at: <https://www.rcp.ac.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policy-documents/rcp-position-statement-on-the-terminally-ill-adults-end-of-life-bill-9th-may-2025/>

Sky News (2025) *MP who proposed assisted dying bill defends changing who gives final approval*, 11 February 2025. Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/assisted-dying-high-court-would-not-need-to-approve-cases-under-change-to-bill-13306930>

UK Parliament (2025) *Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (Twenty-fifth sitting) - Debated on Tuesday 18 March 2025*. Available at: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-03-18/debates/5c370560-a5bd-46c6-b2d5-8203523db8a9/TerminallyIllAdults\(EndOfLife\)Bill\(Twenty-FifthSitting\)?highlight=social%20workers#contribution-ED19963C-3018-4470-B28A-40715A658F7E](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-03-18/debates/5c370560-a5bd-46c6-b2d5-8203523db8a9/TerminallyIllAdults(EndOfLife)Bill(Twenty-FifthSitting)?highlight=social%20workers#contribution-ED19963C-3018-4470-B28A-40715A658F7E)

UTV (2025) *No plans to change law on assisted dying in Northern Ireland*, 13th February 2025. Available at: <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2025-02-13/no-plans-to-introduce-assisted-dying-legislation-to-northern-ireland>

Wittrock, J. (2025) 'A human right to assisted dying? Autonomy, dignity, and exceptions to the right to life', *Nursing Ethics*, p.09697330251328655

About the author:

Dr Danielle McIlroy is a lecturer in Social Work in the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work in Queen's University, Belfast.

The production of this Policy Brief was supported by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account at Queen's University.

NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Ulster University
York Street, Belfast, BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 9536 5611 Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
20 College Green, Belfast, BT7 1LN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 Email: info@ark.ac.uk



Insights for Northern Ireland:
past, present, future