

Mr Colm Gildernew
Chairperson
Committee for Health
By Email

12 November 2021

Dear Mr Gildernew

Call for Evidence on the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill

The BMA (British Medical Association) is a professional association and trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors and medical students in the UK. It is a leading voice advocating for outstanding health care and a healthy population. It is an association providing members with excellent individual services and support throughout their lives.

The BMA welcomes the opportunity to comment as part of the call for evidence on the introduction of safe access zones outside abortion service providers. We strongly believe that neither women accessing lawful abortion services, nor the staff providing those services, should be subject to intimidation or harassment. We support the introduction of protestor-free zones outside abortion clinics, such as those set out in the Bill, as a necessary and proportionate measure to enable the protection of staff and patients.

The BMA appreciates that there is a wide range of views about abortion. However, intimidating staff who are providing lawful and necessary health services, and approaching women accessing these services who may already feel vulnerable, are unacceptable.

We are aware of anti-choice picketers harassing women and staff in a variety of different ways, including filming individuals approaching clinics that provide abortion services; providing grossly erroneous information about clinical risks, such as linking abortion with breast cancer; and shouting 'murderers' outside services (with the shouting audible inside treatment areas). The recent Northern Ireland Abortion and Contraception Taskforce (NIACT) report, published in March 2021, highlighted that misleading and distressing leaflets had been forced on staff and visitors to centres; protestors followed staff and visitors, who were subject to coercive and distressing language; and gave an example of the adverse impact this had on the willingness of clients to continue beneficial treatment. The NIACT recommended that safe access zones should be introduced around sexual and reproductive health clinics and pregnancy counselling centres.

Access to safe healthcare is a fundamental right and the state has an obligation to intervene and protect women and girls where this is being obstructed or prevented. We support the Bill in its aims of

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introducing safe access zones and helping to ensure that staff, women, and those accompanying women should not have to encounter harassing and intimidating behaviour when they are entering premises that provide confidential and lawful health services.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Chisholm". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Dr John Chisholm CBE
Medical Ethics Committee Chair