

Thank you for providing this opportunity to submit views on the proposed imposition of censorship zones around abortion centres in Northern Ireland. I am making this submission to the Committee in opposition to the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill.

The fundamental problem with the whole notion of a censorship zone is that it is pure unadulterated totalitarianism. It arises from a fascistic desire to silence and banish from public view perfectly law-abiding citizens who hold views which a minority of the people find 'offensive' in one way or another. It is an attack on the fundamental right to freedom of expression, the right to publicly witness to the perfectly reasonable view that the child in the womb is a person; and that women who are considering abortion – many who are under coercion of one sort or another - are to be deprived of the kind of material, moral and spiritual support which pro-life vigils offer, always in a spirit of love and care.

See here for testimonies of women who have been helped by such life-giving vigils here in England: <http://behereforme.org/>

There are several reasons that a PSPO would be a draconian, unreasonable and disproportionate response to the reality of pro-life vigils:

**1) Removes help where it's needed.** Pro-life outreach helps hundreds of women at the gates of London clinics. Such assistance ranges from counselling to assistance with food, rent, housing and legal advice. Pro-life assistance is provided 'at the gate' because that is a proven point of need for women who have said themselves that they cannot find help elsewhere. So-called 'buffer zones' would remove that help where it is most relevant.

**2) Silences women.** Anne Furedi, the Chief Executive of BPAS, stated in an interview on Sky News, October 2017, that 20% of women scheduled for an abortion do not go through with the procedure. Our experience at the gate confirms that many women are not sure about the procedure on the day of the appointment, and would choose to give birth if they thought they had that option. A PSPO ignores the voices of those women and erases them from the civic conversation. We find this unacceptable. A society that believes in respecting the experience of women should not erase the voice of a whole section of women.

**3) Violates human rights.** We call 'safe-access zones' censorship zones because that more accurately describes their effect. As noted above, vigils are not so much protests as peaceful gatherings that offer help and prayer. A censorship zone as proposed would potentially prevent the otherwise legal expression of human rights such as freedom of conscience, religion, assembly, expression and the right to receive information. We note that the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 states that the council must "*must have particular regard to the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly set out in articles 10 and 11 of the Convention*".

The Human Rights Act 1998 guarantees the above rights. Many of the powers currently available to authorities have been subject to public campaigns against them, as groups such as Liberty felt existing powers already go too far in giving local authorities discretionary control over public behaviour.

**4) Damages democracy.** Preventing the free assembly of citizens on public land, the exchange of information of ideas and mutual interaction is deadly to a healthy democracy and violates the principles it is built on. It is profoundly illiberal. If the pavement ceases to be a place of free exchange of ideas and opinions, the foundations of our liberal, democratic way of life is killed at the root. Censorship of such civic activity should only be done in the cases of persistent, substantiated, actual harm; such is the importance of those freedoms.

In the recent case of *Annen v. Germany*, interference with the freedom of expression of pro-life advocate Klaus Annen by the German Government was struck down by the European Court of Human Rights.

The court specifically recognised that a special degree of protection was afforded to expressions of opinion on abortion, which contributed to “*a highly controversial debate of public interest*”.

**5) Draconian powers.** Legal experts and civil liberty organisations have criticised buffer zones for criminalising behaviours that would otherwise be legal. The use of such powers is draconian and violates the principle of ‘minimal criminalisation’. Such use of public orders unnecessarily leads to the criminalisation of citizens as a first resort, rather than dealing with difference, or annoyance, through negotiation or other softer means. Using PSPOs as a tool of first resort sets a dangerous precedent and risks pitching the people of a borough against its council unnecessarily and exacerbating apparent divisions in a community. Instead, the criminal sanctions of the state should be used when a specific, illegal action has taken place.

**6) Current protections work.** There are wide-ranging powers available to authorities to keep public order and protect the public from genuine harassment. There has been no call from police authorities to have increased power or discretion in their use to regulate the activities of pro-life groups. In 2018, then UK Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, when rejecting calls to introduce censorship zones outside abortion clinics in England, concluded (<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2018-09-13/HCWS958>) : “introducing national buffer zones would not be a proportionate response, considering the experiences of the majority of hospitals and clinics, and considering that the majority of activities are more passive in nature. In making my decision, I am also aware that legislation already exists to restrict protest activities that cause harm to others.”

The proposal to impose a PSPO follows the slanderous ‘Back-Off’ campaign pushed by BPAS, Britain’s biggest abortion provider. The solemn duty of politicians is to serve and protect your own people - not to pander to the interests of BPAS and the other big players in the abortion industry, with its massive profits and highly paid executives.