

I am making this submission to the Committee in opposition to the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill.

In my submission, I have outlined the key reasons why the Assembly should reject this unnecessary and disproportionate attempt to introduce censorship zones around abortion clinics and hospitals offering abortion.

A June 2021 poll (<https://comresglobal.com/polls/right-to-life-poll/>) undertaken by SavantaComRes showed that only 25% of the Northern Irish population support the introduction of 'buffer zones' on specific clinics, as this Bill would permit.

Pro-life vigils consist of the following activities: Prayer, support, dissemination/reception of information, and expression of conscience. These activities are done, and support is offered (including counselling, help with rent/housing, providing maternity and baby clothes and other financial support, legal advice, and protection from domestic abuse, among other things) 'at the gate' (where women walk into clinics), because that is the place of need.

Censorship zones violate well-established human rights. Such rights are enshrined both in domestic law and international convention, and include freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression, freedom to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority, and freedom of assembly and association. This Bill would potentially allow for the nationwide introduction of censorship zones outside abortion clinics and hospitals offering abortion, despite their gross affront to long-established human rights.

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."