



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**Committee for Justice
Room 345
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**From: Christine Darrah
Clerk to the Committee for Justice**

Date: 15 September 2021

**To: Keith McBride
Clerk to the Committee for Health**

Protests Outside Premises Providing Abortion Services and Other Healthcare Services

At its meeting on 9 September 2021 the Committee for Justice considered correspondence from the Department of Justice setting out the current position regarding protests outside premises providing abortion services and other healthcare services.

The Committee agreed to send a copy of the correspondence to the Committee for Health for information.

**Christine Darrah
Clerk to the Committee for Justice**

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3 August 2021

Dear Christine

Protests Outside Premises Providing Abortion Services and Other Healthcare Services

Thank you for your letter of 14 July regarding the Department's response to the letter from Health Committee members on their concerns about protests outside premises providing abortion services and the impact of these protests on patients and staff. As requested, a copy of the response is attached.

As there have been some developments since this letter was issued, Committee members may be interested to know the current position.

As members are aware, the Minister had hoped to bring forward legislative proposals to provide for exclusion zones as an amendment to the then Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. However, she was unable to gain Executive approval for the introduction of this Bill to the Assembly and agreed to bring forward a re-drafted Bill, now titled the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill. The Bill was laid in the Assembly on 5 July.



In order to secure Executive agreement, the re-drafted Bill is more narrowly scoped and this narrower scope means that legislative proposals for exclusion zones may not be able to be progressed in this mandate.

The Minister is still fully committed to seeing effective change in this area. The Abortion Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 made no provision for the establishment of exclusion zones, but there was an undertaking by the UK Government that the issue would be kept under review once abortion services had been commissioned and operational for some time.

In conjunction with the issue of the Abortion Directions 2021 on 22 July, the Secretary of State wrote to the Executive on the detail of the Directions. His letter also referenced the protests outside healthcare facilities providing abortion services and, while he considers that this is an issue for the Department to consider, in liaison with the Department of Health, he has signalled his willingness to have ongoing discussions on the matter. The Minister, therefore, intends to write to the Secretary of State with her concerns.

As regards Committee members' enquiry on the proposed Private Member's Bill on Safe Access Zones (Public Health and Well Being), I understand there has been no Departmental or Ministerial engagement on this Bill at this early stage.

Yours sincerely

**CLAIRE MCCORMICK
DALO**