

## **Safe Access Zone Bill**

All Five Trust's in NI would like express support for the proposed Safe Access Zone bill. Current legislature has not adequately protected the safety and freedoms of those women who are seeking abortion services.

Clinic protests create an intimidating environment where the safety of those seeking to access lawful abortion care is not guaranteed. Clinic protests can have a detrimental impact on the mental health of those who seek to access to lawful abortion services – through the behaviour, language, and materials distributed by protesters.

Words such as 'murder' and 'kill' are often used by protesters. This language is distressing for all women but those who are terminating a much wanted pregnancy after receiving a severe or fatal foetal impairment diagnosis. Graphic images often displayed by protests can be particularly distressing for any staff member or service user that has experienced a miscarriage or later pregnancy loss.

For vulnerable patients such as minors and those pregnant as a result of sexual crime, these protests may exacerbate distress and adverse mental health impacts to those who have already experienced trauma.

In general, the presence of protesters is intimidating for both patients and staff, the Trusts uphold the principle that staff have a right to go to their place of work free from intimidation or harassment. Staff have had to navigate coming to work with the fear that they will be photographed or filmed by the protestors. There has also been some examples of bogus calls have been received, which has added to the steps the teams have had to take to ensure that the women accessing their services are legitimate. This is additional pressure on small teams of staff that is unnecessary and very stressful.

The existing legislation on Harassment requires evidence of two or more incidents to meet the legal threshold. Given the fact that those entering a lawful abortion clinic may encounter different individuals in a protest, this can mean that the threshold for legal action under existing Harassment law is not met.

This results in those needing reproductive medical treatments being left without any recourse to law despite having been subject to the most unacceptable forms of harassment and abuse. The mental health implications for the victims of this loophole in the law are profound and completely unacceptable. They must be closed.

## **Summary**

The five Trusts are supportive of this bill which will end the distress and impact that these protests are causing those who seek to access lawful abortion services. We also call for the expansion of the Bill's provisions to include photographing, recording and related online harassment.

## **Experience within the SHSCT –**

Clinic services commenced in May 2020, initially the clinic was facilitated in a John Mitchell Place in Newry and also in Portadown Health Centre. The clinic remained in this location with weekly protests, service users being approached regardless of what services they were accessing and graphic images and literature being on display. There were weekly incidents and the PSNI were called on several occasions. There was an example of a pro-life protestors live streaming from Portadown Health Centre. In October 2020, a private security company was employed to manage the weekly protests, support staff and ensure service users had access to clinical accommodation. In March 2021, accommodation was secured on the Daisy Hill and Craigavon Hospital sites, so both clinics were relocated. This is not ideal in terms of access for women but ensures that the weekly protests can be kept at the entrance to both hospital sites, instead of outside the building they are accessing. So women accessing our clinics drive pass the protestors who are displaying poster citing 'Babies are murdered here.' We would welcome the introduction of the safe access zone to offer protection to our staff and women and enable us to locate services