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Via Email: [Committee.Health@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:Committee.Health@niassembly.gov.uk)

Mr Keith McBride,  
Clerk, Committee of Health

**Belfast HSC Trust - Submission to the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health consultation on the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill.**

**Introduction**

Belfast HSC Trust has been offering an early medical abortion service through the Rose Clinic, part of the Sexual & Reproductive Health Service, at 16 College Street, Belfast since April 2020.

Belfast HSC Trust welcomes and fully supports the Bill introduced by Clare Bailey, MLA.

Other countries have introduced similar legislation and there are buffer zones in some UK constituencies. The Abortion (NI) Regulations 2020 unfortunately did not include provision for Safe Access Zones. Since the beginning of 2021, despite lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions, there have been weekly protests from various anti-abortion groups outside clinics in NI. In the rest of the UK and Ireland there has also been increasing numbers of protests and protestors outside abortion clinics in recent times.

We know from patients attending 16 College Street, and from the staff who work there, that there is considerable distress and anxiety caused by anti-abortion protestors outside. This impacts those needing abortion care, and other service users, medical, nursing, and administrative staff, other services within the buildings, local businesses and members of the public passing by.

It is Belfast Trust's belief that the provision of Safe Access Zones can maintain freedom of expression and right to protest while also respecting the safety of clients, patients and staff allowing privacy and unhindered access to care.

**Context**

Since January 2021, there have been at least weekly anti-abortion protests outside the building with protestors blocking the entrance, harassing and upsetting clients and staff. As a result, the Trust has employed a security guard and has installed CCTV cameras. The PSNI has been called multiple times and several clients have made statements. In terms of internal HSC governance and in line with risk management procedures, we have submitted several Incident Reports and we have added the risk of harm to patients and staff to the Trust's Risk Register. We have met with colleagues from PSNI to agree strategies for managing the protests and mitigating the risk of distress and harm to our patients.

The activities we are aware of used by protestors include harassment, intimidation, name-calling, chanting, praying, throwing holy water, wearing bodycam (threatening to stream footage online), spitting, and following people up the street or to their cars. Leaflets containing inaccurate and misleading medical information is pushed into handbags. A safe access zone would provide an element of protection from some aspects of these methods.

As outlined above, the protesters have an impact on our patients (protected person) as well as on those accompanying a protected person. They impact staff working in the protected premises and on local businesses and passers-by.

This paper will outline in more detail the impact of current protests and how the Trust understands a Safe Access Zone could help dilute this impact.

### **Impact of protests on service users and patients**

Individuals entering 16 College Street or walking/driving by are subject to often very graphic imagery that some people report to be traumatising and can trigger significant psychological distress, not just for women wanting an abortion but those who have suffered pregnancy loss or who live with fertility issues.

Other clients accessing contraception and other health care services in the same building are deterred from entering and many decide not to attend once they see the protests.

It is the Trust's considered opinion that without a safe access zone, there is a greater potential risk to harm for patients. To illustrate this point, earlier this year two women attended on a day when there were protests. One was extremely distressed and the PSNI was involved. Both required urgent onward referral for life-saving emergency surgery. Had those individuals not attended, there could have been serious consequences or indeed a fatality. Separately, we know of one client who did not attend for her scheduled early medical abortion appointment because she feared walking through the crowds of protestors and was too distressed. An appointment was later rescheduled but we are clear that these examples illustrate the potential risk of harm for this group of vulnerable patients.

Accessing care in Health and Social Care is free at the point of need. Everyone has a right to confidential and safe local health care and the obstruction of doorways and crowds of protestors close to a clinic compromises privacy and confidentiality. It is important to note that many vulnerable women accessing this service are already significantly distressed and are victims of abuse. Emotive behaviour adds to their distress.

## **Patient feedback**

*'I'm stunned today at the harassment I faced by Precious Life and CBR NI going into College St for my IUD check. PSNI have been informed. Buffer zones needed now.'*

*'The last person I want help from is a stranger with no mask on, who is harassing me as I go in for healthcare. Their actions are traumatising.'*

*'It's none of their business - why are these old men standing outside telling me what to do with my body?'*

## **Impact of protests on staff**

Similarly to patients, any member of staff entering and leaving facilities where abortion is provided can be subjected to verbal abuse, name-calling, filming, and can be identified as potential targets. There is no discrimination made as to whether the individual works in the Rose Clinic or provides any other service. Staff are conscious that globally, a number of abortion providers have come to catastrophic harm by anti-abortion groups. While rare, this is still a significant threat.

Comment from a sexual and reproductive health doctor: 'I feel very uncomfortable walking in to the clinic and having to push past protestors blocking access to where I swipe my ID badge to gain access. I have been called a murderer and sworn at. I feel vulnerable and intimidated and can't imagine how our poor patients must feel.'

In addition, there is a considerable burden on staff to provide extra emotional support to people arriving in the clinic for treatment in a distressed state.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have recommended that women are protected against anti-abortion protests.<sup>1</sup>

Providing medically inaccurate leaflets and information affects the informed consent process when accessing medical treatment. Clinic staff now warn clients attending Sexual and Reproductive Health Services for any reason that there will be a protest outside.

## **Impact of protests on the general public**

Many members of the public who have been passing College Street have been impacted by the anti-abortion protests. As College Street clinic is in Belfast city centre, some local shops and businesses have advised the presence of protests can impact on their business.

Further information on the negative effect of local protests is documented in chapter 5 of the Informing Choices NI Report Beyond Decriminalisation.<sup>2</sup>

## **Enforcement of Safe Access Zones by a Constable**

Belfast Trust supports this clause and we understand the proposed Bill will provide guidance for the Police Service of Northern Ireland in the management of protests which will permit staff and users of other family planning services to enter and leave the building without fear.

Staff will also have more clarity on when protesters have breached reasonable behaviour and the right to protest and therefore when the PSNI should be called.

## **Monitoring of effectiveness of Safe Access Zones**

This would be essential but we would like clarification on how this will be undertaken by the Department of Health NI, and what action would be taken if Safe Access Zones are shown to be ineffective.



**Dr Cathy Jack**  
**Chief Executive**