

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER

Minister's Office Block B,
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Ballymiscaw
Belfast
BT4 3SG
Tel: 028 90522744
DoJ.MinistersOffice@justice-ni.gov.uk

Keith McBride
Clerk to the Committee for Health
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

Your ref: C288/21

15 November 2021

Dear Keith,

THE ABORTION SERVICES (SAFE ACCESS ZONES) BILL

Thank you for your letter of 21 October seeking the Department's views on the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill.

The Minister has always believed that, while everyone has the right to protest, equally, everyone has the right to access healthcare free from harassment and intimidation, and healthcare staff should be able to access their place of work without interference.

To address these issues 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 its introduction and, reluctantly, agreed to the re-drafted and re-scoped Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill. The narrower scope meant that it was not possible to bring forward necessary legislation in this mandate.

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That is why the Minister is fully supportive of the Bill and the Department will work with the Committee to ensure that the offences and penalties that will be created by the Bill fit appropriately within the Northern Ireland sentencing framework and also that whatever is agreed by the Assembly is enforceable under the law.

I trust this is helpful.



**CLAIRE McCORMICK
DALO**