

GENERAL PRESBYTERY OF THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF ULSTER



Government and Morals Committee

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SUBMISSION ON ABORTION SERVICES (SAFE ACCESS ZONES) BILL

The Free Presbyterian Church would like to take this opportunity to state its opposition to the provision of safe access zones at abortion facilities. We make it clear that we do not endorse or support violence, assaults or attacks on anyone at abortion clinics or anywhere else. The law at present makes provision for the prosecution of harassment, assault or creating a breach of the peace but this new provision seeks to criminalise peaceful protest, prayer or anti-abortion counselling or even holding up a sign outside of abortion facilities.

We oppose the provision of safe access zones on a number of grounds

1. This is an attempt to hide objections to abortion from public view. The abortion industry is well funded and able to lobby. Many ordinary folks have no other way to voice their objection than through protest. Such protests are traditionally made at the premises of the body they are protesting against. Trades Unions stand at the gate of the premises they are protesting against. And in the course of that there are times when Trades Unionists may have become overzealous but they are not banned from standing outside and protesting. Why are anti-abortionists to be treated differently?
2. If buffer zones are accepted in principle, then the principle can be very easily widened out. This is a thin edge of the wedge. Assembly members should consider what kind of precedent they are setting by passing such a measure
3. The right to freedom of assembly and right to freedom of expression are fundamental human rights. This measure dilutes those rights.
4. When there were calls for government to legislate for such buffer zones in 2018 they were rejected by the then Home Secretary Sajid Javid who concluded that a proposed implementation of buffer zones by the UK government was not an appropriate response. At the time Sajid Javid said it would “not be a proportionate response”, given that nearly all pro-life

activities in such areas involve “praying, displaying banners and handing out leaflets”.

5. There already is legislation if people are behaving improperly by either assaulting others or by creating a breach of the peace. This is legislation which seeks to ban even peaceful protest.
6. When Ealing Council in England announced a buffer zone in its own area in April 2018 a number of campaigners who would be pro-abortion in outlook, “Manifesto Club, Big Brother Watch, Index on Censorship, the Freedom Association and Peter Tatchell all joined together and co-signed the letter expressing “grave concern” that the legislation was, “so widely drawn as to impose potentially unlawful restrictions on the rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of expression”. They said,” We would urge the council and police to use existing powers, targeting specific problems and violations of the law”

The argument for abortion is always freedom of choice but now those who advocate freedom of choice want to restrict the choice of those who want to protest.

We ask the Assembly to take great care in restricting freedom. You will see from point 6 above that many who would naturally support abortion see the grave danger in restricting assembly. We would ask the Assembly to abandon its proposals to impose such “safe access zones”.