

I write in order to affirm my support for the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Bill introduced by Clare Bailey MLA. It is a piece of legislation that can make a considerable difference to those people who need to access the places where abortions take place, whether for work, to access other healthcare, to seek advice or to access abortion care. Abortion is now legal and as such individuals who wish to access this deserve to do so as safely and without experiencing verbal abuse as they would access any other legal service.

I have personally encountered these anti-choice protestors and also witnessed how they harass other people. They use language designed to shame people using legal healthcare because they disagree with it. They of course have a right to object to abortion, to campaign against it, and to make their voices heard in debates around it. That is not what is happening outside abortion clinics. Campaigning belongs in particular zones and must not be used to make victims of the people exercising their rights, sometimes in dire personal circumstances that the protestors know nothing about. They are sometimes children. They are sometimes the victims of horrific crimes. Our society owes it to them to not compound the suffering they may already be experiencing.

What happens there is not something we need to make room for in a civilised society. Free speech is protected but it is a qualified right. The kind of speech engaged in outside clinics is designed to harm, it includes language like “murderer”, “I have named your dead baby James” and so on. It often involves physical contact. It is harmful because it is designed to be harmful. This Bill is designed to prevent that harm which has no legal remedy.

That legal remedy is harder to access than the debates in the Assembly make it seem. Anti-harassment legislation requires individuals to be harassed more than once and by the same person. The protestors know this and, even if the same patient returns more than once, they can be harassed by two or more people. This, combined with the need to embark on a lengthy and arduous legal process, means that the current legal protections from harassment will not help patients.

Any conviction should include mandatory anti-harassment education to prevent re-offending. Fines are insufficient as many of those who may be convicted are part of organisations that can or would pay their fines. Consideration should be given to a course of action should an individual engage in a pattern of offending.

I support this Bill because I believe we owe it to the people who will use this service to make sure that they are not treated poorly because of other people’s personal views. They deserve better than what we have given them so far.