

Demonstrations (Abortion Clinics) Bill

Bill briefing on abortion clinic protests

Our position

We support the Demonstrations (Abortion Clinics) Bill, and all efforts to introduce legislation that would move anti-abortion protesters away from the gate of abortion clinics and enable women to access, and healthcare professionals to provide, a lawful, confidential health service without harassment and intimidation.

If the Bill is pushed to a vote, **we urge Members to vote in favour.**

What the bill would do

The bill would introduce buffer zones around abortion clinics. Buffer zones are an area where certain activities cannot take place – including filming of women accessing services, harassment and intimidation, stopping women in an attempt to change their mind about accessing services, and gathering for the purpose of protest about reproductive choice.

They would stop activity taking place directly outside clinics, but not have any impact on protests anywhere else. It would apply equally to pro-choice and anti-abortion protests.

The problem

Clinic protests are a form of activity used by anti-choice protesters across the UK to deter or prevent women accessing abortion care.

They take many forms, including the **display of graphic images of dismembered fetuses**, large marches that gather outside the clinic, **filming women** and staff members, **following women down the street**, sprinkling sites with holy water, and large gatherings of people who sing hymns and recite dedicated anti-abortion prayers loudly enough to be heard inside clinics. These protests can last several hours a day over a number of weeks or months. In several cases around the country, protests have continued for many years.

Even seemingly innocuous behaviour such as handing out leaflets has a negative impact, as leaflets routinely contain false medical information such as that abortion leaves women 'unable to bond with their existing children', causes breast cancer, leads to suicidal ideation, and can lead to child abuse.

This is a current issue. **As lockdown has loosened, clinic protests have recommenced.**

The impact

In the last two years, 45 clinics in England and Wales have experienced anti-abortion protests. This includes 10 completely new protests at sites which, before 2018, had not experienced protests before.

Accounts from women and staff affected by these protests include:

"3 people outside with a plastic foetus on a table. They were asking clients what treatment they're having and saying they'll die if they take pills." Clinic manager, Leicester, March 2020

“She told me I was a murderer and killing my baby. She then showed me pictures of what it’ll look like in a leaflet, then said the drugs weren’t safe and brought religion into it. It made me feel uncomfortable as I’m only 17...” Client, Brighton, November 2019

“Leaving work on Saturday after doing clinic, accompanied by daughter and 6-year old grandson, I was verbally abused by a street preacher across the road who had set up a box and loudspeaker. He shouted across the road calling me ‘a baby killer’.” Healthcare worker, Taunton, August 2019

“[They were] asking me not to go ahead with the abortion. I said I already have. They said it’s the murder of an unborn child.” Client, Birmingham South, March 2019

“Approached me at the corner of the road and gave me a leaflet saying it could be useful to whoever I was waiting for. Then pointed to a lorry, telling me ‘that’s the truck they take the dead babies away in’.” Client, Bournemouth, October 2018

Using existing law to deal with protests

Clinic protests have an impact disproportionate to the behaviour involved – largely because of the captive nature of their audience (women and providers have to walk past them to enter or leave the clinic), the confidential nature of medical care, and the heightened emotional state of many clients.

As a result, existing laws that are designed to deal with persistent harassment, public disorder, and violent protest are not applicable. Police at local level report being unable to address existing problems owing to a lack of legislation under which they could charge protesters. In many cases they recognise the impact that they have on women accessing services, but are unable to take action.

Public Spaces Protection Orders

Out of the 45 clinics that have had protests in the last two years, two are now protected using a Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO). A PSPO is a tool that enables Local Authorities to prevent certain anti-social activity taking place in a certain area. Ealing and Richmond-upon-Thames Councils have both introduced orders to tackle clinic protests.

Unfortunately, while PSPOs are a helpful stopgap, they are not a permanent solution. They create a postcode lottery where some women are unable to access care without harassment. They are expensive to introduce and uphold in court – making councils less likely to risk their introduction. And the evidence bar excludes many clinics from protection because despite a negative impact, irregular protests or protests where women are not approached can be more difficult to fit under persistent anti-social behaviour laws.

Bill Sponsors

The Bill has been introduced by Rupa Huq, and is sponsored by Conservative MPs Huw Merriman, Andrew Mitchell, Laura Farris, and Bernard Jenkin; Labour MPs Diana Johnson, Jess Phillips, Jeff Smith, Steve McCabe, Rosie Duffield, and Tan Dhesi; Liberal Democrat MP Sarah Olney; Plaid Cymru MP Liz Saville-Roberts, and Green MP Caroline Lucas.

Who we are

The Back Off Coalition is a group of organisations committed to ending harassment outside abortion clinics. The Coalition is co-ordinated by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) and has members including the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Marie Stopes UK, and Women’s Aid. You can [find the full list of supporters here](#).