
The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP
Home Secretary
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

19 July 2024

Dear Home Secretary,

We would like to extend our congratulations on your recent appointment. We are a group of abortion care providers and representative medical bodies writing to you today specifically regarding the implementation of safe access zones around abortion clinics and hospitals which provide abortion services in England and Wales, Section 9 of the Public Order Act 2023.

These zones were designed as a solution to the persistent issue of harassment of women and staff immediately outside abortion clinics by anti-abortion protesters. This harassment includes persistent presence, gatherings immediately at the clinic gate which serve to intimidate women and staff, the distribution of leaflets containing false medical information, and the display of graphic and distressing posters.

As you will be aware, safe access zones were passed by a majority of MPs - including yourself - during free votes in October 2022 and March 2023. Despite being in statute and receiving assurances that they would be implemented in Spring 2024, the previous government failed to bring these zones into force. As a result, our clinics, patients, and medical professionals continue to be routinely harassed as they seek to access or provide abortion care.

As providers and representative medical bodies, we were particularly alarmed at the end of last year by the proposed non-statutory guidance consulted on by the former Home Secretary which would not, in our experience, protect either women or staff from this persistent presence. The failure to include so-called silent prayer or 'consensual communication' in the activities covered by the law ran counter to the settled will of parliament and would have left almost without exception the current routine anti-abortion presence in place without challenge.

We believe this is as a result of a failure of the previous Home Office to engage with us or listen to our concerns. The last time the Home Office was in touch with providers to seek any input was August 2022, months before Parliament debated the amendment we had worked on with cross-party MPs. No provider has been invited to meet with a Minister to discuss this specific issue since October 2017. The only conclusion we have been able to draw from this failure to engage is that the previous Home Office was unwilling to listen to our concerns or act meaningfully to address them.

In the spirit of a new government, we are therefore asking for confirmation from you on the following:

- 1) That the Home Office will be seeking to introduce safe access zones as a matter of urgency;
- 2) That any guidance surrounding safe access zone implementation will reflect both the votes in parliament and the contents of the UK Supreme Court ruling on a similar law in Northern Ireland, and address the concerns raised by providers in last year's consultation; and
- 3) That you or the relevant minister will commit to meeting with us to discuss our experiences and concerns, and update us on a firm timetable for next steps.

We greatly appreciate the support shown for the introduction of safe access zones by you during the last parliament and know that you believe, like us, that these zones are essential in keeping patients and staff safe from harassment or intimidation.

We look forward to hearing from you, and to working together over this next Parliament to strengthen reproductive rights for women and girls across the UK.

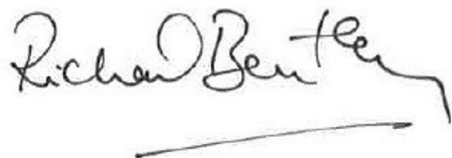
Yours sincerely,



Heidi Stewart
Chief Executive Officer
British Pregnancy Advisory Service



Dr Raneer Thakar
President
Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists



Richard Bentley
Managing Director
MSI Reproductive Choices UK



Dr Janet Barter
President
Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare

CC: The Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson MP, Minister of State, Home Office
Wes Streeting MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care