



Royal College of
Obstetricians &
Gynaecologists



SAFE ACCESS ZONES – IDENTIFICATION, MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING OF CLINIC HARASSMENT

GUIDANCE FOR HEALTHCARE STAFF

JANUARY 2025

VERSION 1.1

DOCUMENT SUMMARY SHEET

This guidance has been written alongside the implementation of Section 9 of the Public Order Act 2023 – “Offence of interference with access to or provision of abortion services”.

It is designed to provide guidance and information to frontline staff who may encounter anti-abortion presence in contravention of the law outside abortion clinics or hospitals providing abortion services.

This guidance does not form any part of the law, and decisions about arrest and prosecution remain solely with the police and Crown Prosecution Service.

BACKGROUND

Safe access zones will come into force around abortion clinics and hospitals which provide abortion services across England and Wales on 31st October 2024.

These zones will make certain activity within 150m of an abortion clinic illegal.

This law will be enforced by the police in line with guidance issued by the College of Policing.

THIS GUIDANCE

This guidance has been drafted by abortion providers and representative medical bodies to ensure that frontline staff are prepared for the introduction of these zones.

RESPONSIBILITY

Organisations with significant levels of clinic harassment should appoint a lead for implementation of this guidance and management and reporting of harassment.

For organisations without a lead, further advice on this guidance can be sought from:

policy@bpas.org

policy@rcog.org.uk

marketing@mschoices.org.uk

DOCUMENT CONTROL

Final version 1.1 – Issued 15th January 2025

Draft version 1.0 – Issued 30th October 2024

1. THE LAW

Section 9 of the Public Order Act 2023 came into force on 31st October 2024.

This law introduced 'Safe Access Zones' around every abortion clinic and hospital which provides abortion services across England and Wales.

WHAT IS A SAFE ACCESS ZONE?

A safe access zone is an area with a boundary 150m from any part of an abortion clinic or any building or site which contains an abortion clinic, within which certain activities are banned.

Banned activities are anything taking place inside the zone which:

- Influences any person's decision to access, provide, or facilitate the provision of abortion services;
- Obstructs or Impedes any person accessing, providing or facilitating the provision of abortion services;
- Causes harassment, alarm or distress to any person in connection with a decision to access, provision or facilitate the provision of abortion services.

The zone applies to all public land in and around an abortion clinic, anywhere that is visible from public land, and any dwelling or place of worship where the person affected is not inside the premises.

It does not apply to anybody doing anything in the course of providing abortion services, anybody providing other kinds of medical care at a healthcare facility, or anybody accompanying someone with consent. It also does not apply to anybody operating camera if capture of people accessing or providing care is incidental (eg if somebody is filming an unrelated clip for social media on the street).

TYPES OF BEHAVIOUR

The law does not contain a specific list of behaviour which is banned, but is instead focused on its impact. This may include, but is not limited to:

- Handing out of leaflets with information related to abortion
- Display of abortion-related posters, graphic or otherwise
- Distribution of rosary beads or 'miraculous medals'
- Use of microphones or loudspeakers linked to abortion provision or access
- Filming of clinic users, staff, or the clinic itself
- Prayer (including silent prayer) or singing outside the clinic entrance
- Leaving literature related to abortion outside or inside a clinic site
- Prolonged presence observing the clinic and its users.

As a rule of thumb – if a staff member or a patient feels they are being influenced or harassed about their decision to access or provide abortion, a crime may have been committed.

PROTECTED SITES

Safe access zones are in place from 31st October 2024 around all abortion clinics across England and Wales. For the purpose of the law this includes:

- A place approved by the Secretary of State under the Abortion Act 1967 (ie standalone clinics)
- A hospital which has provided abortion services in the current or previous calendar year.

Protected sites are published by the Department of Health and Social Care on their website.

ENFORCEMENT

Breach of a safe access zone is a criminal offence which will be dealt with by the police.

The maximum punishment for breaching a safe access zone is a fine issued by the Magistrates Court, which will also give the offender a criminal record.

The police are expected to act in line with guidance issued by the College of Policing in relation to safe access zone legislation.

INTERACTION WITH PRE-EXISTING LOCAL SAFE ACCESS ZONES

Five clinics across England already have a local safe access zone in place prior to the introduction of national zones, as a result of Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) around the clinic. These are:

- BPAS Birmingham South
- BPAS Bournemouth
- BPAS Richmond
- MSI Reproductive Choices Manchester
- MSI Reproductive Choices West London.

These local zones will remain in place once the national law comes in. It will be up to the local police and council how they wish to address any breaches of either the PSPO or the new law.

Where the current PSPO is time-limited around clinic opening hours, the new law is not. This means that national zone restrictions will now apply outside clinic opening hours.

Each local authority will decide whether to renew its local PSPO every three years in accordance with the existing process, which requires a public consultation.

2. SCOPE

Frontline staff who may encounter clinic harassment or anti-abortion activity as part of their work in clinics or hospitals.

3. BACKGROUND

New law has been introduced which for the first time will introduce safe access zones around clinics nationwide. It has been recognised that standardising best practice across sites and providers with regards to management and reporting of clinic harassment and anti-abortion activity will reassure staff on the use of the law, and protect patients from associated harm.

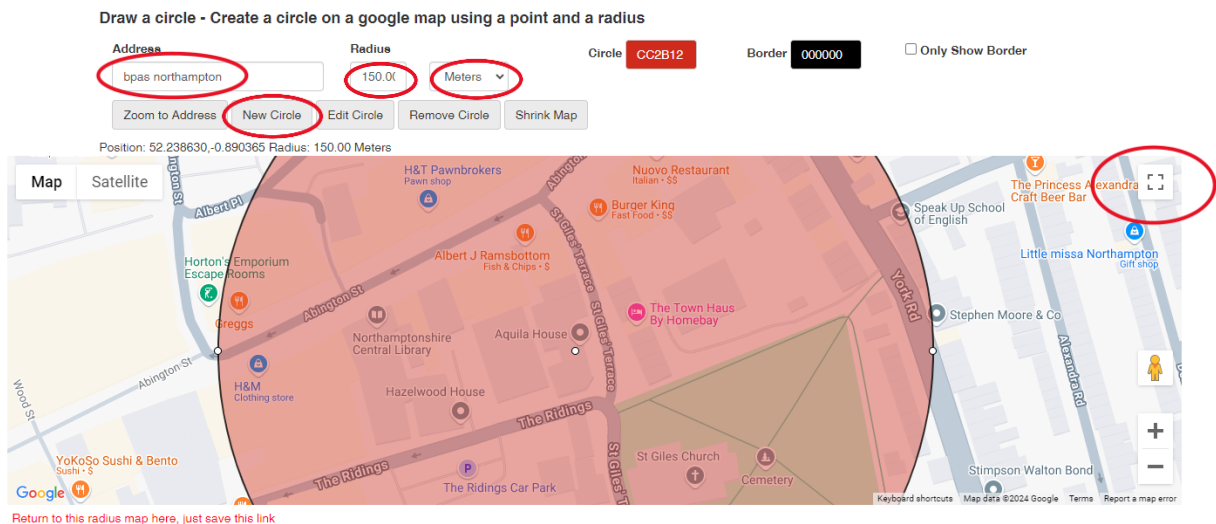
This is also intended to ensure adequate data collection to assess the efficacy of the law.

4. POLICY & PROCEDURE

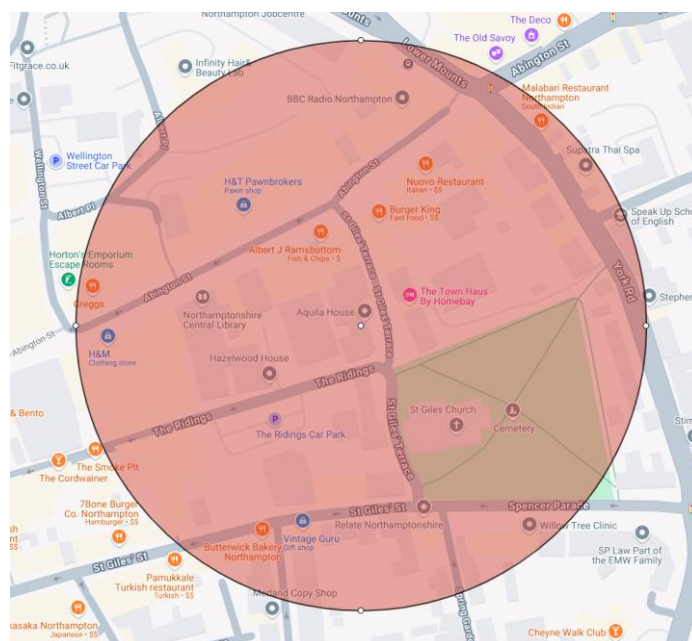
IN ADVANCE

Managers should identify the area that applies around their clinic.

They can do this by using a map tool to draw a circle, radius 150m, around the address of their clinic or hospital - <https://www.mapdevelopers.com/draw-circle-tool.php>. Clicking 'New Circle' will draw the circle on the map. If you are in a hospital or large site, you can drag the centre of the circle to the main entrance or boundary.



Clicking the map expansion button on the top right of the map will expand it to the full screen. You can then screenshot (Tap 'Prt Sc' button at the top of your keyboard) and Paste into a Word Document or email to share with clinic staff and any relevant security or front desk staff.



Staff should familiarise themselves with the policy to ensure that they can identify any breaches of the law, whether first hand or on patient report.

OBSERVING AND IDENTIFYING ANTI-ABORTION ACTIVITY

Anti-abortion protesters may be difficult to spot from inside the clinic, but staff should be alert to what individuals breaking the law may look like. They may include:

- Small groups of people gathered close to the clinic entrance
- People observing the clinic or building entrance for prolonged periods
- Individuals or groups handing out leaflets to passers-by
- People you see on a regular basis always around the clinic with no seeming purpose.

Patients or neighbours may also report behaviour and attendance to you.

No activity which has an impact on patients or staff is permissible under the law.

INFORMATION-GATHERING

If you do not personally observe the activity, it is important to gather information. A template reporting form which you can provide to staff or patients is available as an appendix to this document. The form should be provided to anybody who reports activity, alongside a copy of the map of the safe access zone around the clinic.

Where one patient or staff member has reported the activity, the form should be provided to all other relevant patients and staff to report anything should they wish to.

Key information to obtain is:

- Where the people were standing
- How many were there
- What were they doing
- Did they attempt to speak to you or anybody else?
- Were you handed any information or literature?
- Did they identify themselves/do you know who they were?
- What impact did they have on you/how did they make you feel?

ESCALATION & INTERNAL REPORTING

Managers should be alerted to every instance of anti-abortion activity, and provided with the information gathered. It is the responsibility of the clinic manager to determine if the police should be contacted.

Every instance of anti-abortion activity within the safe access zone should be reported internally using the relevant incident reporting tool (eg Datix). Information gathered should be included, in addition to any detail about further external reporting. If you have reported to the police, include the incident number provided.

Where central resources such as public policy teams or health and safety teams who record anti-abortion activity are present, these teams should be informed of the activity along with the information gathered. Where security teams exist, they should be notified of the activity.

EXTERNAL REPORTING

Managers should dial 101 or, where known, contact their community policing team as soon as possible to report **all instances** of anti-abortion activity within a safe access zone. Police should be informed that you are calling from an abortion clinic and that you believe your safe access zone is currently being breached.

Information gathered from patients should be anonymised and shared with the police.

Record the incident number and include in internal reporting.

If at any point staff or patients feel threatened, or if behaviour outside the clinic escalates – for example involving largescale presence, shouting, physical threats, or assault – **call 999 and report an ongoing incident in need of police attendance.**

Please be aware that you may be asked to provide a witness statement and attend court in connection with these incidents.

To enable national data-gathering on safe access zone breaches, please report using the online form at: <https://bpas-campaigns.org/share-your-experience/>

5. ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

This section should be filled out by each organisation to reflect their own arrangements.

Policy lead – Responsible for keeping the policy up to date and providing organisation-level guidance on anti-abortion activity and clinic harassment

Relevant Manager – Clinic-level manager responsible for monitoring clinic harassment and internal and external reporting where necessary

Senior Manager – Where relevant, escalation point for internal reporting and further support

Health and Safety – Organisational contact who gathers reports of patient harassment and risks to safety

Security – Where relevant, organisation's security team contact

Police contact – Where known, the best contact for your local police force where activity within the safe access zone is ongoing.

Responsibility	Name	Role	Contact
Policy lead			
Relevant Manager			
Senior Manager			
Health and Safety			
Security			
Police contact			

YOUR OPINION COUNTS

As you will have seen, there are protesters outside who do not support your right to seek an abortion. A new law has recently come into force which bans these groups from outside clinics and hospitals. To help enforce this law, we are gathering information about what our staff and patients experience.

We will share this information anonymously with the police and to raise awareness about ongoing anti-abortion activity outside clinics and hospitals.

Are you a patient or a staff member?	I'm a patient	I'm a staff member
Date		
What were the protesters doing?		
Can you describe them and where they were standing?		
How did this activity and/or the presence of protesters make you feel?		
If you would like us to share your details with the police when we report this incident, please leave your name and contact details		

<i>To be filled in by a member of staff</i>	
Name/address of site	
Name of protest group/individual	