

AGAINST LIFE

## UK, 'buffer zones' imposed to defend abortion

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

19\_09\_2024

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The British Labour government announced yesterday, September 18, nationwide buffer zones prescribed in the [Public Order Act](#) will come into force in two phases: on September 24 in Scotland and Northern Ireland and in England and Wales on October 31. In these protection zones, anyone who offers a vital support option to pregnant women thinking of having an abortion or holds silent prayer vigils will be treated and

tried as criminals.

**The move comes more than a year since MPs voted** in the Public Order Act (POA) in May 2023. The previous Conservative government delayed its implementation until guidelines had been drawn up to provide guidance to police officers on how to apply the law and in particular Section 9 which protects women from harassment outside abortion clinics and to the controversial issue of silent prayer in buffer zones. At the end of May 2024, just as the guidelines were finished and ready for implementation the then Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called a snap election on May 4 which shelved both the guidelines and the enactment of the POA.

**In the meantime, the problem of policing silent prayer** in Public Space Protection Order buffer zones gave rise to several high profile court cases and made international news. [Isabel Vaughan-Spruce](#) and Catholic priest [Father Sean Gough](#) successfully argued in court their arrests for praying in silence in an area under a (PSPO) were unjust and a breach of their human rights. Veteran Adam Smith-Connor, on the other hand, who is currently [on trial in Poole Magistrate's Court](#) for praying in silence two years ago near a clinic in Bournemouth, is presently undergoing a three-day trial with the verdict still hanging in abeyance. All three cases drew widespread public condemnation including from human rights groups with accusations that 'thought police' were roaming the streets and arresting citizens for thinking about God in buffer zones. The UK no longer appeared such a beacon of democracy.

**To make things worse,** the Labour government elected on July 4, has decided to wipe the slate clean and start a fresh. It has ditched the draft guidance drawn up by the last Conservative government that told police that silent prayer should be allowed inside the new "safe access zones". It has also scrapped exemptions allowing "consensual" communication within the zones. This was understood to give pregnant women the opportunity to approach pro-life volunteers for information about choices other than abortion but prevented volunteers from making the first move. Instead, according to the Home Office, new guidance will be published in the coming weeks by the College of Crown and Prosecution Service to 'ensure there is clarity and consistency with the enforcement of the new offence'.

**Notably, campaigners for buffer zones** had consistently argued the law would be watered down in practice if silent prayer was not banned. And this position enjoys such a large majority in Parliament that it is more likely that decisions about potential offenders will tilt towards a conviction rather than leniency. In fact, the wording of section 9 provides such a low threshold for conviction affording such wide sweeping

powers to police, it appears almost totalitarian.

**Yesterday's Home Office announcement states,** 'safe access buffer zones will make it illegal for anyone to do anything that intentionally or recklessly influences someone's decision to use abortion services, obstructs them, or causes harassment or distress to someone using or working at these premises. The law will apply within a 150 metre radius of the abortion service provider'. But it also adds that 'anyone found guilty of breaking the law will face an unlimited fine'. This disproportionate increase in the maximum penalty compared to a conviction for breaching a PSPO which carries a maximum fine of £1000 is obviously intended to discourage brave souls from venturing out to defend the lives of the unborn.

**The determination to come down hard on any resistance** also comes from members of the government like [Jess Phillips](#), the Home Office's safeguarding minister, who said: "The right to access abortion services is a fundamental right for women in this country, and no one should feel unsafe when they seek to access this. "We will not sit back and tolerate harassment, abuse and intimidation as people exercise their legal right to health care, which is why we have fast-tracked this measure to get it up and running without further delay. "For too long, abortion clinics have been without these vital protections, and this Government is determined to do all we can do to make this country a safer place for women."

**On the same wavelength,** Baroness Merron, Minister for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health said: "The safety and wellbeing of women accessing abortion services remains our priority. No women should feel scared or threatened when accessing these services, and it is only right they are protected from any abuse or harassment."

**It is clear from the will expressed** in these statements and the way the police have managed these situations so far that, although the issue of individual silent prayer has not yet been explicitly clarified, it is difficult to envisage any exceptions being made in this regard.

**Speaking to Isabel Vaughan-Spruce on the phone**, she told the *Daily Compass*, “These misleadingly named 'safe access zones' have been brought in off the back of hearsay and gossip. Abortion is not safe considering approximately 1 in every 17 women receiving abortion pills in Great Britain end up in hospital with complications. Women deserve to know about the alternatives available to them which is what these censorship zones aim to prevent”.

**Catherine Robinson, spokesperson for Right to Life Uk**, said buffer zones threatened to remove “vital practical support provided by volunteers outside abortion clinic, which helps to provide a genuine choice, and offers help to women who may be undergoing coercion”.

**But, the arguments for and against buffer zones** amount to more than just the two sides of the same coin. The disproportionate balance of power and the financial advantage pro-abortionists enjoy makes any pro-life or pro-democracy challenge to government restrictions potentially unviable. In fact it's difficult to envisage Great Britain ever being restored to its former democratic glory.