

These notes refer to the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Act (Northern Ireland) 2023 (c.1) which received Royal Assent on 6 February 2023

Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Act (Northern Ireland) 2023

EXPLANATORY NOTES

BACKGROUND AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

3. This Act establishes ‘safe access zones’ around abortion clinics in order to protect the women using those clinics as well as the people who work in them. It will be a criminal offence to harass people in a safe access zone around those clinics. The topic of the Act is health.
4. The Member proposes the establishment of ‘safe access zones’ around registered pregnancy advisory bureaux and clinics, in which anti-abortion activity cannot take place. This would stop activity directly outside centres, ensure women are not approached unsolicited and prevent other activities designed to cause distress including (but not limited to) filming, recording, unsolicited ‘counselling’ and pamphlet distribution.
5. The Act ensures safe access for those who wish to avail of non-directive sexual and reproductive health services in Northern Ireland. The Act does not include provision for protestors.
6. In terms of the legal structure there will be ‘protected premises’ (e.g. abortion clinics), ‘safe access zones’, and ‘protected persons’ (e.g. the people who will be protected from harassment).
7. The Act has six policy objectives.
 - a) to ensure that buildings which house organisations offering sexual and reproductive health services have a safe access zone appropriate to their specific location and environment;
 - b) to ensure women and others visiting or working in the premises with legitimate reason (and those accompanying them) are not approached in an unsolicited manner within this zone;
 - c) to prevent activities designed to cause distress or to deter a person from approaching a building – e.g. filming, recording, unsolicited ‘counselling’ and pamphlet distribution;

These notes refer to the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Act (Northern Ireland) 2023 (c.1) which received Royal Assent on 6 February 2023

- d) to place an obligation on the Department of Health to publish and maintain a list of all protected premises and the extent of the safe access zone for each premise, in such manner as it deems appropriate;
- e) to create a series of obligations on constables in relation to the monitoring and enforcing of safe access zones; and
- f) to require the Department of Health to publish an annual report highlighting the effectiveness of the safe access zones in protecting people attending protected premises.