



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

23rd April 2023

Jean Contreant,

RE: ABORTION PROTESTS & CLAUSE 9 OF THE PUBLIC ORDER BILL

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of protests at abortion clinics and Clause 9 of the *Public Order Bill*; I have read your comments on this issue with interest.

As you might be aware, MPs agreed to add Clause 9 - which introduces areas around abortion clinics and hospitals ('buffer zones') where interference with, and intimidation or harassment of, women accessing, or people providing, abortion services, would be an offence - to the *Public Order Bill*.

Matters related to abortion are a free vote for MPs, meaning the Government does not ask us to vote a certain way. I recognise that there are very strong views from both sides of the debate on this subject. When discussing the amendment in Parliament, the Government expressed the view that this country has a proud history of allowing free speech, but the right to peaceful protest does not extend to harassment or threatening behaviour. The law already provides protection against harassment and intimidation, and the police have a range of powers to manage protests. Like all members of the public, protesters are subject to the law and suspected criminal offences must be robustly investigated and dealt with by the police.

Following concerns about the tactics of protestors outside some abortion clinics, a review was instigated by the Government in 2018. This review revealed that anti-abortion demonstrations take place outside a small number of facilities. In 2017 for example, 363 hospitals and clinics in England and Wales carried out abortions. Of those, 36 hospitals and clinics experienced anti-abortion demonstrations. With this in mind, the Government's assessment was that introducing 'buffer zones' would not be an appropriate response, given the experiences of the majority of hospitals and clinics. However, as matters relating to abortion are a free vote issue, MPs nonetheless decided to add provisions for 'buffer zones' to the *Public Order Bill*.



Separately, Ministers have taken steps through the *Police, Crime, Sentencing & Courts Act* to give the police the powers they need to better manage protests, enabling them to balance the rights of protesters against the rights of others to go about their daily business. It is also the case that 'Public Spaces Protection Orders' have been implemented successfully to restrict harmful anti-abortion protests in Ealing, Richmond and Manchester.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Tom Pursglove'.

**TOM PURSGLOVE MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**