

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill

Notes from informal evidence session 5 March 2024

Contents

Motivations for participating in vigils	1
Support	2
Healthcare provision.....	3
Impact of vigils	3
Taking part in a vigil.....	3
Placards, imagery and literature	4
Location	5
The Bill	5
Other thoughts.....	6

Motivations for participating in vigils

- Both participants set out their experiences of accessing abortion services and how those experiences, characterised by a lack of emotional support, counselling or consideration of alternative options, led to considerable trauma and feelings of guilt and shame.
- Both participants experienced depression as a result of their experiences and spoke of the role of faith and Christianity in helping them through their trauma and grief.
- One participant spoke of the process of accessing an abortion as a conveyer belt, with no time to process or consider options and how staff at the abortion services assumed she knew what she was doing. She noted that in her experience there was no support offered, other than being told she was doing the right thing. Another participant spoke of how she didn't feel there were opportunities to exit the process of getting an abortion once she had started down that path.
- One participant spoke about how when women experience miscarriage, there is support and people around you. Conversely, when experiencing unexpected pregnancy and abortion she felt there was no support and she was alone. The participant noted there is a real silence around abortion and how it didn't feel like it was normal healthcare.

- Both participants spoke of how their past experiences motivated them to take part in and/or co-ordinate 40 Days for Life vigils in Edinburgh.
 - One participant described why she attended 40 Days for Life vigil as first and foremost to allow those seeking to access abortion services to breathe, stop and think, and secondly to support those who had experienced abortion. She also noted that she wanted to help other women avoid what she went through.
 - Another participant described why she attended 40 Days for Life vigils. It was to:
 - bear witness to the value of every human life
 - offer prayer because she believed in the power of prayer
 - offer a way out to those who know in their hearts that they don't want an abortion.
- One participant outlined the role of prayer at a vigil. She noted that speaking as a Christian, prayer is very powerful and to pray for the women going in, the staff and the unborn children, was important. She described prayer as an internal process that does not need to be visible noting that prayer is a conversation with God, not a loud proclamation. The participant stated that the Bible teaches Christians that prayer should be conducted in a private place, and that Jesus speaks against visible prayer.
- Both participants spoke of how they also supported women who had had abortions through a programme called Post Abortion Support for Everyone (PACE). One participant noted there were many similarities between the experiences of participants in this programme. For example, many reported that no alternatives to abortion had been discussed and some felt pressurised into having an abortion. Many also identified self-destructive behaviours as a result of the trauma of having an abortion – for example, promiscuous behaviour, using drugs or alcohol, suicidal thoughts.

Support

- Both participants thought sources of support when undergoing an abortion were inadequate.
- One participant thought every woman considering abortion should be offered counselling and access to a psychologist, describing the need for opportunities to talk someone neutral, and to be able to process everything before proceeding, but that cost was a limiting factor.
- In one participant's view, the NHS only offered counselling after someone has been through an abortion. However, she noted that one woman she had been involved in supporting had asked why she would go back to the NHS for post-abortion counselling when it was the NHS that had taken her down the route which caused her trauma.

- Both participants thought that the NHS did not give sufficient information on alternatives to abortion in advance. One flagged adoption as an option which wasn't discussed.
- Both participants stated that they would like to see counselling offered –provided independently of the NHS – in advance of accessing an abortion. One participant described this as a pregnancy support service, which should be available to all. However, she also noted that funding was an issue.

Healthcare provision

- One participant questioned the view that abortion is not linked to depression. Speaking of her own experience, she noted that abortion providers did not ask for her NHS number, which meant it was not on her health record and therefore no connection between her depression and the abortion. She reported that this was routine practice and, as a result, there is no way of knowing what the real connection/numbers are.

Impact of vigils

- Both participants highlighted that there were many stories of babies saved as a result of anti-abortion activities or vigils. They both gave an example from a vigil in Glasgow the day before where a couple had changed their minds about proceeding with an abortion having seen a placard saying “Pregnant? We can help”.
- One participant noted that lots of people think abortion is the only choice and highlighted that vigils can help people realise they are not alone. She also noted that twice as many women from deprived areas have abortions, and further articulated that it was her hope to reach people to try and show them they have support whatever their life situation.

Taking part in a vigil

- Participants outlined the experience of taking part in a 40 Days for Life vigil.
- One participant provided the Committee with the 40 Days for Life statement of peace, which can be accessed online. She noted that all vigil participants must abide by the statement of peace to take part in a vigil and if they do not do so, they would be asked to leave by the organiser of that particular vigil.
- One participant spoke about how, in their experience, vigils were very limited and specific, they are organised for the same time each year for a specified period of time – 40 days. Each group organises their own vigils, some are in the Autumn, others are during Lent.
- One participant noted that she had never experienced a vigil participant who was causing harassment. She noted that there was no intention as part of an anti-

abortion vigil to harass people accessing services. However, she noted that someone may feel harassed if they were not at peace with their decision to access an abortion.

- Both participants noted that at the vigils they attend, they don't approach people, they don't start conversations and they don't shout. They stated that they only speak to people if they stop to speak to them first. Both participants also noted they hold placards and distribute leaflets when they are engaged in conversation with someone.
- One participant reported violence that was directed towards those that attend vigils. She also noted that the actions of anti-abortion activists are regularly misrepresented in the media, which emboldens those with pro-abortion views. An example was given of an activist receiving an email containing threats to follow her home and stab her in the vagina. Another example involved four pints of milk being poured over anti-abortion activists outside Chalmers Street clinic, as well as shouting and harassment.
- One participant noted that many people speak to them during vigils, noting that many people who approached her have often had abortions or have been affected by abortion. Other interactions have included people:
 - asking why they're there
 - saying they're glad they're there
 - saying they shouldn't be here – for example, some just give passing comments, but sometimes people also stop and engage.

Placards, imagery and literature

- Both participants discussed placards at vigils:
 - One participant stated that she held placards saying things like "Ask me about my abortion" and "Life begins in the womb". She thought the most controversial one was the 40 Days for Life organisation message, which was "Pray to end abortion".
 - One participant stated that she holds a placard saying, 'I've had an abortion, talk to me about it', as well as a picture of an unborn baby to get people to think about what they're doing, and phone numbers and emails addresses.
- One participant spoke about how images and placards are decided upon. She reported that there are various visual boards and it's up to those organising the vigils to use what they're comfortable using. The placards will always have phone numbers and email addresses to contact for support.
- Another participant noted that she understands it can be hard to see the signs but noted that, in her opinion, those attending abortion services are already in turmoil before they see the signs and it's not necessarily the signs that are the traumatising factor.

- One participant was asked about the presence of more extreme messages at vigils (e.g., “Abortion is murder”). She stated that she wouldn’t want to comment until she had seen some evidence of things like that. In her view, it didn’t happen.
- One participant provided examples of the literature distributed during a vigil. She noted that these were for post-abortion recovery and sources of support. The participant offers a choice of leaflets for Christian and non-Christian women.

Location

- Both participants discussed the reasons vigils are located outside hospitals:
 - One participant noted it was to influence (but not unless approached), to pray and to offer help to those in crisis pregnancy and to those with post-abortion trauma. She thought they could pray somewhere else, but they wouldn’t be able to do the other things.
 - One participant outlined that her reasons for wanting to be close to abortion services was to allow those seeking to access abortion services to breathe, stop and think. She stated that it wasn’t about changing someone’s mind or influencing necessarily as only they can do that themselves, but it was to allow them to take that moment to pause. She further noted that if they were around the corner and out of sight, then someone doesn’t have that opportunity to stop and think about what they’re doing. She articulated that the reason they’re there is to reach people.
- When asked by a Committee Member for their response to the view held by some that those opposed to abortion should lobby the Parliament or Government, rather than holding vigils outside clinics, one participant noted that she was not trying to change the law. She stated that the law can only follow what people want, and right now the prevailing view in society is pro-abortion. She noted that she doesn’t want to change the law.

The Bill

- Both participants outlined their concerns around the Bill.
- One participant was of the view that saving the life of a baby should never be a crime. She questioned why anyone would want to pass a law that prevented babies being saved. She thought the offences in the Bill were vague and that that was dangerous. It left too much room for interpretation.
 - When asked whether the penalties in the Bill would stop anti-abortion activities outside hospitals, this participant said she didn’t know. She thought it would be obvious that she didn’t support any penalties. She also noted that people have continued to fight against other social injustices, despite social attitudes. She gave the example of slavery stating that people might think that

they wouldn't have supported slavery, yet most in modern society don't address the worse injustice of abortion.

- Both participants were concerned about the idea of influencing as an offence, noting that this was too unclear.
- One participant questioned the assumption that vigils prevent access to services, stating, in their view, this did not happen. She also questioned claims of harassment noting that, in their experience, this didn't happen at vigils and there is no intention to harass.
- One participant noted that the human right to freedom of speech is important, but so was protecting the unborn baby who has no voice.
- One participant thought that the Bill was trying to shut down the pro-life voice. She stated that some people who have had an abortion push the trauma outwards – e.g., by being hostile to anti-abortion activities. Other people push the trauma in – for example through depression or suicidal thoughts.
- One participant thought that asking her views on the size of buffer zones and the arrangements for extending or reducing them was like debating how much support should be given to slavers to transport slaves.

Other thoughts

- One participant appreciated the lengths undertaken to recognise the trauma caused by abortion. However, she felt the approach was ironic. She saw parliamentarians as inflaming sentiments towards anti-abortion activities – for instance, accusing people of harassment, of preventing people from accessing services, of violence. She noted that the rhetoric which comes from Parliament influences society and the media. She stated that politicians need to be honest and to not inflame issues.