



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

SAFE ACCESS ZONES FOR ABORTION SERVICES – ANNUAL REPORT

December 2025

VERSION CONTROL

VERSION	DATE	SUMMARY OF CHANGES
1.0	November 2025	First Issue
2.0	10 December 2025	Final draft

Introduction

This is the second annual report of the Department of Health since the introduction of Safe Access Zones, covering the 12-month period from 1 October 2024 – 30 September 2025.

Abortion Services are available in all five Health & Social Care (HSC) Trusts in Northern Ireland. [The Abortion \(Northern Ireland\) \(No 2\) Regulations 2020](#) were introduced on 31 March 2020 and provide the legal framework for abortions in Northern Ireland. The latest abortion statistics can be found at the follow site: [Northern Ireland Abortion Statistics, 2024/25](#).

Safe Access Zones became operational at all Trust sites on 29 September 2023 under legislation introduced by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Department, Trusts and the PSNI have been monitoring the operation and effectiveness of the zones. The purpose of this report is for the Department to set out whether, in its opinion, the Safe Access Zones have been effective in protecting the safety and dignity of protected persons, in line with [Section 8 of the Abortion Services \(Safe Access Zones\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2023](#).

The Department would like to place on record its thanks to those Trust and PSNI representatives who were and remain instrumental in overseeing the implementation and monitoring of Safe Access Zones in Northern Ireland.

1. Executive Summary

- There are currently eight Safe Access Zones operational across five Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust areas – all of these became operational on 29 September 2023.
- Five of these Safe Access Zones extend for 100 metres, two for 130 metres and one for 150 metres.
- The Department of Health has not received any notifications of amendments to the extent of the Safe Access Zones at any site.
- Department officials have engaged with Trusts and the PSNI to gather feedback on the Safe Access Zones to inform this report.
- During this reporting period, there were 12 recorded breaches of Safe Access Zones, all reported by the Northern Trust in connection with ongoing protests at Causeway Hospital. Concerns regarding these incidents continue to be raised with the Department.
- The PSNI have reported eleven calls for service regarding the Safe Access Zones at Causeway Hospital between 1 October 2024 and 31 September 2025. Three of these remain under investigation.
- Overall feedback received from Trusts, the PSNI and other stakeholders is that the Safe Access Zones continue to be effective in protecting women and staff accessing and providing abortion services.
- On balance, the Department considers that the legislation is working effectively and does not consider that any legislative amendments are required at this time.
- Furthermore, the Department considers that the current monitoring and evaluation methods remain appropriate to assess the effectiveness of Safe Access Zones and do not propose any amendments at this time.

2. Background

- 2.1 Safe Access Zones were established under NI Assembly legislation, the [Abortion Services \(Safe Access Zones\) Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2023](#) (referred to below as “the Act”), to protect women and girls accessing abortion services, information, advice and counselling, and anyone accompanying them, and protect staff working at these locations. These are referred to as “protected persons” within the Act. Under the law, anti-abortion protests and other behaviours are prohibited within any Safe Access Zone once it has been established, and this may be enforced by the PSNI.
- 2.2 The Act makes it a crime to do an act in a Safe Access Zone, either intentionally or recklessly, that will or might:
- directly or indirectly influence a protected person in their decision to attend an abortion clinic; OR
 - prevent or impede their access; OR
 - harass, alarm or distress that protected person.
- 2.3 The Act received Royal Assent and came into effect on 6 February 2023. Criminal offences and enforcement provisions within the Act, came into effect from 7 May 2023. Safe Access Zones were subsequently introduced at all health service locations providing abortion services from 29 September 2023.
- 2.4 The Act creates responsibilities for the Department of Health, the operators of premises as defined in the Act and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) (see Chapter 3 for details of responsibilities). These responsibilities were outlined in the [Operator Guidance](#) which was developed by the Department of Health and sets out how Safe Access Zones are to be implemented and monitored by the Department, by operators such as Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts or by other organisations in line with the legislation.
- 2.5 A Safe Access Zone includes the “protected premises” where abortion services are provided, as well the public areas around the protected premises at a distance of **at least 100 metres from each entry and exit point**. This distance

may be extended up to a maximum of 250 metres from entry and exit points if the operator considers it appropriate to allow safe access to “protected persons”.

2.6 The Safe Access Zones only apply to the strictly designated public space areas. They do not apply to private properties.

2.7 Northern Ireland became the first region across the United Kingdom and Ireland to introduce Safe Access Zones at all locations providing abortion services. Since then, Safe Access Zones have become operational in Scotland (24 September 2024), Ireland (17 October 2024), and England & Wales (31 October 2024).

3. Responsibilities

- 3.1 This section provides a summary of the responsibilities of providers of abortion services (i.e. operators, which currently only includes HSC Trusts), the Department of Health and PSNI. Further information is available in the [Operator Guidance](#).

Operator

Establishing a Safe Access Zone

- 3.2 An **operator is responsible for establishing a Safe Access Zone** and determining the extent of the Safe Access Zone at each premises. Factors such as the geographical area and the history and extent of any anti-abortion protest activity at the location can be considered.
- 3.3 Operators are responsible for considering proportionality when determining the size of a Safe Access Zone at their premises and should engage with the PSNI as part of the determination process. Ultimately, the final decision on a Safe Access Zone is one for the operator, who should weigh up the factors involved and have a rationale for a decision and retain this as a formal record.
- 3.4 Operators must notify the Department of Health that they wish the premises to be protected. The Safe Access Zone is established when the Department has been notified.
- 3.5 **Operators are also responsible for bringing the existence and extent of any Safe Access Zone to the attention of members of the public.** This includes the erection of Safe Access Zone signage, publication of Safe Access Zone maps, and effective communication of this information. Effective communication includes the provision of an information circular to any private premises within the Safe Access Zone.

Reporting a suspected breach, Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), and staff training

- 3.6 Operators are responsible for developing a Standard Operating Procedure and providing appropriate training to ensure that relevant staff are aware of the Safe Access Zones and how to safely manage a suspected breach.

Monitoring the Effectiveness of Safe Access Zones

- 3.7 **Operators must monitor the effectiveness of the Safe Access Zone** by keeping a record of the nature and extent of any breaches of the zone (and the legal outcome) and / or incidents at the premises including protest activity. Operators are also responsible for gathering feedback from protected persons by way of survey and anonymised testimonials and seeking property owner/resident feedback within a Safe Access Zone.

Extending a Safe Access Zone

- 3.8 If an operator considers that a Safe Access Zone, as established, is not providing safe access to the premises for protected persons, **the operator can give notice to the Department that it wishes to extend the Safe Access Zone by a specified distance up to a maximum of 250 metres**. Operators must give due consideration to proportionality when determining whether to extend a Safe Access Zone and should engage with the PSNI as part of the determination process. The rationale for any decision to extend a Safe Access Zone should be recorded and retained by the operator.

Withdrawal of a Safe Access Zone

- 3.9 In line with the Act, an operator of a protected premises may at any time withdraw the notice given to the Department for the establishment of the Safe Access Zone.

Department of Health

Establishment of a Safe Access Zone

3.10 It is the Department's responsibility to publish and maintain a **list of Safe Access Zones on the Department's website and to ensure that it is updated in line with any changes.**

Monitoring the Effectiveness of Safe Access Zones

3.11 As set out in Section 8 of the Act, the **Department must publish an annual report**, setting out whether, in the opinion of the Department, each Safe Access Zone has been effective in protecting the safety and dignity of protected persons.

3.12 The **Department will gather insight to inform their opinion** prior to publishing the annual report. These sources may include:

- Detail collated yearly from each operator of protected premises;
- Feedback and opinion gathered directly from the PSNI;
- Case study examination of specific case studies or success stories related to the Safe Access Zone implementation to understand its impact on protected persons;
- Benchmarking to compare the Safe Access Zone effectiveness to similar initiatives or zones in other locations/jurisdictions; and,
- Long-term analysis to analyse trends over time to determine whether the Safe Access Zones continue to meet their objectives and adapt strategies accordingly.

3.13 The **Department will keep monitoring and evaluation methods under review** and adjust these as appropriate to help ensure the effectiveness of Safe Access Zones and identify any potential improvements.

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)

3.14 The **PSNI has powers of enforcement** under the legislation and can be contacted by a member of staff at any protected premises, or by a member of

the public, in the event of any potential breach of the law. The PSNI has employed a “4 E’s approach” to policing the Safe Access Zones – Engage, Explain, Encourage and Enforce, if required.

3.15 Any breaches of the Act will be dealt with appropriately and those found guilty of an offence could face a fine of up to £2,500 (not exceeding level 4 on the standard scale).

4. Current Safe Access Zones

4.1 There are currently Safe Access Zones at eight locations across the five Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts as set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Trust	Site Name	Meterage
Northern	Causeway Hospital	100m
Western	Altnagelvin Hospital	100m
Southern	Craigavon Area Hospital	100m
Southern	Daisy Hill Hospital	130m
Belfast	Bradbury Wellbeing and Treatment Centre	150m
Belfast	College Street	130m
South Eastern	Lagan Valley Hospital	100m
South Eastern	Ulster Hospital	100m

4.2 During this reporting period there have been no notifications to the Department to remove, extend or establish a new Safe Access Zone at any Trust premises. Additionally, there have been no notifications to the Department from non-statutory providers of information, advice, or counselling about abortion services, who, under the Act, can also establish a Safe Access Zone.

4.3 Information on the location of each Safe Access Zone is displayed at all protected premises and published on the Department of Health¹ and HSC Trust websites. Public signage highlights the legal requirements at each Zone.

4.4 The Safe Access Zones only apply to the strictly designated public space areas. They do not apply to private properties.

¹ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/safe-access-zones-now-established-northern-ireland>

5. Feedback on the Operation of Safe Access Zones

5.1 To monitor the effectiveness of the Safe Access Zones, Trusts and the PSNI have kept records of incidents and breaches and have shared relevant data and feedback with the Department at the end of the reporting period. The Department also invited stakeholder to provide feedback for the purpose of informing the second annual monitoring report.

5.2 This section provides an overview of the feedback received.

HSC Trusts

5.3 A summary of the records provided by HSC Trusts is included in Table 2 below.

Table 2

	Incidents recorded at Safe Access Zone	No of Breaches Recorded	of No of times PSNI involved in Breaches
Northern Trust	Twelve incidents recorded from 1 October 2024 to 31 September 2025. Protests outside the SAZ still occur regularly.	12 breaches	PSNI were called 7 times and attended 5 times.
Western Trust	No incidents	No breaches	None
Southern Trust	No Incidents	No breaches	None
Belfast Trust	No incidents	No breaches	None
South-Eastern Trust	No protest activity	No breaches	None

5.4 The Northern Trust reported the only incidents at Causeway Hospital. Each of the twelve incidents were recorded as a breach of the Safe Access Zone. The

PSNI were not contacted in all circumstances due to either insufficient information or the protestors moving on.

- 5.5 These incidents / breaches within the Northern Trust included protestors within the Safe Access Zone approaching service users and leaving anti-abortion leaflets inside the Hospital. In the incidents where the PSNI did not attend, Northern Trust staff attended the area and re positioned and/or made use of CCTV.
- 5.6 The Northern Trust advised that it continues to work constructively with local PSNI and collaborates with them to actively address concerns regarding protests in the vicinity and any potential breaches of the Safe Access Zone at Causeway Hospital.
- 5.7 Whilst protests still occur at the boundary of other Trust Safe Access Zones, there have been no reported breaches of the Zones. All Trusts advised that they consider that the implementation of Safe Access Zones has enabled women and staff to access sites without fear of intimidation. Belfast Trust stated that these have had a notably positive impact and both patients and staff feel a lot safer in accessing and delivering this essential service.

PSNI

- 5.8 Information recorded by the PSNI is outlined in Table 3 below. The PSNI had **11 calls for service** during this reporting period all occurring in the Northern Health Trust. This includes calls from members of the public, hence the difference in Trust figures highlighted in Table 2 above.

Table 3

	No of Calls for Service	Details	Number of Arrests Recorded & Outcome
Northern Trust	11	The majority of these were complaints about the manner in which anti-abortion protestors conduct a weekly protest outside the SAZ and lack of knowledge about the parameters of the SAZ.	Three of these are currently under investigation.
Western Trust	None	-	-
Southern Trust	None	Safe Access Zone is monitored in passing.	-
Belfast Trust	None	-	-
South Eastern	None	-	-
Total	11		

5.9 PSNI advised that, whilst protests occur more frequently at the Causeway Hospital than in other Trust areas, they have received a lower number of calls for service overall (11, compared with 108 calls in the previous year). The PSNI feel that the reduction in calls reflects the effectiveness of the safe access zones and of the collaborative working between organisations, key stakeholders and protest groups to ensure a balance of rights for everyone involved.

5.10 PSNI further advised that over this reporting period there has been one conviction in December 2024 resulting in a fine of £750 which is now at appeal stage. Another case from July 2024 was due in court in late 2025.

5.11 The Department was also advised that a meeting was held between the PSNI and the Northern Trust on 8 October 2025 to discuss a recent increase in alleged breaches of the Safe Access Zones at Causeway Hospital since August 2025. Following the meeting, work has been undertaken to improve speed of reporting and capture of CCTV evidence. The potential expansion or redrawing of the existing Safe Access Zone was also discussed and is a matter for consideration by the Trust. It was noted that there has also been an overall

reduction in calls to police regarding protest activity compared to when the Safe Access Zone was first introduced at the Causeway Hospital. Previously, the PSNI were receiving a large volume of calls about the location, actions and materials displayed by protestors, whereas they are now receiving much fewer and more specific calls regarding protestors accessing hospital grounds and potentially engaging with patients and those accompanying them.

- 5.12 Regarding the Belfast Trust, the PSNI stated that “the introduction of Safe Access Zones has been effective in ensuring that persons using the services at both locations can do so without fear of being accosted. Whilst pro-life protests do still take place in Belfast it would appear that organisers take all necessary steps to ensure that they do not breach the Safe Access Zones.”
- 5.13 In the Southern Trust, PSNI again consider the Safe Access Zones to be effective. When protests have taken place at Craigavon Area Hospital, PSNI advised that “engagement has been positive and they have been compliant. The Safe Access Zone is a positive tool that allows us to balance the rights of all involved.”

Other Stakeholders

- 5.14 The Department met with representatives from Alliance for Choice, specifically Alliance for Choice Derry and North Coast for Choice, during the development of this report.
- 5.15 Alliance for Choice Derry carried out a consultation survey requesting feedback on the operation and effectiveness of Safe Access Zones in Northern Ireland. They received 76 unique responses and produced a summary report of these responses.
- 5.16 The consultation responses demonstrate widespread public support for Safe Access Zones as an essential safeguard for privacy, dignity, and safety. Participants generally agreed that the introduction of these zones has reduced direct confrontation and visible protest activity near healthcare sites.

- 5.17 However, the group noted that significant concerns remain regarding limited enforcement by the PSNI and what it considers to be an insufficient distance of current zones, which many people feel do not fully prevent visibility or audibility of protestors.
- 5.18 The survey showed that there was broad and consistent support for the continued existence of Safe Access Zones as a critical protective measure for both service users and healthcare professionals. Participants recognised the zones as a progressive development that have reduced some direct confrontations, but several indicated that the visibility and presence of protestors remain problematic in their opinion. The perceived effectiveness of Safe Access Zones varied widely in the survey results, with individual ratings ranging from 1 to 8 out of 10, where 1 is not effective and 10 is very effective. Respondents who rated the zones lower typically cited insufficient enforcement by PSNI and inadequate boundary distances, both of which they believed undermined the intent of the legislation.
- 5.19 A respondent from the Belfast Trust area stated “from a mother who has had to endure pregnancy loss and on one occasion have had to have medical intervention. I find the imagery and words used by protestors disgusting and feel that it is highly inappropriate on all grounds. I understand that people have a right to voice their opinions but they are causing emotional distress to females of all backgrounds.” A respondent from the Northern Trust stated “I had to drive past the “protests” weekly when going to work. They are a danger not only to the women they harass on the way to access health care but they are a distraction to drivers and will end up leading an accident one of these days.”

Department of Health response to feedback

- 5.20 The Department acknowledges the ongoing protest activity outside Causeway Hospital. Whilst it is recognised that the protests are outside the boundary of the Safe Access Zones, the Department notes that these are situated at the

Lodge Road Roundabout, which is the main route for many attending Causeway Hospital.

- 5.21 Those attending the hospital, and elected representatives, have raised concerns in the past about the graphic and offensive nature of the posters on display. While members of the public and those attending other appointments at the hospital are not defined as “protected persons” under the legislation, we acknowledge that some have reported feeling extremely traumatised by witnessing these protests, and others have raised concerns more generally regarding road safety in the area.
- 5.22 Whilst the Department has no authority to extend the Safe Access Zone at Causeway Hospital or at any premises, it has been advised by Trust management that the matter has been considered and will be kept under review. The Department is aware that any extension of the current Safe Access Zone up to the maximum distance permitted in legislation would continue to place the boundary on a main route to the hospital and would also include the car park of a local shopping centre, which may impact on more members of the public. It is therefore unlikely that such action would reduce the visibility of protests or calls to the PSNI. However, it is recognised that it may deter protestors from entering the grounds of the hospital, where they may come into contact with protected persons, as has happened over the course of the year.
- 5.23 During the reporting period, the Department has been asked on occasion to comment on protestors silently praying in / around the Safe Access Zone and the impact of the Zone on freedom of speech. The Department’s position remains that enforcement of Safe Access Zones is an operational matter for the PSNI.

6. Effectiveness of Safe Access Zones

- 6.1 In light of the evidence presented by Trusts and the PSNI and feedback that the Department has received during the reporting period, it is the Department's opinion that, on balance, **each of the eight Safe Access Zones continue to be effective in protecting the safety and dignity of protected persons.**
- 6.2 The Department recognises that at some sites, particularly Causeway Hospital, the continued presence of protests and the nature of those protests may cause distress to members of the public passing by or attending the hospital. However, the Department notes that the intention of the legislation was not to remove the right to protest but rather to protect women and staff specifically from harassment, alarm or distress when attending a clinic for abortion services within the immediate vicinity of these premises. The Department, and the Northern Trust, are content that the Safe Access Zone is effective in doing this.
- 6.3 The Department is of the opinion that the Northern Trust is managing the situation appropriately and within the confines of the law, although it is recognised that the ongoing monitoring places resource pressures on the Trust, particularly when protestors enter the grounds of the hospital. The Department acknowledges that there have been breaches of the Safe Access Zones at Causeway Hospital and that the Trust and the PSNI are working closely on managing these breaches. As enforcement is a matter for the PSNI, it is for them to decide, based on the specific scenario, if and when the law has been broken. The Trust and the PSNI have both referenced the good working relationship which has continued to be effective over the course of the year.
- 6.4 Furthermore, the Department is content that the Northern Trust continue to monitor the situation at Causeway Hospital and consider the options available to it, including extending the Safe Access Zone to 250m, and is content that this is kept under review at this time.

6.5 The Department considers that the current monitoring and evaluation methods are appropriate for helping ensure the effectiveness of Safe Access Zones and identifying any potential improvements.