

## London council sets up buffer zone around abortion clinic

A London council has become the first local authority in the UK to approve a buffer zone around an abortion clinic.

Members of Ealing Council, in the west of the capital, voted April 10 to establish a public space protection order, which would ban public prayer and offers of assistance to women within 100 metres of a clinic run by Marie Stopes UK.

The decision means Britain will become the second Western democracy to ban pro-life activities in the vicinity of abortion clinics.

It follows Canada, where in February 50-metre exclusion zones were enforced around eight Ontario facilities.

And in Alberta, the NDP government has introduced [a bill](#) April 5 to create 50-metre buffer zones around abortion clinics, with the hope of keeping pro-life protesters at bay and preventing them from harassing patients and staff.

Marie Stopes UK sought the ruling because it claimed that members of the Good Counsel Network, a largely Catholic group, were harassing its clients, a charge the pavement counselors have strongly denied.

Richard Bentley, managing director at Marie Stopes UK, said approval for the buffer zone was "a landmark decision for women."

"We are incredibly grateful to Ealing Council for recognizing the emotional distress that these groups create, and for taking proportionate action to protect the privacy and dignity of women accessing our clinic in the borough," he said in a statement published on the charity's website April 11.

"This was never about protest – it was about small groups of strangers choosing to gather by our entrance gates where they could harass and intimidate women and try to prevent them from accessing health care to which they are legally entitled," he said.

"Ealing Council has sent a clear message that this kind of behavior should not be tolerated, and that these groups have no justification for trying to involve themselves in one of the most personal decisions a woman can make for herself," he continued.

Other local authorities in the U.K., Bentley added, were now "exploring similar measures to increase protection outside clinics in their areas."

However, Elizabeth Howard of the Good Counsel Network said Ealing Council had taken a “profoundly regressive step.”

“I am dismayed, but not surprised, by Ealing Council’s decision to ban offers of help outside the abortion center here,” she said in a statement emailed April 11 to Catholic News Service.

“Hundreds of women over the years have accepted this help and are grateful for the chance to keep their babies,” she said. “This decision will harm vulnerable women who need our assistance. These are women who can’t get support anywhere else.”

Clare McCullough of Good Counsel said more than 1,000 women in the past six years have changed their minds and decided to keep their babies after they were approached by counselors praying outside the clinic.

The buffer zone will take effect April 23, and anyone who breaches the order would be committing a criminal offense and could be fined or prosecuted under the law, the statement said.

Pro-life activists will take legal advice about mounting a possible challenge to the decision of the council.

But in a statement published on its website, Ealing Council said it was confident that “the need to provide safe, unimpeded access to the clinic in the safe zone can be balanced with the Equality Act and the European Convention on Human Rights.”

Auxiliary Bishop John Sherrington of Westminster has defended the Good Counsel Network for offering “practical alternatives and assistance if a woman wants to make a different choice.”

“It should not be necessary to limit the freedom of individuals or groups to express opinions, except when they could cause grave harm to others or a threat to public order,” he said in a February statement. “There are already proportionate means in current legislation to deal with these situations.”

He added, “A blanket introduction of ‘buffer zones’ carries with it the danger of both denying freedom of expression and fostering intolerance toward legitimate opinions which promote the common good.”