

Mark Drakeford AC / AM
Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref MB-MD-1524-15

Julie Morgan AM
Julie.Morgan@wales.gov.uk

30 June 2015

Dear Julie,

Thank you for raising the issue of harassment outside abortion clinics with the Minister for Finance and Government Business during assembly questions on 10 March. You asked for a debate on the British Pregnancy Advisory Services' Back Off campaign and the Minister agreed to look into the scheme in more detail. We discussed the matter further during a short meeting on 24 June.

The Chief Medical Officer for Wales wrote to the chief executive of each health board asking for details of any reports of patients being harassed whilst accessing abortion services. The health board responses confirm there has been no reported harassment or protest outside NHS Wales provided abortion services. We sought further reassurance from Cardiff and Vale University Health Board concerning the British Pregnancy Advisory Service clinic in St Mary's Street in Cardiff and can confirm no reports or complaints have been received by the health board. I have also made enquiries with South Wales Police and their records show there have been two recorded incidents in the past three years relating to the BPAS clinic in Cardiff. Both incidents occurred in March of this year, involved less than six people and despite police attendance no offences were detected or complaints made.

Our enquiries about the 40 Days of Life protest at the BPAS clinic in Cardiff have shown a sustained protest has taken place during Lent in both 2014 and 2015. We take this matter very seriously as women should be able to access clinical care without being subject to harassment. We must be clear women must not be subject to interference and harassment when going about their legitimate and lawful business. It is important women are not discouraged from seeking advice and support during such a difficult time as a potentially unwanted pregnancy. I have copied this letter to the Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner for South Wales, Sophie Howe, to ensure the police are aware of the issue and are using their existing powers to protect women from harassment.

I am however encouraged by the very small number of people who feel compelled to take part in this form of protesting and the proven effectiveness of the counter-protest group Cardiff Abortion Rights. The number of people involved in the protest this year seems to be fewer than in 2014. I also take heart in the small opportunity afforded to anti-abortion groups to interfere with women seeking medical support, as to our knowledge there are only two private abortion clinics in Wales accessible to this form of protest. The latest abortion statistics show 92% are carried out within 13 weeks and this indicates women are able to get early access to abortion services in Wales.

We must also recognise the difficult balance to be struck between protecting people from harassment and protecting people's legitimate right to legal protest. The rights to protection from harassment and the right to protest are already provided for under UK law. We must exercise heavy caution when considering whether or not to restrict people's rights further and acknowledge some of the practical hurdles that would have to be overcome in the introduction of buffer zones outside abortion clinics. Overall, the evidence for acting would have to be substantial and the existing powers would have to be shown to be ineffective.

Thank you for drawing this matter to our attention and I am content to revisit it if substantiated evidence emerges of sustained illegal harassment.

This letter is copied to Sophie Howe, Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner for South Wales.

Best wishes,
Mark.

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