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# Abortion protesters force clinic to close

**David Sanderson**

An abortion clinic has been forced to close because of "intimidating protests" it has been claimed, a first in the escalating battle between pro-choice and anti-abortion campaigners.

For several months campaigners have been demonstrating outside clinics across the country, filming women as they enter for their appointments and holding placards featuring dismembered foetuses.

MPs from all parties have urged for "buffer zones" to be set up around clinics, to allow protesters to be moved away by police.

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) said that "an abortion clinic is to close as a direct result of protest activity — a first in the UK" but denied that the clinic was one of its own.

One of its clinics in south London has become a focal point for the conflict, but BPAS said that, contrary to reports from anti-abortion groups, its practice was still operating despite the "desperate attempts" of its opponents.

Marie Stopes also denied that the clinic about to close was one its own, while other providers did not respond to requests for comment.

Diane Abbott, the Labour MP, put down an early day motion last month calling on the government to establish buffer zones "to ensure women are able to access healthcare free from intimidation" She said that other clinics had

been "unable to open due to local fears about anti-abortion activity"

One of the groups that regularly holds protests, Abort67, said that its members carried cameras to "provide visual evidence" that false claims were being spread about its protesters.

Ruth Rawlins said: "Our volunteers hand out leaflets and have conversations with passers-by. No one is pressed to engage with us and no one is obstructed from entering the abortion clinic. We simply present educational displays outside clinics to show women the results of abortion procedures."

Andrea Williams, chief executive of the Christian Legal Centre, said that Abort67's volunteers were not doing anything illegal.

Buffer zones have been implemented in Canada, France and the United States, although the US Supreme Court has ruled that some of the zones violate the right to free speech.

Abigail Fitzgibbon, head of advocacy and campaigns at BPAS, said: "It is absolutely despicable that any group should resort to the harassment of individuals in order to close down an NHS service they personally disagree with.

"Whatever our beliefs about abortion we should all agree that women do not deserve such treatment at such a difficult time in their lives. If clinics close and women cannot access legal abortion women will look to illegal and potentially unsafe means to end their pregnancies."