I am Roger Crouch, one of the councillors for Twickenham Riverside, the ward in which the BPAS clinic is situated. I urge the committee to agree to the proposed consultation on a PSPO in the Rosslyn Road area. I would like to express my thanks to officers for working with ward councillors, including our predecessors, in producing the report before you and for keeping us informed of developments. I also pay tribute to the Reclaim Rosslyn Road group and their hard work in gathering evidence and producing the evidence pack.

As others have mentioned, the proposed Public Space Protection Order is an issue separate to that of the ethics of abortion, however, for the record I believe individuals are sovereign over their own body and, therefore, logically I defend a woman’s freedom to choose.

Opponents of the PSPO deploy the ‘freedom of speech’ argument. As a liberal it will not surprise you to learn that I believe freedom of speech and expression is a basic human right to be cherished. I do not believe, however, that freedom of speech should go completely unfettered particularly where there is demonstrable harm to others. Freedom of speech outside the Rosslyn Road clinic means harassment and intimidation of women, and the staff at the clinic, who are accessing a service which is legal and understandably needs to be discreetly provided. It is not a debate but targeting of women for making legal and medical choices. It is accosting those who are seeking treatment and advice. The Good Counsel Network may well, as their evidence suggests, have a code of conduct to which their protestors are meant to adhere to, however, they have no way of controlling the manner in which protestors who may not belong to their Network behave.

I acknowledge that many of those participating in the so-called vigils are peaceful and entitled to express their views, however, the proposed PSPO does not impede their freedom of speech. The PSPO simply states that their freedom of speech is restricted in the immediate vicinity of the clinic and on the primarily residential roads used to access the clinic. Opponents of abortion are at liberty to protest, pamphlet and proselytise at any place outside the proposed buffer zone. Many of the town centres in the Borough have a tradition of hosting street stalls often on controversial issues. There would be nothing in this proposal stopping vigils in those locations.

I do think it would be wrong if this Council continued to allow the bullying, intimidation, cajoling, and attempts at conversion of women, normally at a very distressing and vulnerable time in their life, who are attending the clinic – often seeking advice and not necessarily settled on a particular course of action. I also think it wrong to have these demonstrations in close proximity to the GP’s surgery and ETNA Centre, which hosts a nursery for infants.

In conclusion, as a society we cherish freedom of speech, however, we do not tolerate untrammelled freedom of expression outside hospitals, schools, sexual health clinics, places of worship, and places where we vote. I could go on and I could highlight different groups who might want to protest outside these places. These vigils are alien to our culture of tolerance. It is time to back off! I hope, therefore, the committee will allow the consultation to proceed and that residents in Twickenham Riverside will be able to express their own view on the appropriateness of a PSPO.