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## Challenging “thought-crimes” – Charity volunteer arrested for silent prayer

#ProtectFreeSpeech

 Who: Isabel Vaughan-Spruce  Where: Birmingham, UK  Advocacy Team: Jeremiah Iggunnubole, Lois McLatchie

Topic | Freedom of Speech

Meet the charity worker arrested twice and charged on four counts for silent prayer “thought crime” near an abortion facility.

In a viral video in December 2022, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce was seen being searched and arrested by three police officers after saying that she “might be” praying inside her head. The area surrounding the facility nearby which she prayed has been covered by a [local Public Spaces Protection Order \(PSPO\)](#), in force since November 2022, which prohibits prayer, distributing information about pregnancy help services, and other activities considered to constitute “protest”.

Although she was acquitted by Birmingham Magistrates’ Court, Isabel was arrested a second time after returning to pray near the abortion clinic. The police have imposed bail conditions on her, which were later relaxed by West Midlands Police in April 2023. She waits to see if they will charge her anew.

**“Isabel’s experience should be deeply concerning to all those who believe that our hard-fought fundamental rights are worth protecting. It is truly astonishing that the law has granted local authorities such wide and unaccountable discretion, that now even thoughts deemed “wrong” can lead to a humiliating arrest and a criminal charge.”**

- Jeremiah Iggunnubole, Legal Counsel, ADF UK

### Case summary

In November 2022, Police approached Isabel Vaughan-Spruce standing near the BPAS Robert Clinic in Kings Norton, Birmingham. Isabel was not protesting. She wasn’t carrying a sign or engaging with anyone. She was completely silent, until approached by officers who had received complaints that she may be praying silently in her mind.

Isabel, who has supported women in crisis pregnancies for over twenty years, was charged with “protesting and engaging in an act that is intimidating to service users,” despite the fact that the abortion facility was closed during the time in which she was present and praying, and despite her clear statement that she was not there to protest.

While harassment is already illegal, the censorship zone measure introduced by Birmingham authorities criminalises individuals perceived to be “engaging in any act of approval or disapproval or attempted act of approval or disapproval” in relation to abortion, including through “verbal or written means, prayer or counselling...” Isabel’s physical presence in the public space protection order (PSPO) area wasn’t a crime in itself; it was the contents of her private thoughts that were prohibited. If Isabel had stood in the same place thinking about another topic, she would not have been arrested.

Isabel is the Director of the UK March for Life and has volunteered for many years in support of women in crisis pregnancies. She has tirelessly served her community by providing charitable assistance to vulnerable women and children, and yet, she is being treated no better than a violent criminal because of her private thoughts.

The prosecution was, however, not able to present any evidence before the court to substantiate the “thoughtcrime” and so the Birmingham Magistrates’ Court acquitted Isabel of all charges in February 2023.

But, only three weeks later, in March 2023, Isabel was again arrested for silently praying. Six police officers attended that arrest despite her “not guilty” verdict.

Bail conditions were then imposed on Isabel prohibiting her from attending an area within the vicinity of the abortion facility which extends beyond the censorial “buffer zone”. Supported by ADF UK, Isabel was able to challenge the unnecessary and disproportionate bail conditions, which were finally amended by the police.

Isabel’s case exemplifies the dangers of “buffer zones.” In 2022, ADF UK and other civil liberty groups [warned](#) that broadly drafted laws under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act 2022, will inevitably be used by police officers to erode the most basic of

freedoms.

This concern is compounded by Free Speech Union's [recent report](#), which found that approximately 78% of the police forces are providing no or inadequate training on freedom of speech.

Unfortunately, the House of Commons voted to criminalise all forms of "influence" near abortion facilities across England and Wales on 7 March 2023, thereby effectively introducing the first "thought crime" into UK law.



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