

Clive Johnston

- Retired pastor Clive Johnston (aged 77) is a grandfather of seven and is a former President of the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland. He is married to Sheila and lives in Strabane.
- Mr Johnston is being prosecuted under Northern Ireland's abortion 'buffer zone' laws for an open-air sermon in which he preached on John 3:16.

Sunday 7 July 2024

- Clive, with about a dozen others, conducted an open-air Sunday service on the fringes of a buffer zone opposite the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine on 7 July 2024. The service consisted of two hymns which Clive accompanied on a ukulele and a sermon by Clive about God's love, based on John 3:16. The service lasted for ten or so minutes before the police stopped Clive.
- Clive was cautioned on 7 July but not arrested.
- In February 2025, Clive was notified that he was being prosecuted. He received a summons dated 14 February 2025 to appear at Coleraine Magistrates' Court.
- Clive faces two charges under the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) Act (Northern Ireland) 2023, these being (a) conducting a protest to 'influence' a protected person accessing the hospital's abortion services, and (b) not immediately leaving the area when asked to do so by police.
- It is an offence to act within these areas with the intent of, or reckless whether it has the effect of, causing people to be "impeded, recorded, influenced or to be caused harassment, alarm or distress" in connection with their attendance at protected premises.
- Clive is not accused of harassment or impeding access to a clinic. Simply of intending to influence a 'protected person', or being reckless as to whether his actions had that effect.
- It is not alleged that Mr Johnston mentioned abortion. Nor were there any abortion placards or banners.
- The key issue in Clive's case is not the validity of safe access zones in general, but whether it is legal to preach the Gospel within a safe access zone.

Coleraine Magistrates' Court, Friday 21 March 2025

- A brief preliminary hearing took place in Coleraine on Friday 21 March.
- Clive pleaded not guilty to the two charges. His barrister, Aaron Thompson, indicated to the court that the case potentially raises significant new human rights and devolution issues which may require satellite litigation to resolve. Mr Thompson said there is 'a tension between the buffer zone legislation and Mr Johnston's freedom of conscience and religious expression as enshrined in Article 9 of the ECHR'.
- Mr Thompson advised the court that Pastor Johnston had enlisted the services of Northern Ireland's former Attorney General, John Larkin KC, to advise on whether the buffer zones laws really do outlaw such acts of worship and, if so, whether that complies with human rights law.

Coleraine Magistrates' Court, Wednesday 17 December 2025

- Clive is due to appear in court again on Wednesday 17 December, when the case will be heard and he is expected to give evidence.
- Under the 2023 Act, eight 100-150 metre buffer zones were created around hospitals and abortion clinics. Supporters of the zones claim they are necessary to protect patients and staff from protests.
- The judge deferred his decision, pending additional written submissions. Another court hearing has been scheduled for 31 March 2026.