

Local residents group campaigning against protesters outside Rosslyn Clinic (Reclaim Rosslyn Road)

1. WHO WE ARE

Reclaim Rosslyn Road (RRR) was started in July 2014 by a local resident who had become frustrated and upset by the activities of anti-abortion protesters from a group called the “Good Counsel Network” outside BPAS family planning clinic on Rosslyn Road, in Twickenham. The clinic is in a quiet street, next door to a doctors’ surgery. Every day when the clinic is open, protesters patrol the street outside, targeting women of child-bearing age to dissuade them from going in. They hand out leaflets suggesting, among other things, a link between abortion and breast cancer.

At that time, the protesters were also showing a sort of small size replica of a foetus and displaying deceptively enlarged, graphic posters of embryos on the pavement outside. Parents taking young children to the nearby nursery school started taking alternative routes and there were complaints from the doctors’ surgery. Residents had become fed up with the disruption to life in the neighbourhood and shocked by the protesters’ behaviour, which was found hostile and aggressive.

So, leaflets were distributed to near-by houses and apartments, suggesting meeting in a local café. The meeting was well-attended, including by members of Richmond Police and the Borough Council. It was decided that the first step should be to start a petition to the Council as a “Ward Concern”.

Since then, a “core group” of 10 people meet about every 2-3 months and emails frequently to discuss next steps, progress made, etc. We also send a newsletter every 4 to 6 months to update the people who signed our petition online and requested to join us.

A very nice consequence of this campaign is that we got to socialise with people in our neighbourhood. Some of us spend a lot of time on this campaign while others, who are busy with life, work, family, etc., contribute a lot even if they have less time available. Basically, it does not have to be time-consuming or difficult!

2. WHAT WE HAVE DONE SO FAR

The petition gathered 390 signatures in 4 months, with little to no advertising, relying on word of mouth and some door to door leafleting within a short distance of the clinic. We deliberately restricted ourselves to the immediate neighbourhood to ensure the petition had credibility with the Council. The petition was clear that we were not taking sides in the abortion debate and that we understood people have a right to protest. We asked the Council to ensure that the protest did not affect the lives of local people and specifically, that the protestors stand on the opposite side of the road to the clinic entrance and no longer display their lurid images and models.

The petition was presented to the council in November 2014, supported one of our Councillors. A leading member of the Council Cabinet responded with a commitment to “do whatever is lawful to stop these protesters”. Unfortunately the Council did not think it was in its power to create an exclusion zone around the clinic, so little has changed.

Later that year, a [video of a woman arguing with anti-abortion protesters](#) (outside another clinic in Southwark) went viral, and a petition to the Home Secretary, Theresa May, was launched on [change.org](#), seeking the establishment of exclusion zones around abortion clinic and gathering over

120,000 signatures. We decided to meet our local MP, who was Vince Cable (LibDem) at the time. He appeared sympathetic and wrote to the Home Secretary while encouraging MPs in similarly affected constituencies to consider supporting an [Early Day Motion](#) on the issue.

3. ADVICE

Go online. If you launch a petition, it will be easier to get people's contact details (which can otherwise be hard to decipher on a piece of paper) if you do it online. This will in turn enable you to contact your supporters quickly and easily if you need to mobilise them (asking them to write to their MP, etc.). We used a free service for community groups called e-voice (<http://e-voice.org.uk>), which enables you to set up a website, including a petition tool.

Be easy to find. You will be surprised at the number of people who will want to join you/help you, etc... once they know you exist! Make sure that people unhappy with protesters know where to find you. So, communicate with other residents groups, new mums groups, nearby public services (GP surgeries, etc.), ask to put signs and leaflets, start a Facebook group, start a [Streetlife](#) group... We are currently exploring how to bolster this so would be happy to get your input!

Remain scrupulously within the law. Anti-abortion groups are well-funded and supported by competent lawyers. We know of a local resident, here in Twickenham, who was prosecuted after taking anti-abortion posters off the pavement and putting them in the bin. Besides, our strength resides in the fact that we represent the silent majority of people who disagree with the protesters' extreme behaviour. If we are perceived to behave like extremists (which, then again, we are not), we risk losing the support of the general public.

Don't stay in your corner. There are lots of people involved in this initiative to implement buffer zones around family planning clinics: local residents, clinics, councillors, police, MPs, feminist groups, medical groups. We need to keep each other informed of our strategies, our victories (big and small) and challenges. This will enable us to work more efficiently and to avoid wasting our energy doing something that someone else is already doing, etc.

Embrace freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is protected by British law and anti-abortion protesters have a right to their belief and to expressing it – in fact some of the supporters to our group, RRR, are opposed to abortion –but they disagree with the extreme and harassing nature of the protests outside the clinic. We do not want to curtail freedom of speech, all we ask is to go about our life without being disturbed.

Reframe the debate. This issue is not about abortion, but about public disturbance. Abortion is an emotional, complicated issue. If we start arguing over the right to abortion, we risk getting our goal and our message muddled. So we try and focus on the fact that this is a campaign to move anti-abortion protests away from family planning clinics, not a debate on abortion. A part of RRR members support the right to abortion and this is a prime motivation to their contribution to this campaign, but this is not a prerequisite and indeed a number of our supporters actually oppose abortion. Then again, the issue is not abortion, it is public disturbance.

4. CONTACT DETAILS

Our website: <http://e-voice.org.uk/reclaimrosslynroad>

Our email address: reclaimrosslyn@gmail.com or you can contact us using the [contact us form](#)