



## Christian woman arrested for silent prayer receives compensation from police

- **West Midlands Police pay out £13,000 to Christian volunteer “unlawfully” arrested for praying silently near an abortion facility**
- **UK Government reportedly set to strengthen silent prayer crackdown by expressly labelling it as “criminal” in upcoming “buffer zones” guidance**

**BIRMINGHAM (19 August 2024)** – In a victory against UK censorship, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce – the Christian charitable volunteer who was seen being arrested twice for praying silently in viral videos – has received a payout of £13,000 from West Midlands Police in acknowledgement of her unjust treatment, and the breach of her human rights.

With support from ADF UK, Vaughan-Spruce issued a claim against West Midlands Police for two wrongful arrests and false imprisonments; assault and battery in relation to an intrusive search of her person; and for a breach of her human rights both in respect to the arrests, and to the onerous bail conditions imposed on her.

**“There is no place for Orwell’s ‘thought police’ in 21st Century Britain, and thanks to legal support I received from ADF UK, I’m delighted that the settlement that I have received today acknowledges that. Yet despite this victory, I am deeply concerned that this violation could be repeated at the hands of other police forces.”**

- Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, compensated by police after being unlawfully arrested for silent prayer

## Further crackdown on silent prayer anticipated

The news comes days after reports that the Home Office will strengthen the crackdown on silent prayer near abortion facilities by expressly criminalising it in upcoming “buffer zones” legislation, set to come into force imminently.

Ministers are set to review the initial guidance published by the previous government which protected the human right to freedom of thought, reading: *“Silent prayer, being the engagement of the mind and thought in prayer towards God, is protected as an absolute right under the Human Rights Act 1998 and should not, on its own, be considered to be an offence under any circumstances.”*

## A breach of human rights

Vaughan-Spruce was first arrested in November 2022 for silently praying in a censored “buffer zone”. The zone, covering several streets in the Kings Norton area of Birmingham, was installed by local authorities via a Public Spaces Protection Order and banned all expressions of *“approval or disapproval with respect to issues related to abortion services, by any means”* within a large vicinity of an abortion facility.

In what is widely thought to be the first “thoughtcrime” case prosecuted in 21st Century Britain, Vaughan-Spruce was searched by police (including through her hair); arrested, criminally charged and tried – even though she had prayed imperceptibly and not expressed any opinion outside of her own mind.

In February 2023, Vaughan-Spruce, was fully acquitted of all charges at Birmingham Magistrates’ Court after the prosecution were unable to offer evidence to support the charge. ADF UK supported her legal defence.

Yet only a matter of weeks later, Vaughan-Spruce was arrested for the same activity yet again – silently thinking prayerful thoughts on a public street within the censored “buffer zone”. Six police officers attended the scene, with one confirming to her that *“you’ve said you’re engaging in prayer, which is the offence”*.

Vaughan-Spruce’s ordeal has sparked international outcry, including most recently from a U.S. government agency, which **highlighted** the case as an example of European governments *“targeting individuals for their peaceful religious expression.”*

**Commenting on the news of the settlement and payout from West Midlands Police, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce said:**

*“Silent prayer is not a crime. Nobody should be arrested merely for the thoughts they have in their heads – yet this happened to me twice at the hands of the West Midlands Police, who explicitly told me that “prayer is an offence.”*

*“There is no place for Orwell’s ‘thought police’ in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain, and thanks to legal support I received from ADF UK, I’m delighted that the settlement that I have received today acknowledges that. Yet despite this victory, I am deeply concerned that this violation could be repeated at the hands of other police forces.*

*“Our culture is shifting towards a clamp down on viewpoint diversity, with Christian thought and prayer increasingly under threat of censorship. A ‘buffer zone’ policy is set to be rolled out by the government imminently – the language of which is inherently unclear, and will likely lead to further violations against the freedom to pray, or peacefully converse or offer help near abortion facilities.”*

### **Nationwide “buffer zones” to be rolled out imminently**

The Public Order Act, adopted in 2023, is set to be rolled out by the Labour Government, and will ban all forms of “influencing” within 150m of all abortion facilities nationwide.

The ambiguous wording of the ban has worried volunteers that engaging in consensual conversation, praying, or simply offering a leaflet about help services available will lead to a criminal conviction, in further breach of rights to freedom of speech and thought.

Already, two further members of the public have been charged and are set to face trial in relation to locally-imposed “buffer zones”.

Adam Smith-Connor, a military veteran who prayed silently about his own encounter with abortion near a facility in Bournemouth, will face trial at Poole Magistrates’ Court on the basis of his silent thoughts. Livia Tossici-Bolt, a retired scientist, will face trial in the same location for having held a sign reading “here to talk, if you want”. Both individuals are receiving legal support from ADF UK.

**Commenting on the cases, Jeremiah Igunnubole, Legal Counsel for ADF UK, said:**

*“The fact that the government is reportedly set to name “silent prayer” as a criminal offence, brazenly contrary to their commitment to international human rights law, exposes the crisis of free speech and thought in the UK today. Law enforcers are dutybound to vigilantly protect, not prosecute, the peaceful exercise fundamental rights.*

*“Yet across the country, Christians exercising their basic rights to peaceful expression have faced criminal charges for silently praying, or offering consensual conversations to, women in need. We are delighted that West Midlands Police have acknowledged wrongdoing and injustice in the treatment of Isabel Vaughan-Spruce.*

*“We now await the judgment of the court in the case of Adam Smith-Connor – another individual arrested for his silent thoughts. Britain’s future depends on our ability to accommodate different beliefs and viewpoints. Censorship violates human rights.”*

**Deputy Leader of Reform UK Richard Tice said:**

*“The arrests of Ms Vaughan-Spruce for silent prayer are another clear example of two-tier policing in the UK. Nobody should be criminalised for their thoughts. It is right that she has received compensation from the police.*

*“This case is yet another reason why we need a Free Speech Bill that would prevent such ridiculous arrests from taking place in the first place.*

*“It is becoming increasingly difficult to deny that mainstream Christian beliefs are not treated fairly by our elites, while other beliefs are given privileged status.*

*“This is especially worrying in light of the Home Secretary saying Labour will crack down on people ‘pushing harmful and hateful beliefs’.*

*“Yvette Cooper should answer: does she include mainstream Christian beliefs in this category?”*

**Lord Frost, the senior Conservative peer and former cabinet minister, said:**

*“It is incredible that people have been arrested for thoughtcrime in modern Britain. I am very glad Ms Vaughan-Spruce has received compensation for her unjust arrest for this so-called offence.*

*“But if a recent report is correct that the Government is considering formally criminalising silent prayer outside abortion centres, then there will be further such cases, and then not just freedom of speech but freedom of thought will be under threat. It is hard to imagine a more absurd and dangerous situation.*

*“It would be much better to stick to the sensible approach in the previous Home Secretary’s draft guidance, which proposed a much better balance between the various competing rights and interests. If the government scraps it, then it will be clear to all that its commitment to civil liberties and fundamental freedoms is paper-thin.”*

**Lord Farmer, Conservative peer and former treasurer of the Conservative Party, said:**

*“A country like ours, which places such a high value on human rights and freedom of speech should be horrified at its citizens being arrested for their silent thoughts or prayer.*

*“What happened to Isabel Vaughan-Spruce was a travesty of justice and it is right that West Midlands Police make some compensation for the hardship she has endured.*

*“But the wider issue remains that we are living through an undemocratic clampdown on Christian speech, expression and thought in the UK which is set to intensify when the government rolls out “buffer zones” nationwide. If pro-life thought is considered prosecutable today, what other thought crimes might face similar measures tomorrow?”*

<https://adfinternational.org/en-gb/news/silent-prayer-arrest-payout>