

MEDIA FACT SHEET

United Kingdom in Context: Europe Abortion Laws 2026

Across Europe, countries are showing that progress on abortion rights is possible, even as abortion rights face global pressure. The United Kingdom reflects this broader trend, with England and Wales removing women from criminal law in relation to their own abortions in 2026, while Northern Ireland has significantly expanded legal access to abortion since 2019. However, important legal and practical differences remain across the four nations, and outdated criminal-law frameworks continue to shape abortion regulation in parts of the UK.

HIGHLIGHTS

1. The United Kingdom has made important progress on abortion law reform, but criminalisation continues.

Northern Ireland almost fully decriminalised abortion in 2019 and introduced a new legal framework in 2020 allowing abortion on request in early pregnancy and on broad legal grounds thereafter. England and Wales followed in 2026 by removing women from criminal law in relation to their own abortions. However, criminal penalties for women remain in place in Scotland, and providing or assisting with abortion outside of legal pathways continues to be criminalised in most parts of the UK.

2. Abortion on request is legal only in Northern Ireland.

In Northern Ireland, abortion is available on request up to 12 weeks of pregnancy. In England, Scotland and Wales, abortion on request is still not legal, with laws only allowing abortion on broad socio-economic grounds and following approval by two doctors; although these grounds are interpreted broadly in practice. Abortion is available later in pregnancy across the UK in specified circumstances, including where necessary to protect the pregnant person's life or health.

3. Safe access zones now protect people seeking and providing abortion care across all four UK nations.

Safe access zones are now in place across the United Kingdom to protect people seeking and providing abortion care from harassment, intimidation and obstruction. Northern Ireland was the first part of the UK to bring safe access zones into force in 2023, followed by Scotland, and then England and Wales in 2024.

4. Scotland has now a clear opportunity to move forward with abortion law reform.

In 2025, a government-appointed Abortion Law Review Expert Group recommended comprehensive reform of Scotland's abortion law, including decriminalisation and legalisation of abortion on request up to 24 weeks. The recommendations provide a clear path for change, and there is now an urgent need to turn them into action and deliver meaningful reform.

KEY NUMBERS: THE UNITED KINGDOM IN EUROPE

- ✓ **21 countries**, including the United Kingdom, have enacted meaningful reforms to improve access to abortion care in the past decade.

- ✓ **21 countries**, including the United Kingdom, generally provide abortion care free of charge in all circumstances or ensure it is covered under mandatory health insurance schemes.
- **43 out of 49 European countries**, allow abortion on request. The United Kingdom does not, except for Northern Ireland.
- **29 countries** no longer criminalise women who have abortions outside legal pathways. Northern Ireland, England and Wales are now part of this group; Scotland is not.

RECENT EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENTS

Recent developments across Europe show that countries are continuing to repeal restrictive laws, remove barriers to care and strengthen legal protections for abortion rights.

1. **Constitutional protection is emerging as a safeguard against rollback.**

In June 2026, Luxembourg became the second country in the region, after France in 2024, to explicitly enshrine the freedom to access abortion in its Constitution. Constitutional reform efforts are currently underway in Belgium, Sweden and Spain.

2. **Criminalisation of abortion is increasingly being questioned.**

In 2026, England and Wales repealed criminal law provisions criminalising women for accessing abortion care outside of legal pathways, and pardoned those previously convicted. Across Europe, 29 countries no longer criminalise women in relation to their own abortions.

3. **Even long-standing restrictive abortion laws are no longer politically immovable.**

In 2025-2026, the jurisdictions of Jersey and the Faroe Islands both legalised abortion on request. Reforms to legalise or decriminalise abortion are being considered in a few countries, including Andorra, Belgium, Liechtenstein, Poland and Scotland.

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