Submission by the National Working Group on Abuse Linked to Witchcraft and Spirit Possession Accusations:

‘Call for submission of written contributions for the elaboration of a study on the situation of the violations and abuses of human rights rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization’

* 1. What measures have been put in place, including legal and policy ones, to ensure the elimination of harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization?
	2. Have you collected disaggregated data, based on gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion etc. about human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization? How such data is collected? Please share available disaggregated data on the phenomenon.
	3. What have been the key challenges to prevent and address human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization?
	4. Have you identified some promising practices in this regard?

What measures have been put in place, including legal and policy ones, to ensure the elimination of harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization?

In the UK, the National Working Group on Abuse Linked to Witchcraft and Spirit Possession Accusations (NWG on ALWSPA) is a multi-agency strategic forum that was created in the aftermath of the Victoria Climbie inquiry.

The secretariat function for the NWG is provided by HM Government Department for Education. The NWG is chaired by Dr Lisa Oakley, University of Chester.   The NWG brings together stakeholders including Police, Crown Prosecution Service, NHS England, and National Crime Agency in addition to a wide range of academics, lawyers and third sector providers – many of whom are grass roots, community led organisations.

The NWG was formerly known as the NWG on Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief but recently changed its name to better reflect the specific abuse partners respond to.  It also better reflects the fact that adults, (as well as children – who are still disproportionately affected) can be victims too.

The NWG on ALWSPA is the only strategic forum its kind responding to this complex and highly prevalent harmful practice as thus plays a vital role in contributing to the UN resolution.

An updated National Action Plan is to be launched in 2022.   It has 4 key priorities:

* Prevention
* Response
* Education
* Support

Priorities include:

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| **Outcome**  | **Action to achieve outcome** |
| Raise awareness of abuse linked to faith or beliefs | Development of free online resources Development of National Action PlanDevelopment of designated website  |
| Raise awareness of the signs and indicators of abuse linked to faith and belief | Development of free online resources Development of National Action PlanContinued development and delivery of training including signs and indicators |
| Increase referrals for cases of child abuse linked to faith and belief | Continued development and delivery of training including signs and indicatorsContinued development and delivery of training with a focus on supporting referrals Analysis of children in need census dataIncorporation of faith literacy into teacher, social work, police and statutory initial training. |
| Increase the accuracy of recording  | Continued development and delivery of training including signs and indicatorsContinued development and delivery of training with a focus on supporting referrals Analysis of children in need census dataBespoke training delivery for organisations |
| Increase prosecutions for abuse linked to faith or belief | Development of expertise in abuse linked to faith or belief to enhance expert witness testimony for court prosecutions |
| Increase faith literacy in practitioners | Delivery of faith literacy trainingIncorporation of faith literacy into teacher, social work, police and statutory initial training  |
| Enhance government focus on the area of abuse linked to faith or belief | Support from Department for EducationSupport from Members of ParliamentPartnership with All Party Parliamentary Group for safeguarding in faith communities |
| Partnership with faith and community groups | NWG and other organisations to continue to work in partnership with communitiesDevelop community partnership working through commitment to addressing abuse linked to faith or belief and events to support this.  |
| Engagement of faith leaders | Encourage faith forums to address the topic of abuse linked to faith or beliefTraining of faith leadersPartnership working with faith leaders |
| Support for survivors  | Seeking signposting and developing bespoke support for survivors of abuse linked to faith and belief.  |

Have you collected disaggregated data, based on gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion etc. about human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization? How such data is collected? Please share available disaggregated data on the phenomenon.

Systematic collection of data on the phenomenon is sadly lacking. In England, there is national data source relates to ‘child abuse linked to faith and belief’ cases that have been identified in the children in need census.

The Department for Education collects the children in need census from local authorities for each full 12-month period since 2009 to 2010. In 2016/17 the categories of Child Abuse Linked to Faith and Belief and FGM were added to the data that local authorities were required to collect.

The CIN Census provides the latest information on children referred to children’s social care, assessments carried out upon those children and whether a child became the subject of a child protection plan. The relevant information is within the ‘factors identified at the end of assessment by the local authority’.

Data can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need/2021#dataDownloads-1>

In England the number of child abuse linked to faith and belief cases recorded in the CIN census were:

* 1950 in 2021
* 2080 in 2020
* 1950 in 2019
* 1630 in 2018
* 1460 in 2017

\*it should be noted that the figures for most categories in the CIN census data were lower in 2021 due to lockdowns imposed in response to the pandemic. It should also be noted that the term ‘child abuse linked to faith and belief’ is broad and can include multiple forms of abuse and therefore there is a lack of clarity about what the specific nature of these cases

There have been notable court cases which have evidenced the ability to prosecute cases including abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession.

In 2021 there was a conviction of a couple in Ireland for assault causing serious harm and three charges of child cruelty resulting from an exorcism for djinn possession both parents were sentenced to 14 years in prison.

In 2020 a pastor was convicted for 34 years for rape and sexual abuse which included the use of spiritual baths for cleansing evil spirits and his wife was convicted for 11 years for three counts of aiding and abetting rape and helping to arrange abortions.

In 2019 there was the first conviction for FGM in the UK and evidence of co-existing beliefs in witchcraft and spells cast toward professionals involved in the prosecution

In 2017 in Leeds a father and faith practitioner were convicted following the exorcism of a teenager which included hijama, they were sentenced to 42 weeks in prison suspended for two years.

There is ongoing work with the National Crime Agency Forensic Medical Advice Team to expand the range of expert advisors and witnesses to speak to these cases and a two-day training event is planned.

The work of the NWG recognises the very valuable work faith and community groups play in the lives of their communities and the many ways in which they operate to prevent abuse. In seeking to address harm and abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possessions it is an important part of our work to promote partnership working, to ensure the work does not stigmatise any community and to recognise the very positive role faith and belief has in the lives of many individuals and communities. In successful working together it promotes prevention, identification and response to harm and abuse.

What have been the key challenges to prevent and address human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization?

Key challenges include:

* Identifying the scale and nature of this complex form of abuse
* Raising awareness of the myriad of professionals who are best place to identify and respond to it
* Securing political governance at a national level to ensure that this issue is owned by an identified senior lead and Government Department
* Establishing national governance frameworks within statutory services (i.e. criminal justice, health, education, social care)
* Supporting victims of this form of abuse
* Preventing the abuse, with perpetrators having strongly held beliefs that are often shared by those around them

Have you identified some promising practices in this regard?

The Amber Project is a multi-agency partnership that seeks to raise awareness of and enhance the response to child abuse linked to faith and belief at a Local Authority level.  Delivery partners include specialists in abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession from the Metropolitan Police Service, University of Chester, Barnardos National FGM Centre.

A two-hour free training webinar has been developed that clearly explains: (a) what abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession accusations is, (b) the factors and indicators professionals need to look out for and (c) what safeguarding actions need to be taken by those identifying cases.

The intention is that these take place at a local authority level and act as a catalyst that enhances the response to abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession accusations.

There is an explicit focus on those within the education sector, policing, social care and health.  It is also of benefit to those who are from faith communities and communities working with families and children.

The overarching aim is to increase awareness and reporting of this complex form of abuse and improve the multi-agency response when cases are identified. This is a free resource and can be delivered anywhere in the country.  A resource pack is available after the event.

The Amber Project has been delivered to over 3000 professionals, with more than 500 professionals on each session. The next national session will be delivered on 2nd December and an invite can be extended to the recipients of this paper.

The Amber Project raises awareness of the nature of abuse for key professionals, assists identify cases and encourages multi-agency working around a complex and high-risk area. With increased identification of cases, better recording and a higher priority placed on this form of abuse, it allows the NWG to make the strategic case for more effective governance structures to be put in place.

Partners within the NWG have also created web-based resources to highlight to professionals the nature of the abuse.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afiBsJ5Lyfo>

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1491457045236953088>