

**The NSPCC response to *Working Together to Safeguard Children:  
Safeguarding Children from Abuse linked to a belief in Spirit Possession  
and Witchcraft***

**NSPCC  
42 Curtain Road  
London  
EC2A 3NH**

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**Telephone: 020 7825 1352  
Fax: 020 7825 2964**

**Website: [www.nspcc.org.uk/publicaffairs](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/publicaffairs)**

## Introduction

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. The NSPCC aims to end cruelty to children by seeking to influence legislation, policy, practice, attitudes and behaviours for the benefit of children and young people. This is achieved through a combination of service provision, lobbying, campaigning and public education.

The NSPCC believes that, given the will, all cruelty can be prevented. In order to achieve this, it is vital that all children, whatever their needs, have a range of services that are flexible and offer them support and protection. The NSPCC has more than 180 services in the UK and the Channel Islands. These services aim to:

- Prevent children being abused by working with parents and carers in vulnerable families to improve their knowledge and skills in safeguarding, and giving children and young people someone to turn to through the provision of our Listening Services.
- Protect vulnerable children and young people from abuse by providing direct services in a number of settings, including schools and young people's centres. We also protect them by providing Listening Services for adults to ensure they have someone to turn to with their concerns; by ensuring that abused children and young people are identified and effective action is taken to protect them, and by working with young people and adults who pose a risk to children and young people to reduce the risk of abuse.
- Help children and young people who have been abused overcome the effects of abuse and achieve their potential.

In drawing together this consultation we have consulted with NSPCC practitioners who have worked with children who have been abused as a result of a belief in spirit possession and/or witchcraft. This includes abuse linked to beliefs in Celtic witchcraft, spirit possession and witchcraft in Black African communities, and exorcism and deliverance ministry in the Church of England.

We have also drawn on the experience of our training and consultancy staff who have provided advice and consultancy services to a number of different faiths and religious denominations. We have consulted with our Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) Adviser and with staff who are members of LSCBs. We also sought the views and advice of the NSPCC's Child Protection Awareness and Diversity Department which seeks to raise awareness and influence the attitudes, behaviour, practice and policies of a number of audiences, including children and young people, parents, all adults, and professionals. The team includes specialist posts that promote diversity and equality by promoting the needs of children and families from black and minority ethnic groups and disabled children.

## Summary of key points

We welcome the Department for Education and Skills guidance on *Safeguarding Children from Abuse linked to a belief in Spirit Possession*. The guidance is a useful and much-needed supplement to *Working Together to Safeguard Children*<sup>1</sup>. It is a detailed resource bringing together information, indicators and best practice for practitioners who come into contact with children abused or neglected because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft.

Abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft is a clear violation of a child's rights. In particular, it is contrary to Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which states that all appropriate measures shall be taken to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members. The UNCRC must be the starting point of dealing with cases and it would be helpful for the guidance to be framed by Article 2 of the UNCRC to clearly set out that all children must be protected from harm because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft.

The draft guidance states that the number of cases of abuse known to be linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft is small compared to the total number of children known to be abused as whole. However, although the number of identified cases is low, the type of abuse is particularly disturbing and the impact on the child is substantial and can have serious implications for them in later life. It is essential that practitioners should be equipped to identify cases, be familiar with definitions and practices associated with abuse because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft and know what to do if they suspect a child is being abused or neglected because of these beliefs.

However, we do not consider that the guidance alone is sufficient to tackle this issue. To ensure practitioners are able to protect children being abused because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft, it is essential that this draft guidance is accompanied by training and resources to ensure that staff are able to recognise and respond to this type of abuse.

Given the recent failures to prosecute individuals who are arguably inciting abuse by labelling children as witches, we consider that new legislation to tackle the harm caused to children by a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft may also be needed. New legislation could be used to raise awareness and act as an educational tool in communities where this type of abuse is prevalent that it is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. We are currently examining various options for how this could be drafted and would welcome further discussion with the Department for Education and Skills in due course.

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<sup>1</sup> HM Government (2006) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: a guide to interagency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children* HM Government, London

We are particularly concerned that the draft guidance lacks detail about the increased vulnerability of a child with a difference as a trigger for a belief that they are possessed with a spirit or a witch. We suggest that disability, a child with a difference (such as being exceptionally bright) and a weak bond of affection between the carer and the child is clearly stated in the guidance as a key factor and feature in contributing to abuse perpetrated on a child because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft.

## **Response to specific questions**

### **Do you agree with these key considerations?**

We agree with the key considerations set out in the guidance. However, we suggest a number of additions to the text. These include:

#### **ii. *All people working or in contact with children have a responsibility to recognise and know how to act on evidence***

We recommend that after the word 'evidence', the words 'concerns and signs' are added. The word evidence, by itself, denotes a legal tone and suggests that physical evidence must be available before people working, or in contact, with children act if a child's health, development and safety is being harmed or impaired. It is important that anyone working or in contact with children acts immediately on any concerns or on evidence that a child is being harmed.

#### **iii. *Standard child safeguarding procedures apply and must always be followed***

Although this point refers to *Working Together* which provides the framework for statutory guidance, we suggest that a sentence is added clearly stating that any concerns about a child being abused should trigger an inquiry as set out in Section 47 of the Children Act 1989.

#### **iv. *Child abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession often stems from a child being used as a scapegoat***

While we do not dispute that this may be the case, the guidance is very limited in detail about the increased vulnerability of a child with a difference as the trigger for a belief that they are possessed with a spirit or a witch. We suggest that disability, a child with a difference (such as being exceptionally bright) and a weak bond of affection between the carer and the child are added to this consideration.

Research by the Department for Education and Skills, published in 2006 found that disability is a key factor that leads to children becoming vulnerable and at greater risk of abuse due to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft. The report commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills<sup>2</sup> stated that certain characteristics or behaviour including disability, illness or a child

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<sup>2</sup> Stobart, E (2006) *Child Abuse Linked to Accusations of "Possession" and "Witchcraft"* Department for Education and Skills, London

with a 'difference' were common features in abuse cases linked to a belief in spirit possession.

The report also stated that several factors combine to make a child more at risk, including rationalising misfortune and a change of circumstances for the worse. When family troubles begin or are exacerbated – such as serious illness, financial troubles, or unemployment, people may look for anything that is new or 'different' as the cause of the problem.

**vi. *Professionals with safeguarding responsibilities should be able to identify links***

Professionals, local agencies and institutions should, as a matter of good practice, improve their knowledge about families and learn to identify beliefs that may lead to harmful behaviour towards children.

We recommend further information is inserted under this point about organisations such as the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS) which professionals can refer to if they are identifying links between individual cases of child abuse and wider belief, faith or community practices. CCPAS gives advice and support to churches, faith groups, organisations and individuals where there are child protection concerns or allegations of abuse.

We also recommend that individual faith leaders are included in the first sentence of this point. Professionals should be able to identify links between cases of such child abuse and individual faith leaders as well as wider belief, faith or community practices

**vii. *Local agencies and institutions must also work to minimise risk of harm***

This point states that 'whilst it is not generally the role of safeguarding agencies to judge beliefs, there are some practices that local partnerships need to expose, challenge and stop.' We recommend this sentence is reworded to: 'Local agencies and institutions share responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. They should act if they have concerns about a child's welfare and ensure that practices linked to abuse because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft are exposed, challenged and stopped.'

We suggest that a new consideration is included in this section to give an overview of the role of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs). Although a separate and detailed section covers the role of LSCBs at the end of the guidance (currently page 11), LSCBs play a key role in collating information and developing links with communities where abuse linked to spirit possession and witchcraft are prevalent. It is important that the role of LSCBs is clearly highlighted under 'key considerations' and that professionals should refer any cases of abuse they identify linked to spirit possession and witchcraft as a matter of course to the LSCB.

## **Do you agree with the described incidence and forms of abuse?**

### ***Definitions***

Under this heading, deliverance ministry should be added to the range of language and behaviours that are connected to abuse linked with spirit possession and witchcraft.

Religious leaders and congregations can also be perpetrators of abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft and should be added to the sentence which states that genuine beliefs can be held by families, carers and the children themselves that evil forces are at work.

### ***Incidence of abuse***

We recommend that the second paragraph is expanded to cover the harm caused by faith leaders who accuse a child of witchcraft or being possessed with spirits. This abuse can be carried out alongside the child's parents or carers or others in the family network.

It is particularly important that the impact of faith leaders have on the instigation of abuse is fully recognised. Some children are emotionally abused when they are told by faith leaders that they are 'evil' and 'no good' which damages their sense of self, confidence, image and identity. It is known that such feelings can lead to longer term consequences such as self harm, mental health problems and, in extreme cases, suicide later in adulthood.

We also recommend that the sentence which states that there have been cases of individuals who present themselves as faith leaders being paid by parents to "exorcise" children suggests that abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft is perpetrated by a minority of rogue faith leaders.

However, exorcisms can be carried out by a much wider group and across a diverse range of faith groups. For example, the NSPCC has been involved in safeguarding a young girl who was exorcised through deliverance ministry by a prayer group linked to the Church in Wales. The young girl suffers from a congenital heart condition and the fits caused by the condition led to a belief that she was possessed with spirits. She has been left severely traumatised by the deliverance ministry, her education has suffered and her family has had to relocate following a police and social services investigation into the exorcism.

### ***Forms of abuse***

- ***Physical abuse:*** Under this section, rubbing chilli peppers or other substances in the child's mouth should be included as a form of abuse alongside chilli peppers and other substances being rubbed on the child's genitals and eyes.

Physical abuse should include shaking a child or young person as set out in

1.30 of *Working Together*. “Shaking the devil out of you” is a familiar phrase in cases of abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft and should be classified as physical abuse.

- **Emotional abuse:** Telling a child that they are evil or possessed constitutes emotional abuse and should be included under this section.
- **Sexual abuse:** This section should be expanded to set out why children who are abused because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. This may be because they feel powerless and/or worthless and will not be believed if they tell someone about the sexual abuse because they have either been told or they believe that they are considered to be evil.

**Do you agree with the explanation we have given for such abuse? Are there other reasons you would want to include?**

### ***Change of circumstances***

The trauma caused by civil war and humanitarian crises can lead to displacement and movement of a child which can lead to parents sending their child overseas to relatives in their extended family where there are weak kinship ties. The weak bonds of affection can in turn lead to a child being more vulnerable to abuse. We recommend detail setting this out is included under this heading.

A significant number of cases included in Stobart research showed that a number of children who had been abused because of beliefs in witchcraft and spirit possession originated from countries more likely to engage in these practices such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Tanzania, Burundi and Angola where there has been either recent turbulent political upheaval or civil war. These often bring about changed circumstances for individuals and can be at the root of accusing a child of being possessed with evil spirits or being a witch.

We suggest that another heading entitled **Threshold and Capacity of Parents** is included in this section. The factors which could place children to risk of harm due to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft include: poverty, education of the parents, poor parenting and behaviours that are culturally and inherently passed on and legitimised.

**Financial stress and alcohol abuse** should also be included as reasons why children are abused or neglected because of a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft. The presentation of these problems to Pastors can provide an opportunity for questions to be asked about family background. This can in turn opens an opportunity for the Pastor to single out a vulnerable child within the family claiming that they are the source of the problem.

**Do you agree with the key warning signs? Are there other signs that professionals working with children should be aware?**

Parents, carers or faith leaders referring to or describing a child as a witch or possessed with spirits should be included as a key indicator of abuse.

A deterioration in a child's performance at school should be included as a possible indicator of abuse. This should be inserted in the fifth bullet point alongside a child's attendance at school becoming irregular or being taken out of school all together without another school place having been organised.

**Have we highlighted the most relevant considerations for a practitioner?  
Are there other considerations we should mention?**

Under part (a) *How do I understand the particular risk to the child?* a new sentence should be included to cover the importance of understanding the child's viewpoint and the environment they live in. This is particularly important when building a relationship with the child and gaining their trust.

We suggest the bullet point which starts with *You should seek advice* is reworded to state: 'You should seek advice if you are dealing with a culture, religion or set of beliefs that you do not understand or which is unfamiliar to you.' We also suggest that professionals should ensure that they are using the correct terminology and language when talking about the religion, culture or set of beliefs to ensure they are able to collect accurate and comprehensive information about any case of abuse which may be linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft. This is also important to ensure that the professional is culturally competent and that trust is built between the professional and child or young person and more widely with the community within which the abuse may have taken place. We have developed a resource for NSPCC practitioners detailing the key features of mainstream religion and faith in the UK signposts practitioners to further information if it is required. We would be happy to share this resource with the Department for Education and Skills and for it to be used as appendices to the guidance.

This further underlines the need for effective training of staff so that they are able to protect children in these very challenging cultural contexts.

Under the bullet point which questions the family structure and the relationship between the child and carer, we suggest that professionals working with the family should clarify the relationships of all members of the household. Professionals should also be alert to the fact that there may be no direct familial relationship between the child who is being abused and the customary carer. If this is the case, professionals should ascertain how the child entered the UK and if they entered with their parent, carer, another adult or unaccompanied.

Under part (b) *How do I best promote the welfare of the child?* we suggest a new bullet point is added stating that professionals should not be afraid to ask questions or seek advice about a religion, culture or set of beliefs they are not familiar with or do not understand. It is important that professionals are encouraged to ask questions if they are not fully equipped and knowledgeable

about another faith, culture or religion. The NSPCC has produced a guide for professionals which sets out the key features of the major religions in the UK.

In part (c) *Which services are relevant in these cases of abuse?*, under the fourth point, further detail should be included to make clear that social workers should seek help and advice from faith groups and the family's faith community. The current wording of the sentence states that faith groups may need to seek advice from children's social care. However, children's social care may also need to seek advice from faith groups. Faith groups can help children's social care understand the rudiments of religion and belief that are influential in causing the belief and the harm this can cause in cases of abuse linked to spirit possession and witchcraft.

**Do you consider what has been included in the consultation to be best practice? Are there other practices that you believe we should encourage? Please send us any such examples.**

We recommend that specific safeguarding products should be produced. These should be culturally appropriate for specific groups to enable and help them to keep children safe. The products should include a focus on prevention and education. Support for families should also feature to ensure that in households and the wider communities where abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft is prevalent, appropriate support is provided and interventions take place.

We also suggest that innovative methods of building relations with community and faith groups who share the same value of promoting the welfare of children are developed.

For example, the Friends of the NSPCC is a new development in the North East of England which brings together a number of prominent members from ethnic communities in the Tyne and Wear Region as well as support from other individuals in civic and business life in the area. Another Friends of the NSPCC Group is being formed in the Tees Valley Region to broaden our pilot work in the North East.

The Group identifies issues affecting communities and groups in the North East to enable the NSPCC to support the development of services and support for children from all ethnic communities. One other key aspect of the Group is the potential to strengthen social cohesion and the bonds between different ethnic communities by working together on the shared value of creating a better future for all children. We would be happy to facilitate a meeting between Department for Education and Skills officials and Friends of the NSPCC to share best practice in developing community relations.

Under the heading **Best practice of agencies and institutions** we recommend the third sentence should be reworded to read: 'They should apply basic safeguarding principles, including sharing information across agencies, being child-focused at all times and keeping an open mind when talking to parents, carers *and faith leaders*.' It is important faith leaders are

included as they are key to any investigation where abuse may have occurred due to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft.

We recommend that point **ii. Early identification** is amended and expanded. In particular we suggest the final sentence is reworded to ensure professionals understand the community's knowledge and awareness of immigration status and the role of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate.

It is important that any contact with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate is handled very carefully as it could have serious implications and consequences in encouraging members of communities to report abuse due to a belief in witchcraft and spirit possession. The Immigration and Nationality Directorate may be aware of how the child entered the UK and of any abuse they suffered before they entered the UK and should therefore be involved in any strategy meeting where immigration status is an issue. However, communities where beliefs in spirit possession and witchcraft are prevalent, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, can be suspicious of authority. If they become worried about their immigration application if they are seeking asylum in the UK they might be deterred from contacting statutory agencies if they are concerned a child is being abused because of a belief in witchcraft or spirit possession.

Under **iii. Developing partnerships with communities** under the third bullet point – *discuss appropriate punishment for children*, we suggest that it is made clear that this does not mean or include physical punishment in any form.

Under **iv. Working with places of worship and faith organisations** we suggest new bullet points are included which state that concerns about a place of worship may emerge where there is a belief that faith leaders do not harm or abuse children or where there is promotion of mistrust of authority and statutory agencies.

### **Would this information request enable a robust national analysis of the incidence and forms of child abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession?**

We welcome the proposal contained in the guidance that LSCBs should provide an annual report on the incidence of such abuse to the Department for Education and Skills. This will help more accurately to gauge the number of cases linked to a belief in witchcraft and spirit possession and to further develop policy on this type of abuse in the future.

We recommend two new questions are included in the list of specific questions and information LSCBs should collate. These include:

1. What information do you have about the child protection policies and procedures faith groups and communities have put in places of worship?

We recommend this question is included as it provides an opportunity to gather information about child protection procedures and policies in faith-based environments. It also enables a mapping exercise to identify where further work needs to be undertaken to ensure all faith groups and communities have robust child protection policies and procedures in place.

2. What were the key features and indicators of abuse?

We suggest this question is included to gather information about the type and nature of the abuse perpetrated because of a belief in witchcraft and spirit possession.

3. Have you identified any examples of good practice you have developed on this specific type of abuse which can be shared?

It is important that examples of and information about good practice are gathered and shared as widely as possible given the current lack of knowledge about how to deal with this type of abuse.

**For further information contact Emily Arkell, Policy Adviser –  
Safeguarding tel: 020 7825 1352 or email [earkell@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:earkell@nspcc.org.uk)**