

Project Violet: Responding to Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief - A Police Perspective

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Developing excellence
in response to FGM and
other harmful practices



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Inspector Allen Davis is part of the Continuous Policing Improvement Command within the MPS. He leads Project Azure, which is the MPS strategic response to Female Genital Mutilation and Breast Ironing and also Project Violet, the MPS response to Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (witchcraft and spirit possession).



Allen is also the lead for Operation Limelight, a high profile, multi-agency safeguarding operation deployed at the UK border that focuses on a range of harmful practices as well as human trafficking.

Allen works closely with the National Police Lead for Honour Based Abuse (HBA) and plays a key role in formulating the national police response to FGM, Forced Marriage and HBA. He sits on a number of strategic forums, working closely with HM Government Departments and FGM leads from the National Health Service, UK Border Force, Social Care and the Crown Prosecution Service.

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If you would like to know more about CALFB, head to www.nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/calfb.

For more information on Project Violet, please visit <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/faith-based-abuse/>.

What is Project Violet?

Project Violet is the Metropolitan Police Service response to Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (CALFB). Understanding the scope and scale of these complex safeguarding concerns is a challenge for many professionals. Some basic principles that might help professionals understand the risks posed are that:

- ▶ CALFB is a **harmful cultural practice** that often links to other harmful 'traditional' cultural practices such as FGM or Breast Ironing.
- ▶ CALFB is **not confined to any one faith, community or nationality**.
- ▶ As with many traditional harmful practices **the abuse is often hidden**; may not be recognised, and is often not reported.



Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief

Many communities have belief systems, which incorporate elements of witchcraft, spirits and the invisible world. These beliefs are very real and very common.

It is important to stress that **there is nothing wrong in having these beliefs**.

What is unacceptable is when vulnerable people (particularly children) are subject to harm in the name of these beliefs. Of particular concern is the branding of children as 'witches' which has resulted in children being murdered.

The abusers are often parents and carers of a child. The belief system that abusers hold are very real to them and they are often **looking for a deeper meaning (or explanation) for misfortune in their life**. This can involve blaming a child for causing their bad luck or misfortune. **Children that are perceived to be different can be more vulnerable to this form of abuse**. Examples of difference that leads to the 'branding' include issues pertaining to mental health, epilepsy, being a twin, deafness, sleepwalking or bedwetting. The list is very long.

The abuse that children suffer can be extreme and can result in death. Rituals to neutralise the ‘witch’ or ‘rid the victim of the ‘demon’ are commonly known as deliverance or exorcism and can involve the **beating, burning, cutting, strangulation, starvation or isolation of a child.** The levels of abuse and violence can escalate rapidly.

Belief or faith can be a form of coercion and control for both children and adults. Examples would include Nigerian girls and women. forced in to the sex trade, being controlled through ‘juju’ and the fear of being cursed for breaking bonds made in ceremonies prior to being trafficked.

Having an understanding of the concepts involved is vital. Just as important is sharing information via established referral pathways in order to prompt a multi-agency response to this complex issue.

The coordination role of the National Working Group on CALFB has been important in bringing together central government, statutory agencies, third sector organisations, academics and the education sector.

The partnership response at both a strategic and operational level helps keep people safe.

My advice to professionals

Have an interest in witchcraft and spirit possession. These beliefs are incredibly common and there is evidence to suggest that the beliefs are getting stronger over time rather than weaker for many communities. Ultimately, **knowledge is power.**

It is easy to write off concerns about ‘witchcraft’ and the ‘invisible world’ as being the ‘weird and the wonderful’ and written off by professionals who perceive them as relating to the mental ill health of the person expressing them. Doing so may put a child at risk.

Teachers remain one of our best audiences for recognising the warning signs of CALFB as they are most likely to notice the verbal triggers from children subject to this abuse.

Increasing referrals of those vulnerable to this hidden harmful practice has to be a priority for us all.

Written by Insp Allen Davis