

Safeguarding Children from Abuse linked to a Belief in Spirit Possession

Consultation Response Form

The closing date for this consultation is: 9 March
2007

Your comments must reach us by that date.

department for

education and skills

creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

THIS FORM IS NOT INTERACTIVE. If you wish to respond electronically please use the online or offline response facility available on the Department for Education and Skills e-consultation website (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations>).

The information you provide in your response will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and Environmental Information Regulations, which allow public access to information held by the Department. This does not necessarily mean that your response can be made available to the public as there are exemptions relating to information provided in confidence and information to which the Data Protection Act 1998 applies. You may request confidentiality by ticking the box provided, but you should note that neither this, nor an automatically-generated e-mail confidentiality statement, will necessarily exclude the public right of access.

Please tick if you want us to keep your response confidential.

Name Debbie Ariyo
Organisation (if applicable) AFRUCA
Address: Unit 3D/F Leroy House
436 Essex Road
London N1 3QP

If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation you can contact Shahid Bashir on:

Telephone: 0207 2735759

e-mail: shahid.bashir@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

If you have a query relating to the consultation process you can contact the Consultation Unit on:

Telephone: 0870 0002288

Fax: 01928 794 311

e-mail: consultation.unit@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

Please mark an X in the box that best describes you as a respondent.

<input type="checkbox"/> Local Authority	<input type="checkbox"/> Primary Care Trust	<input type="checkbox"/> NHS Trust
<input type="checkbox"/> Strategic Health Authority	<input type="checkbox"/> School	<input type="checkbox"/> Police
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Children's Charity	<input type="checkbox"/> Faith Group	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Community Group
<input type="checkbox"/> Professional Association/Union	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	

Please Specify:

AFRUCA is a UK Charity Promoting the Welfare of African Children in the UK. Our response to this consultation is based on the wealth of experience we have gained working on this issue in different ways within our community and with practitioners over the past 6 years. In the course of our work, we have come across young people who claimed to have been stigmatised as witches and had exorcism rites performed on them by church leaders. In addition, we have worked with other community organisations in London assisting families where witchcraft accusations have been made and where such families have ended in disarray due to the conflict generated. Lastly, AFRUCA has worked with practitioners across London working on cases involving families where children have been diagnosed as witches, through the provision of advice in working positively with the families and in safeguarding vulnerable children.

Due to our concerns about the seemingly growing number of cases of accusations of witchcraft coming to the fore, and in particular, the involvement of some faith organisations, AFRUCA has taken the following steps to address some of the issues:

- ❖ In July 2005, in partnership with the Mayor's Office, we held a community meeting with key African Leaders to discuss the growing problem of witchcraft abuse and exorcism, and what should be done to safeguard vulnerable children in the community.
- ❖ AFRUCA was a key participant at the Round Table Meeting organised by Children's Minister Beverley Hughes, to discuss the problem of witchcraft and possession in new communities.
- ❖ In June 2006, AFRUCA issued a press release in response to the publication of the DFES Report into witchcraft and demon possession. Our position was that the report failed to link the growing spate of witchcraft abuse with some faith leaders who we believe have a stake

and derive personal gain in diagnosing people, especially children, as witches.

- ❖ From July 2006 - December 2006 AFRUCA held a series of consultative meetings with various faith leaders within the London African community to discuss the need to have a regulation system for faith organisations so unscrupulous faith leaders can be identified and monitored.
- ❖ In February 2007, we launched a community consultation on proposals for a UK law against stigmatising children as witches. This consultation is still ongoing and is attached to this response as Annex One. It is very instructive to see that about 90% of the responses so far received from members of our community indicate they do not condone the belief in witchcraft and the practice of exorcism and therefore agree with our proposals for a “progressive” law to specifically ban both.

1 Do you agree with the key considerations? (section 2.3)

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

While we agree with the key considerations identified in Section Three of the Guidance, we are surprised it did not specifically mention the vulnerability of children with disability. In our view, the children most likely to be accused as possessed by demons or the devil are children with different forms of disability and learning difficulties including but not limited to Autism, Down Syndrome, Epilepsy and others.

2 Do you agree with the described incidence and forms of abuse? (section 2.4)

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments: **Definition**

AFRUCA does not agree with the statement that: "...abuse often occurs when an attempt is made to "exorcise" the child..."

In our viewpoint, once a child is identified as a witch or as possessed, that child becomes vulnerable to abuse since they are seen as "evil". This means abuse is very likely to occur much earlier than when an attempt is made to exorcise or deliver them.

Incidence of Abuse

AFRUCA is of the viewpoint that the attempt in the guidance to understate the number of identified cases in the UK gives the impression that this is a small problem where child protection is concerned. We firmly believe that a lot of the cases that come to the attention of the authorities might not be identified as witchcraft cases because the caseworker has not considered the related indicators of "witchcraft abuse" or was not aware or made aware of

the background and history behind the abuse. This means that a lot of child protection cases might have their origin in witchcraft abuse without the particular caseworker or the local authority being aware.

AFRUCA would like to highlight that the mere mention here of the reported cases of some faith leaders claiming to be able to exorcise and indeed perform exorcism rites or deliverance needs to be further explored and addressed so practitioners can have a full knowledge of exactly what they are dealing with, no matter how daunting it may seem. AFRUCA has been at the forefront of efforts to highlight the role that some unscrupulous faith leaders masquerading as “Men of God” play in exploiting many of our newly arrived, vulnerable and marginalised families in this country, all under the guise of religion. In doing that we have identified five key ways such persons carry out their nefarious activities. These are:

- ❖ **Demand:** Since most people believe in witchcraft and possession as part of their culture, it is quite easy for some faith leaders to exploit these cultural beliefs for their own selfish reasons.
- ❖ **Motive:** AFRUCA as well as other parties within our community believe that most people establishing churches are doing so for material gain and not for spiritual purposes. This means that the more children they are able to exorcise, the more members they can attract to their churches.
- ❖ **Opportunity:** The faith sector is the least regulated in the UK. There is abundant opportunity for people to employ this avenue to abuse, deceive and exploit unsuspecting people or those marginalised members of our community who have no clue what else to do or cannot report because of their immigration status.
- ❖ **Victimisation:** The most vulnerable members of our community are those victimised via witchcraft abuse. Not only that, some faith leaders use their position to bully those who are against them into silence. This has been known to occur in a number of cases. This is also why a lot of such witchcraft cases do not come to the attention of the authorities because church members are afraid of reporting.
- ❖ **Reward:** The more children are exorcised, the more money these people can make, since families are expected to either pay or make a significant “donation” to the church.

Forms of Abuse

Before mention is made of the forms of abuse that can occur in this instance, it is very important to identify the children who are prone to being diagnosed

as witches or as possessed by the devil. From our experience, most cases involved the most marginalised, vulnerable children in our community. These are:

- ❖ Children with disability and learning difficulties, including autism, epilepsy, downs syndrome and so on
- ❖ Children living away from home, in private fostering situations as well as in domestic servitude situations
- ❖ Children living with a step parent, with one of the natural parents absent or dead, or where both parents are dead
- ❖ Children whose parents have been diagnosed as witches
- ❖ Children who are “naughty” or have challenging behaviour

Our experience is that once a child is diagnosed as a witch, or as possessed by the devil, this gives the lee-way for abuse to take place. We have identified the possible forms of abuse as follows:

- ❖ **Psychological and emotional abuse:** in the form of verbal abuse, curses, and the knowledge that one is hated by everyone because one is a witch. The self torture that follows the belief that one is a witch responsible for wicked acts on people can be devastating, leading to low self esteem, depression and so on.
- ❖ **Physical abuse:** to beat the devil out, but also to punish. Includes beating with heavy implements and brooms, stamping on stomachs, kicking, punching, starving in the form of fasting. This can go on for days on end.
- ❖ **Neglect:** Isolation from others. Lack of care and attention, including medical attention. At times children miss education or are not able to concentrate at school because of the abuses highlighted above.
- ❖ **Sexual Abuse:** In some cases, the isolation makes victims prone to additional sexual abuse in the hands of opportunists, since no one cares what happens to them. In other extreme cases, sexual intercourse has been prescribed as a way of exorcising the demon.

3 a) Do you agree with the explanation we have given for such abuse? (section 2.5)

X Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

AFRUCA concurs with all the reasons identified in Section Five of the draft guidance document.

3 b) Are there other reasons you would want to include? (section 2.5)

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

We would like to re-iterate a key point we made above about the role of some faith organisations in scape-goating or facilitating the scape-goating of children and adults. This is due largely to demand from their congregation to perform exorcism on suspected children. In our view, it is also because they have the motive to encourage such beliefs in witchcraft since they tend to benefit. These faith leaders have the opportunity to do this because they are unmonitored and can do what they like unchecked. Lastly there is indeed financial reward to be gained from successfully exorcising children.

With this in mind, we are concerned about the false scape-goating of vulnerable children. While there is widespread belief in witchcraft and possession amongst most African communities in the country, the question of how a witchcraft diagnosis is made and on what this is based needs to be raised. AFRUCA strongly believes it is crucial that this particular issue is addressed at the policy and regulatory levels otherwise a lot of children will continue to suffer unnecessary abuse and harm due to false scape-goating as witches or as being possessed, with caseworkers unable to help because of confusion or a limited knowledge of the issues involved.

4 a) Do you agree with the key warning signs? (section 2.6)

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

AFRUCA supports the key indicators of abuse identified in the guidance document. However, we have further comments highlighted below

4 b) Are there other signs that professionals working with children should be aware of? (section 2.6)

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

We want to once again highlight the point made above about the most vulnerable, marginalised children in our community as being prone to witchcraft abuse. AFRUCA feels that in addition to all the indicators of abuse identified in the guidance, case workers should take extra care to link these to the situation of these vulnerable children. To remind us once again, these are:

- ❖ Children with disability and learning difficulties, including autism, epilepsy, downs syndrome and so on
- ❖ Children living away from home, in private fostering situations as well as in domestic servitude situations
- ❖ Children living with a step parent, with one of the natural parents absent or dead, or where both parents are dead
- ❖ Children whose parents have been diagnosed as witches
- ❖ Children who are "naughty" or have challenging behaviour

5 a) Have we highlighted the most relevant considerations for a practitioner? (section 2.7)

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

The considerations did not address some of the relevant, important issues, in our viewpoint.

Understanding The Particular Risk to the Child

Again, we agree with the key guidance in this section. However, we believe there are a couple of other considerations to bear in mind:

- ❖ The guidance needs to be clearer about how and where practitioners can seek specialist training and advice about culture and beliefs that are not understood. We suggest an appendix to the guidance with names and addresses of reputable community organisations able to perform this role.
- ❖ Practitioners need to be careful about selecting interpreters in such sensitive cases, no matter how urgent the need. This is because the interpreter themselves might have such strong belief in the issue and might be supportive of parents or carers under investigation to the detriment of the child.

How Do I Best Promote the Welfare of the Child?

A lot of our newly arrived families are indeed very isolated and find solace and support in the church where as mentioned above some of the leaders might exploit their vulnerability. AFRUCA suggests that Safeguarding Boards develop a list of reputable and respectable faith leaders in their areas to consult when dealing with such cases involving witchcraft abuse and possession.

Children Being Taken Out of the UK

AFRUCA suggests that all case workers should be extra vigilant and take every precaution to ensure children suffering witchcraft abuse are not taken out of the country. From experience, such victims are sent back to their countries of origin for a couple of reasons:

- ❖ The pastor has asked the parents to send the child home to be prayed for or to undergo extreme exorcism rites, fasting and prayers
- ❖ The pastor has told the parents the child is "incurable" and

should be sent home to be killed or to die

AFRUCA does not believe that whatever arrangements are made for the child in their destination country will safeguard and promote their welfare. On the contrary, we strongly believe the child will be at risk of significant harm or death and should not be allowed under any circumstances to travel, no matter what the carers say.

We want to re-iterate our belief that the local authority must demonstrate a duty of care to all children in its area, no matter their immigration status. In this situation, in particular, the local authority must take full responsibility for ensuring a child, no matter their status, is not removed from the UK to a situation whether their life would be in danger because they have been stigmatised as a witch.

5 b) Are there other considerations we should mention? (section 2.7)

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

no

6 a) Do you consider what has been included in the consultation document to be best practices? (section 2.8)

X Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

Yes, but we do have reservations mentioned below

6 b) Are there other practices that you believe we should encourage? (section 2.8)

X Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

As we have highlighted throughout this paper, more needs to be done to curtail the activities of unscrupulous faith leaders who deliberately abuse children in the name of religion for their own selfish purposes. We want to categorically state here that majority of our churches and mosques are decent places of worship providing their congregation with spiritual support and assistance in settling into their new lives in the UK. However, it is clear that most of them do need to be engaged by way of training and support to develop and implement proper child safeguarding practices and procedures within their organisations.

However, what is clear is that faith organisations with ulterior motives will not engage in anyway or form with statutory agencies. These are the organisations promoting negative practices towards children, including scapegoating as witches and carrying out extreme exorcism rites on victims or asking them to be sent home to be killed or to die. AFRUCA strongly believes that such organisations need to be regulated to prevent them harming any more children. Local authorities will therefore need to develop a system to help them identify and regulate such organisations in the best interests of vulnerable children and their families.

7 Would the information requested enable a robust national analysis of the incidence and forms of child abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession? (section 2.9)

Yes

X No

Not Sure

Comments:

As we mentioned earlier, the definition of abuse, the indicators used are not adequate enough to enable a robust analysis.

8 Is this guidance sufficiently accessible to practitioners?

Yes

No

Not Sure

Comments:

9 Do you have any other comments you would like to make with regards to the consultation?

Comments:

Our viewpoint is that this is a very complex and complicated issue requiring a much more holistic approach in addressing. While we welcome this guidance for practitioners, we regret to say this process is akin to putting the cart before the horse. This is because action needs to be taken at the higher, policy level. Practitioners will have a lot of difficulty in carrying out their work in this area, despite the guidance, because there are gaps in the system which they will not be able to address at the micro level.

The bulk of current UK legislation on child protection is very Eurocentric and does not consider such new forms of abuse experienced by newly arrived children and young people from many non-European countries. For this reason, while this new guidance is being prepared with the best of intentions, it needs to be supported by other frameworks to ensure children at risk of significant harm can be quickly identified and protected and that these forms of abuse can be prevented from occurring in the first instance. We believe that more is required in the form of support including more expert specialist training to understand key cultural issues, a strong understanding of the role of some faith organisations in perpetuating it and most importantly, a strengthening of UK law to protect children at risk of "witchcraft abuse."

10 Please let us have your views on responding to this consultation (E.g. the number and type of questions, was it easy to find, understand and complete? etc)

Comments:

The consultation was okay to respond to.

Thank you for taking the time to let us have your views. We do not intend to acknowledge individual responses unless you place an 'X' in the box below.

Please acknowledge this reply

Here at the Department for Education and Skills we carry out our research on many different topics and consultations. As your views are valuable to us, would it be alright if we were to contact you again from time to time either for research or to send through consultation documents?

Yes

No

All UK national public consultations are required to conform to the following standards:

1. Consult widely throughout the process, allowing a minimum of 12 weeks for written consultation at least once during the development of the policy.
2. Be clear about what your proposals are, who may be affected, what questions are being asked and the timescale for responses.
3. Ensure that your consultation is clear, concise and widely accessible.
4. Give feedback regarding the responses received and how the consultation process influenced the policy.
5. Monitor your department's effectiveness at consultation, including through the use of a designated consultation co-ordinator.
6. Ensure your consultation follows better regulation best practice, including carrying out a Regulatory Impact Assessment if appropriate.

Further information on the Code of Practice can be accessed through the Cabinet Office Website: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation-guidance/content/introduction/index.asp>

Thank you for taking time to respond to this consultation.

Completed questionnaires and other responses should be sent to the address shown below by 9 March 2007

Send by post to:
Consultation Unit

Area 1A
Runcorn
WA7 2GJ

Send by e-mail to: caspguidance.consultation@dfes.gsi.gov.uk