

Briefing: Witchcraft, Spirit Possession and Ritualistic Abuse (WSPRA)

July 2026

Key points

- **WSPRA is the acronym for Witchcraft, Spirit Possession and Ritualistic Abuse.** It is the practice of abusing children because they are believed to be witches, possessed or otherwise linked to the supernatural. This belief is used to justify physical, emotional and sexual abuse towards the child, as well as neglect.
- **WSPRA can affect any community that believes in spirit possession, evil eye, witchcraft or the supernatural, but most people with these beliefs do not go on to abuse children.** Certain children can be at higher risk, such as those with physical differences, those living away from their parents, and children who are perceived as challenging.
- **WSPRA is significantly under-identified and under-recorded.** The true scale of abuse is likely to be much greater than current figures indicate, highlighting the need for improved recording, recognition and evidence gathering.
- **There are significant challenges in identifying and responding to WSPRA in both policy and practice.** Current national guidance has not been updated since 2012, and broader safeguarding frameworks offer little to no guidance for professionals. Professionals face multiple barriers in practice, including lack of knowledge and understanding of WSPRA, inconsistent data collection, limited operational guidance and reluctance from survivors to disclose their abuse.
- **Changes are needed in multiple areas to inform effective safeguarding responses, early identification and prevention of WSPRA.** This includes legislative and policy updates, training and workforce development, improvements to multi-agency working, survivor support and data collection, as well as international collaboration.

What is WSPRA, and how does it affect children?

There is no legal definition of WSPRA. For safeguarding purposes, WSPRA includes abuse associated with beliefs in witchcraft, spirit possession, demons or the devil, the evil eye or jinn, dakini, kindoki, ritual or muti killings, and the use of fear of the supernatural to coerce children or adults into compliance, including for the purposes of trafficking, domestic servitude, or sexual exploitation. These beliefs are not confined to any one faith, nationality, culture, or ethnic community. Cases have been documented across a range of religions and belief systems, in every region of England, and around the world.

Witchcraft accusations are often linked to everyday misfortunes, which are attributed to the child accused of being a witch. Children with disabilities are disproportionately at risk of WSPRA, including those with autism, epilepsy, Down's syndrome and dyslexia, as their behaviours or conditions may be misattributed to spiritual causes. Abuse most commonly takes place within the child's own home or a faith setting, making identification by external agencies significantly harder.

WSPRA takes several forms, often occurring in combination:

Type of harm	How it presents
Physical abuse	Beating, burning, cutting, stabbing, semi-strangulation, tying up a child or applying harmful substances to sensitive areas, e.g. rubbing chilli peppers into a child's eyes.
Emotional abuse	Isolation from family members, threats of abandonment, and persuading a child that they are possessed or evil — an accusation alone is a form of abuse in itself.
Neglect	Withholding necessary medical care, education, nourishment, clothing or warmth.
Sexual abuse	Children singled out as witches or accused of being possessed may be particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse within or outside the family.
Organised ritual abuse	Prolonged, repeated abuse by groups or networks, using ritual elements — sometimes including satanism, esoteric belief systems or fascism — to control, silence and terrorise victims

Case study: Victoria Climbié (2000), London

Eight-year-old Victoria Climbié died in February 2000, after months of being starved, beaten, burnt and tied up by her great-aunt and guardian, who thought the little girl was possessed by evil spirits. It was, said doctors at the time, the most horrific case of child abuse they had seen. She was beaten, starved, cut, bound and made to sleep in a bathtub filled with her own excrement with only a garbage bag for warmth. Her great-aunt Marie-Thérèse Kouao and partner Carl John Manning convinced a pastor that Victoria's injuries were evidence of possession. A post-mortem examination discovered 128 injuries on her malnourished body. The case led to the Children Act 2004 and the creation of the Metropolitan Police's Project Violet.

Perpetration

1. Witchcraft and spirit possession

For accusations of witchcraft and spirit possession, family members, faith leaders, and members of the community are often the accusers.¹ Perpetrators often believe they are doing the right thing for the child or vulnerable adult by 'removing' an evil spirit or preventing witchcraft. As a result, abuse may be justified as an attempt to harm the perceived spirit rather than the person themselves.

There are also increasing concerns about how WSPRA leads to domestic abuse, since accusing women of being witches increases the risk of violence being perpetrated towards them. Crucially, this makes WSPRA a violence against women and girls (VAWG) issue.

2. Ritual abuse

Research by Dr. Elly Hanson identifies organised ritual abuse as typically involving family members, often beginning when children are very young, and frequently being intergenerational in nature.² Perpetrators are predominantly male, but survivors also name female perpetrators including grandmothers and aunts.

¹ Department for Education (2012) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b3dbeed915d429748dc66/Action_Plan_-_Abuse_linked_to_Faith_or_Belief.pdf

² Hydrant Programme and NAPAC <https://www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk/our-work/publications>

Perpetrators often do not believe in the supernatural belief systems themselves, but use them as tools of control, coercion and psychological manipulation.

Perpetrator networks include:

- Abusive family members and extended family networks
- Organised paedophile rings using ritualistic practices to terrorise victims into silence
- Human traffickers using spiritual coercion to control children
- Online gangs exploiting digital platforms to recruit and control victims
- Religious leaders or community figures who exploit their position of spiritual authority

Case studies: Kirsty Bamu (2010) and Ayesha Ali (2013), London

15-year-old Kristy Bamu was beaten and drowned on Christmas Day 2010 by his sister and her boyfriend in the London borough of Newham after being accused of *kindoki*. Kristy endured four days of torture with knives, sticks, metal bars, a hammer and pliers. He drowned after being forced into a bath for ritual cleansing. His siblings were also beaten but survived because they 'confessed' to being witches. Magalie Bamu, then 29, and her partner Eric Bikubi, 28, were both jailed for life in 2012.

Ayesha Ali was killed by her mother and her mother's partner after being subjected to sustained abuse linked to beliefs about spirit possession. Her case contributed to calls for improved multi-agency identification.

Prevalence and data

At a global level, data on human rights violations linked to harmful practices based on accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks remains limited, fragmented, and often underreported due to the secretive nature of these abuses. No organisation systematically monitors and records these violations globally. Nevertheless, more than 20,000 victims have been reported across 60 countries over the past decade, with persons with albinism, older people, women, and children among the groups most affected.³

In the UK, the most recent available data reveals a significant and deeply troubling gap between the true scale of WSPRA and what is being identified, recorded and investigated:

- **2,180 cases** identified in the Children in Need Census 2024 where WSPRA was assessed as a possible factor in a child's needs (17,560 since 2016)
- **1,311 of 36,700** calls to NAPAC's helpline between 2016 and 2025 mentioned organised or ritualistic abuse — 3.57% of all calls
- **7 crimes** categorised as ritualistic in the 2024 COCAD dataset — less than 0.2% of 4,450 group-based child sexual abuse offences
- **0 ritualistic** crimes recorded by police the previous year, despite survivor disclosures
- **38% of 100** UK clinical psychologists surveyed had dealt with one or more cases of satanic or ritualised abuse
- **14 UK** criminal cases since 1982 in which ritualistic practices in sexual abuse were formally acknowledged — widely described as the 'tip of the iceberg'
- **9 Child** Safeguarding Practice Reviews involving WSPRA, with children affected ranging from six weeks to fourteen years old

³ INAWARA <https://www.theinternationalnetwork.org/un-resolution>

Practitioners consistently warn that the low level of police-recorded crime does not reflect low prevalence but instead reflects low recognition. Survivors frequently delay disclosure due to trauma-related memory fragmentation, fear of spiritual retaliation, cultural stigma, and, critically, prior experiences of not being believed.

The lack of robust data on WSPRA means we do not yet have a clear understanding of the scale or nature of this form of harm. Consistent and accurate recording is therefore crucial to building a stronger evidence base. Better data would help professionals to identify patterns of abuse, improve understanding of how WSPRA affects children and families, and ensure that responses are informed by the realities of their experiences. Ultimately, this would support more effective intervention and help ensure that affected children receive the recognition and support they need.

Challenges with policy and practice

1. Current challenges in practice

There are significant practical challenges for professionals and services in identifying cases of WSPRA, responding appropriately and supporting victims. The below table goes through the key barriers.

Recognition and identification	• Professionals across health, education, policing and social care often lack the knowledge and confidence to identify indicators of WSPRA.⁴ • Cultural and institutional disbelief remains a significant barrier, with WSPRA often viewed as implausible or misunderstood, leading practitioners to default to scepticism. • Specialist training on WSPRA is not routine for most professional groups.
Recording and data	• There is no dedicated offence category for WSPRA within crime recording systems, limiting accurate identification and data collection. • A substantial gap exists between survivor disclosures and officially recorded offences, suggesting significant under-recording. • Existing datasets are not always consistently recorded, analysed or utilised at local level.
Multi-agency coordination	• Case reviews consistently identify poor communication and information sharing between agencies as a contributory factor in safeguarding failures. • There is no national lead agency with specific responsibility for WSPRA, resulting in fragmented responses across policing, children's social care, health and the voluntary sector. • Faith communities are not routinely engaged as key partners in prevention, early identification and safeguarding responses.
Survivor support	• Specialist trauma-informed support for WSPRA survivors is extremely limited.

⁴ Oakley, L., Kinmond, K., Humphreys, J. and Dioum, M. (2017) 'Practitioner and communities' awareness of CALFB: Child abuse linked to faith or belief', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 72, pp. 276–282

- Many support services lack expertise in responding to the specific psychological impacts of ritual abuse, spiritual coercion and related harms.
- Survivors from Black, Asian and other minoritised communities face additional barriers, including stigma, distrust of statutory services and fears of community ostracism.
- Children with disabilities appear disproportionately affected yet remain particularly underserved.
- Awareness of WSPRA within domestic abuse services remains low, creating additional barriers to support.

International and diaspora dimensions

- Children may be taken abroad for exorcism, deliverance or similar practices that can result in significant harm, but safeguarding systems are often poorly equipped to identify and prevent these risks.
- International networks of practitioners and organisations working on WSPRA remain insufficiently connected and resourced, limiting opportunities for collaboration, intelligence-sharing and prevention.

2. Current policy and legislative challenges

Although WSPRA-related harms are recognised within some safeguarding frameworks, there is no up-to-date national strategy or dedicated guidance for tackling this form of abuse. Existing legislation, guidance, international frameworks and research provide partial coverage, but often these harms are sidelined, leaving practitioners with limited understanding of the issues and children at risk.

Key resources informing the current landscape include:

- **Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance**
This sets out multi-agency responsibilities but does not specifically address WSPRA, leaving a knowledge gap for practitioners.
- **Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance**
Includes faith-linked abuse as a category but provides limited operational guidance for practitioners.
- **United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution on the Elimination of Harmful Practices Related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks (2021) (A/HRC/RES/47/8)**
Provides an international human rights framework and calls for action to address these harmful practices.
- **National Action Plan to Tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief (2012)**
Remains the principal national policy document in the UK but has not been updated to reflect emerging evidence, changing patterns of harm, or current safeguarding context.
- **INAWARA — the International Network Against Accusations of Witchcraft and Associated Harmful Practices**
Provides global knowledge exchange and policy influence
- **National FGM Centre research and resources on WSPRA**
Provides practice guidance, training and evidence for safeguarding professionals.
- **Dr Elly Hanson's Research Review on Organised Ritual Abuse (2025)**
Offers a recent synthesis of evidence relevant to organised ritual abuse and harmful practices.

What needs to change?

Significant changes are needed to strengthen the current response to WSPRA. Our policy recommendations are as follows:

1. Strengthen and update existing legislation and policy on WSPRA

Strengthen the legislative and policy framework for WSPRA by reviewing existing legal powers (including civil protection orders), recognising WSPRA as an aggravating factor in criminal proceedings, updating the National Action Plan on 'Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief', strengthening Working Together to Safeguard Children, improving data collection through a dedicated data marker in the NRM, and embedding survivor voice in policy development.

2. Establish training and workforce development to improve responses to WSPRA

Establish a national WSPRA training and professional development framework for safeguarding professionals, incorporating mandatory training, continuing professional development, survivor-informed content, and trauma-informed, anti-racist and culturally informed approaches to practice.

3. Improve multi-agency coordination

Improve national and local coordination through dedicated leadership arrangements, strengthened Safeguarding Partnership responsibilities, systematic learning from local data and reviews, and meaningful engagement with faith communities as partners in prevention, identification and safeguarding responses.

4. Ensure survivors have access to high-quality, culturally- and trauma-informed support services

Commission and invest in specialist, trauma-informed survivor support services, including culturally specific 'by and for' provision, to improve access to support for victims and survivors, particularly those from minoritised communities, children with disabilities, and children and young people in fostering/private fostering/kinship arrangements.

5. Improve data collection and research

Strengthen the evidence base through improved identification, recording and analysis of WSPRA, including a dedicated police crime recording code, improved NRM data collection through a data marker, and investment in long-term prevalence, outcomes and safeguarding research.

6. Improve international collaboration and knowledge sharing

Strengthen international cooperation and cross-border safeguarding responses through engagement with networks such as INAWARA, improved intelligence and practice sharing, and targeted training for Border Force and statutory agencies to identify and respond to risks associated with overseas harmful practices.

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear, Changing Childhoods and Changing Lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year we supported about 350,000 children, young people, parents, and carers through more than 650 services and partnerships across the UK, while also working to drive longer term change for future generations. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they belong.

The **National FGM Centre** is hosted by Barnardo's to achieve a system change in the provision of services for children and families affected by Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Breast Flattening, Abuse Linked to Spirit Possession, Witchcraft and Ritualistic Abuse as well as other harmful practices. A leading authority in Harmful Practices prevention nationally/internationally, the National FGM Centre's vision is to keep children and young people safe from Harmful Practices in line with UN SDG 5 of ending new cases by 2030. The Centre works closely with key partners from Local Authorities, Health, Education, Police, and the voluntary sector to achieve its vision and aims. For more information on WSPRA, please email public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk.