

Working with Victims, Survivors and those at Risk of Forced Marriage



This Good Practice Point aligns to the NMC 2022 Standards of Proficiency for SCPHN Health Visitors – in particular: Sphere of Influence C and E. See the [Nursing and Midwifery Council website](https://www.nmc.org.uk) for more details.

This Good Practice Point supports health visitors and skill mix teams working with parents and children who may be at risk of or have experienced a forced marriage. Forced marriage in the UK is a form of domestic abuse, a criminal offence and serious abuse of human rights – as such, it is a public health concern.

The age of consent for marriage in the UK is:

- **England and Wales** - the minimum age for marriage is 18-years-old, this changed in February 2023.
- **Scotland** - the minimum age for marriage is 16-years-old, parental consent is not required.
- **Northern Ireland** - the minimum age for marriage is 16-years-old with parental consent and 18-years-old without.

Forced marriage

A forced marriage is where one or both people do not or cannot consent to a marriage and pressure or abuse is used to coerce them to do so. This is a form of domestic abuse and mainly affects women and girls, however it can be experienced by boys, men and other genders¹. Forced marriage involves asserting control and power mainly over girls and women². People who identify as male, non-binary, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender are also at risk of forced marriage, however, fewer cases have been reported to the Forced Marriage Unit³.

The terms forced marriage and child marriage are often linked, but not in all cases. Child marriage is where any formal marriage or informal union involves one or both people under the legal age of consent for marriage⁴. In England and Wales marriage under the age of 18 is considered a forced marriage and was one of the main reasons that the marriage age of consent was changed to 18 years of age in these countries⁵.

The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, made forced marriage a criminal offence in England, Wales, and Scotland. In Northern Ireland, forced marriage is a criminal offence under separate legislation.

Forced marriage can be linked to honour-based abuse and it is important that the connection between the two is understood. Honour-based abuse is also a form of domestic abuse affecting anyone of any age. It can often begin early in the family home and can extend to include the community. There is currently no statutory definition of honour-based abuse, however, the Crown Protection Service uses the following definition which also includes reference to violence:

“an incident or crime involving violence, threats of violence, intimidation coercion or abuse (including psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse) which has or may have been committed to protect or defend the honour of an individual, family and/or community for alleged or perceived breaches of the family and/or community’s code of behaviour”⁶.

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For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

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Why forced marriage matters?

The pressure put on people to marry against their will may be:

- physical: for example, threats, physical violence or sexual violence
- emotional and psychological: for example, making someone feel like they are bringing 'shame' on their family
- financial abuse: for example, taking someone's wages.

Forced marriage and honour-based abuse can result in, or present as, health-related issues including mental and physical problems such as depression and self-harm in adults, and physical and psychological development issues in children^{1,7}.

Alongside being a serious breach of human rights, forced marriages are sometimes associated with fraudulent marriages or sham marriages to gain an immigration advantage. The UK Government established the Forced Marriage Unit in 2005 to protect anyone facing forced marriage in the UK, and this includes taking British nationals overseas to force them to marry.

Victims and survivors of forced marriage can be from many different backgrounds. In 2023, most referrals to the Forced Marriage Unit were reported to be in the UK at the time of making the referral. Since 2005, the Forced Marriage Unit has dealt with cases of forced marriage from over 90 other countries around the world.

Forced marriage is often referred to as a 'hidden crime'. People may not report their abuse for several reasons such as:

- lack of awareness of being subjected to a forced marriage, as individuals may have been brought up to believe it is a cultural expectation
- fear of repercussions
- lack of awareness of support or safeguarding services available to protect them⁸.

No major faith in the UK advocates forced marriage. Freely-given consent is a prerequisite of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Islamic and Sikh marriages; and these religions condemn forced marriage.

In 2023, there were 283 cases of forced marriage in the UK. Female victims and survivors accounted for 69% of

those affected and 70 cases involved children aged under 18 years⁹. These figures are based on the number of cases reported to the Forced Marriage Unit and will not represent the actual numbers of forced marriages that occur annually in the UK^{10,11}. In recent years, there has been a decline in the number of forced marriage cases reported to the Forced Marriage Unit, and during the COVID-19 pandemic numbers dropped further. Some evidence suggests that this may be due to a mistrust towards government agencies¹², which may have heightened during the pandemic.

Forced marriage and so-called honour-based abuse

Amongst communities that promote forced marriage, not wanting to marry someone who has been chosen by the family can sometimes be misguidedly perceived as dishonourable. Victims and survivors of forced marriage are often made to feel they are shaming their family or community if they go against this. Honour-based abuse can be present with or without the threat of a forced marriage. This may include coercive and controlling behaviour, also physical violence, and in the most severe cases victims have been murdered by members of their own family.

Honour-based abuse occurs in forced marriage and represents a public health concern. It is often misrepresented as a cultural, traditional, or religious 'norm'. There is no honour in abuse and the principles of safeguarding are paramount and transcend such practice, deeming honour-based abuse a form of domestic violence.

Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPO)

A Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO) protects individuals who are being threatened with a forced marriage, or an individual who is in a forced marriage. It is a criminal offence to violate a FMPO and perpetrators can face imprisonment. Anyone can apply for a FMPO, including children under the age of 18 years of age who can also make their own application – they will need court agreement and legal representation¹³.

Forced marriage does not yet require mandatory reporting; however, it is a criminal offence and, where a minor is involved, it becomes child abuse. Local safeguarding policies and procedures must be followed to protect children and vulnerable adults.

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Good Practice Points for health visitors

- **Reach families:** Health visitors and health visiting skill mix team members play an important role in the early identification and prevention of forced marriage – they may be the only external professionals to see parents and their children outside of the immediate family and community.
- **Make every contact count – one chance:** There may only be one chance to recognise the signs of forced marriage, with limited chances to speak to a potential victim, and maybe only one chance to save a life.
- **Demonstrate professional curiosity:** This is where a practitioner explores and proactively tries to understand what is happening within a family or for an individual, rather than making assumptions or taking a single source of information and accepting it at face value.
- **Act:** Act on your suspicions and make the most of the ‘one chance’ opportunity¹.

Safeguarding and supervision

- Follow local safeguarding policies and procedures to safeguard children and vulnerable adults who may be at risk of forced marriage or experiencing forced marriage. Seek advice and support from managers and local safeguarding teams.
- Debrief through peer supervision, reflect and learn from colleagues who have had similar experiences.
- Access and increase safeguarding and restorative supervision when supporting a victim of forced marriage.
- Ensure own safety by following local lone worker policies.

Communication

- Maintain a low threshold when asking about forced marriage and honour-based abuse. See the client alone, take a sensitive approach and ask questions such as, “*How are things at home?*”, “*Are you worried about anything?*”, “*Are you frightened of anyone?*”. Respectful uncertainty and professional curiosity are key to safeguarding – seek to explore what is really happening, avoid making assumptions, look out for any signs that things may not be right.
- Use professional interpreting services and **NOT** family or friends to translate. Ensure that the person is comfortable and feels culturally safe in the presence of a professional interpreter.
- Actively listen to the client and ensure their safety.
- There may be multiple perpetrators, do **NOT** under any circumstance attempt to mediate with family or community members.
- Offer practical and emotional victim support. Connect individuals (including children and young people) to appropriate agencies, for example, specialist charities, other health services and/or the police.
- Communicate with relevant multi-agency professionals/ or engage in a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) in line with local safeguarding policy and procedures.
- Ensure good record keeping in line with the NMC Code, and local policies and procedures. Confidentiality is important to people in a forced marriage, or at risk of forced marriage. Practise in a culturally safe¹⁴ manner by respecting people’s choices and be clear about confidentiality. Reiterate that information will only be shared on a need-to-know basis or when there is a safeguarding concern.
- If safe to do so, seek consent before sharing information.
- Collaborate with external agencies such as third sector victim support charities or escalate to emergency services if you deem there is a risk of significant harm or to prevent a crime being committed.

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Continued professional development

- Access safeguarding training, and opportunities for continued professional development to enhance knowledge, awareness, and recognition of those at risks of forced marriage or those experiencing forced marriage.
- Maintain up-to-date knowledge on local policies and safeguarding procedures to follow if concerned that a child or vulnerable adult is at risk of or is facing forced marriage.

Further Information

Forced Marriage Unit

fm@fcdo.gov.uk

Telephone: 020 7008 0151

From overseas: +44 (0)20 7008 0151

Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Out of hours: 020 7008 5000

Further Resources

Violence, Abuse and Mental Health Network (VAMHN) www.vamhn.co.uk/

A network that brings together experts in violence, abuse and mental health and survivors with an aim to

understand, prevent and reduce the impact of violence and abuse on mental health. Conducts research and offers free access to evidence-based resources, webinars, and podcasts.

Karma Nirvana, a UK charity supports people experiencing honour-based abuse including forced marriage.

E-learning training for professionals - The Forced Marriage Unit E-learning training and workshops enable professionals to recognise the warning signs of forced marriage and ensure that the appropriate action is taken to help protect and support all those at risk. For details see: bit.ly/4dG4NQk

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