

‘So called’ Conversion Practices Position Statement

Purpose of the document

This position statement:

- Sets out Sheffield Adult Safeguarding Partnership’s view on Conversion Practice
- Makes recommendations on how this work can be implemented

Issues

There is no representative data on the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender queer or questioning, intersex, asexual or plus which is used to signify all of the gender identities or sexual orientations that letters and words cannot yet fully describe (LGBTQIA+) people who have undergone conversion practices in the UK. However, some evidence appears to suggest that transgender people may be more likely to be offered or receive conversion practices than those whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, queer, or intersex people.

There is consistent evidence that exposure to conversion practices can be associated with having certain conservative religious beliefs. However, the Diocese of Sheffield’s position follows the Church of England’s declaration that such practices are “unethical, potentially harmful and not supported by evidence” and therefore should not be carried out in the name of the Church.

This position is echoed by the British Psychological Society and other professional bodies, including NHS England and the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Research shows that conversion practices are strongly linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including depression, increased substance abuse, attempts to die by suicide, and other serious concerns. Qualitative studies have found that people who have undergone conversion practices attribute such feelings to the conversion practices they were subjected to (Jowett, A et al, 2021).

Common reasons given for people being subjected to conversion practices are:

- a perceived incompatibility between someone’s religious values and their sexual orientation or gender identity
- a desire to belong and feel ‘normal’ within a community
- external pressure or coercion by someone’s family members or people from their faith community using unequal power dynamics

Some people report that while they underwent conversion practices voluntarily, they feel these ‘choices’ were shaped by powerful influences in their social environment and under guidance from authority figures. (HM, Gov 2021)

Definition of Conversion Practices

The Expert Advisory Group on Ending Conversion Practices in Scotland recommends that the Scottish Government adopt the following definition of conversion practices (Expert Advisory Group on Ending Conversion Practices Report and Recommendations, October 2022). Currently there is no such recommendation of definitions in England. SASP support the definition described, however will commit to updating the definition should this position change:

- 'Conversion practices': refers to any treatment, practice or effort that aims to change, suppress and/or eliminate a person's sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. Conversion practice is abusive and unethical; therefore, any person being subjected to this cannot consent to that practice being carried out on them.
- 'Gender expression' and 'expression of sexual orientation' refers to each person's manifestations of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation, and/or the one that is perceived by others.
- 'Gender identity': refers to each person's internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with their sex assigned at birth, including their personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance and/or functions by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including name, dress, speech and mannerisms. Excluding FGM, or other related illegal activities.
- 'Sexual orientation': refers to a person's emotional, affectional and sexual attraction to persons of a different gender, the same gender or more than one gender and includes the lack of such attraction or relations
- Intersex people are individuals born with any of several sex characteristics, including chromosome patterns, hormonal patterns gonads, or genitals, or an internal reproductive system that, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "do not fit typical binary notions of 'male or female'".
- Asexual refers to someone who does not experience sexual attraction toward individuals of any gender. Asexuality is a sexual orientation, and is different from celibacy, in that celibacy is the choice to refrain from engaging in sexual behaviours and does not comment on one's sexual attractions. An asexual individual may choose to engage in sexual behaviours for various reasons even while not experiencing sexual attraction. Asexuality is an identity and sexual orientation; it is not a medical condition.
- Queer is a term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of LGBTQIA+ identities.

Further explanation of the terms used in our definition is provided below.

- 'To change': When the Group suggests the term 'change' it refers to practices which seek to alter or modify a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, expression of sexual orientation and/or gender expression.
- 'To suppress': When the Group suggests the term 'suppress' it refers to practices which seek to put an end to, restrain and/or prevent the development or the manifestation of another person's sexual orientation, gender identity, expression of sexual orientation and/or gender expression.
- 'To inhibit': When the Group suggests the term 'inhibit' it refers to practices which seek to hinder, restrain, prevent or prohibit, a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, expression of sexual orientation and/or gender expression

Evidence

Evidence suggests that modern forms of conversion practices are commonly based on a belief that same-sex sexual orientations and transgender identities and other identities cited above are mental or developmental disorders, addictions, or spiritual problems.

The most common methods we identified involved a combination of: -

- spiritual methods – for example, prayer for ‘healing’/’deliverance’ or exorcisms, and some forms of pastoral counselling
- psychological methods – for example, talking therapies

The boundaries between religious and psychological approaches are often unclear with many combining the two in a way that could be described as pseudo-scientific theory, methodology, or practice that is considered to be without scientific foundation.

Conversion practice appears to be most commonly carried out in religious settings by religious individuals or organisations, but it may also be done by mental health professionals or family members. In some cases, secular mental health professionals may treat those whose gender identity does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth (for example, non-binary) or minority sexual orientations (for example, asexual) as symptoms of existing mental health conditions. It is unclear how often this is a deliberate attempt at conversion practices.

There is less evidence relating to gender identity change efforts but what evidence there is suggests that conversion practice with transgender people can take a very similar form to that aimed at changing sexual orientation. (HM Gov, 2021)

SASP are aware that people who are subjected to conversion practices can experience coercion which can lead to a perception of consent to conversion practices. In a similar vein to coercive control within domestic abuse situations, a victim may be coerced into agreeing to be subjected to such practices. Professionals responding to concerns about conversion practices should consider this in any action taken (Expert Advisory Group on Ending Conversion Practices Report and Recommendations, October 2022).

Sheffield Safeguarding Adults Partnership position

We the undersigned members of Sheffield Adult Safeguarding Partnership (SASP) value diversity. We are committed to promoting the human rights, well-being and dignity of all members of our society and support their freedom of thought, conscience and religion. We take a gender affirming stance regarding diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity, one that focuses on affirming an individual’s views about themselves.

SASP believes that the sexual orientation and gender identity of LGBTQIA+ people are legitimate and valid. We condemn any approach including coercion that attempts to change an individual’s gender or sexuality, including conversion or reparation practices, on the grounds they are harmful, unethical, and violate the dignity and human rights of the recipient whether or not the person consents to this ‘practice’. SASP supports the rights and autonomy of all people, regardless of sexual identity, and takes a gender affirming perspective. SASP expect our members to do the same.

Appendix 1:

Proposal of recommendations for action to be approved by the City-Wide Best Practice Group and the SASP Executive Board

Recommendation	Action	Measure of Achievement
<p>Awareness raising for staff which should include training to identify and spot the signs of so-called 'Conversion Practices' and talk with confidence to those who are experiencing this or challenge the view of those in support.</p>	<p>Develop a simple Powerpoint which can be downloaded and used by local organisations to train staff on spotting the signs of "Conversion Practices" and what steps to take if they do.</p> <p>Record a conversion practice training session and make this available on the SASP website.</p>	<p>Ask the SASP Performance and Quality sub group if we can measure the numbers of people downloading the information.</p> <p>Measure the level of interest from organisations by asking them to complete a proforma and send it to safeguardingadults@sheffield.gov.uk. If they have used conversion practice training resources from the website.</p>
<p>Awareness raising for the public to:</p> <p>Support people to identify the signs of so-called 'Conversion Practice' and talk with confidence to those who are experiencing this or speak out to challenge the view of those in support.</p>	<p>Signage posters and pamphlets to be developed, to be available for download and use by local organisations.</p> <p>A simple definition to be developed for use in settings where the full definition is too complex to be easily understood. Target at people who have never heard of conversion practice before.</p>	<p>Ask the SASP Performance and Quality sub group if we can measure the numbers of people downloading the information.</p> <p>Measure the level of interest from organisations by asking them to complete a proforma and send it to safeguardingadults@sheffield.gov.uk. If they have downloaded and used conversion practice resources from the website.</p>
<p>Raising awareness of those who carry out conversation practices who work in Positions of Trust</p>	<p>Provide a statement for organisations to use which will include:</p> <p>A definition of who is a PiPoT (person in a position of trust) and how they may abuse this trust if they carry out conversion practice within their employment or in their personal life.</p>	<p>Measure referrals to PiPoT where people involved in conversion practice are held to account.</p>
<p>Developing pathways to allow people and professionals to raise and respond to concerns about 'so called conversion' practices</p>	<p>Develop a mapping document, with steps to take: I.e. Does it meet safeguarding criteria, if yes, step to take, if no, what alternatives are available.</p>	<p>Measure referrals and provide data on how many of these did or did not meet the legal criteria for safeguarding.</p>

	Process maps will be added onto the SASP website.	
Identify support services for those who are experiencing conversion practices	<p>Further sources to be updated as they are identified and added to the SASP website.</p> <p>National Support Service Organisation: Galop</p> <p>https://galop.org.uk/get-help/support-services/</p> <p>“Galop provides advocacy and casework support for LGBT+ people who have experienced abuse and violence. Advocates and caseworkers work with clients, based on what each individual person needs. Our advocacy service specialises in supporting LGBT+ victims and survivors of domestic abuse, hate crime, sexual violence, and other forms of abuse including honour-based violence, forced marriage, and so-called conversion therapies. We are a service run by LGBT+ people, for LGBT+ people, and the needs of our community are at the centre of what we do.”</p>	Monitoring and reporting the number of people accessing this area of the website.
Seek support from organisations across Sheffield to sign up to this position statement	Identify conversion practices advocates to make contact with local organisations.	Number of organisations contacted Number of organisations signed up
Consider multi faith representation on safeguarding partnership boards	<p>Not all organisations are part of the Safeguarding Board and nor would it be appropriate for them all to be members.</p> <p>City Wide Best Practice can invite guests to meetings where this subject is presented or discussed.</p>	

	Provide email address on the resources, where interested parties can make enquiries.	
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The Human Rights Act (1998) is in place to protect everyone rights and public authorities have a duty to uphold these rights without interference. The right to be free from discrimination, torture, to have privacy and right to family life are of utmost importance. We will take positive steps to protect the rights of individuals where there is good reason to do so.