

## **ADCS written evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee: Forced Marriages**

### **Introduction**

1. The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) is pleased to submit this written evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee. ADCS is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services appointed under the provisions of the *Children Act 2004* and for other children's services professional in leadership roles. The Association provides a national voice as a champion for children, with local and central government, and with the public.
2. The Association is willing to give oral evidence in front of the Committee.
3. There can be no question that forced marriages are wrong, and that the risk of forced marriages is a serious safeguarding issue for local authorities, schools, colleges and other agencies within Children's Trusts.

### **Forced Marriages: factual information**

4. Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) are responsible in each area for developing appropriate local policy and practice in the light of national guidance.
5. Arranged marriages are a common feature in some cultures. The key difference is that a forced marriage is made against the will of, and without the consent of, one or both of the parties concerned. Some apparent consents are secured by coercion, including threats of violence, and mental or physical intimidation. Usually such coercion is carried out by the parents, who are in a powerful position to do so, abusing their parental authority, and with potential victims unable to leave the parental home.
6. Many forced marriages are not announced in advance, even to the two participants, because the parents are aware that action might be taken to protect the participants, and the participants might seek to leave the family or seek protection from public or voluntary agencies. It is for this reason that young people should be made aware of the support that is available locally if they are concerned that they, or one of their friends, may be expected to marry against their will.
7. Forced marriages are usually undertaken abroad, when the participants are remote from their local communities and support, and where coercion can more easily be applied.
8. Some forced marriages are undertaken when one of the participants is told that they are leaving the country for a holiday.

9. Where a child or young person discloses that they are concerned that they may be the subject of a forced marriage, then the safeguarding procedures agreed locally should be implemented as a matter of urgency. The disclosure could be to a teacher, a youth worker, a health worker, a police officer, or a worker in any of the public, voluntary or community services with which the child or young person may have contact.
10. Local safeguarding procedures can include taking the children and young people into the care of the local authority, either into foster care or a specialist children's home. While such responses are needed in some cases, they are not universally appropriate, and in any event the local authority will need to consider with the child or young person concerned how their long-term care and well-being can best be secured.

## **Recommendations**

11. Local safeguarding procedures will include such measures as training and awareness-raising of professionals and volunteers likely to come into contact with children and young people at risk of forced marriage, and publicity and education programmes to encourage children and young people to disclose a fear that they may be subject to forced marriage, in the confidence that appropriate action will be taken. These education programmes can and should be included as part of the normal education programme, within sex and relationships education (SRE) or personal, social and health education (PSHE) or otherwise.
12. While there is some evidence that headteachers are reluctant to display the more lurid publicity materials on forced marriage, schools, youth centres and health centres are key locations, and should be strongly encouraged to take an active part in both prevention and early intervention as part of their safeguarding responsibility. A range of materials should be made available that could easily be customised to meet local requirements. Best practice would indicate that young people should be consulted on the materials that would best meet local needs.
13. Local authorities and other public agencies should, through the work of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards and Children's Trusts, promote community education and awareness raising among communities that forced marriages are both wrong and unlawful for children and young people normally resident in the United Kingdom.
14. Where a local authority, school or college becomes aware that an individual child or young person is at risk of forced marriage, other than through disclosure, usually because the child or young person stops attending school or college, or goes missing, then immediate multi-agency action needs to be taken. Unfortunately this action very often proves to be too late.

Case Study - A

A, a 16-year-old girl whose family was originally from Pakistan had been taken into the care of the local authority and placed in foster care at the age of 14, following serious physical abuse. The foster placement had proved successful, and had continued for two years. A was on the borderline of moderate learning difficulties, but achieved modest success at school and was attending a local college. One evening A did not return home from college. The police were contacted immediately and the normal searches undertaken without success. A multi-agency strategy meeting took place the following day, leading to further searches and local publicity. Following further fruitless enquiries it was concluded that it was likely that A was no longer in the country. There was no evidence as to whether she had been subjected to a forced marriage but that was a possible conclusion.

15. *Post facto* action will almost always be ineffective, either because the child or young person who becomes missing or stops attending school or college will already have left the country before the local authority becomes aware of the problem, or because the child or young person has been taken out of the country on a pretext. This reinforces the need both to increase the likelihood of disclosure and effective follow-up action where there is a risk of forced marriage, and to improve community education to reinforce that such practices are morally wrong and unlawful.
16. There have been examples when the enforcement agencies and the Forced Marriages Unit have taken effective action, and the police have on at least one occasion removed a vulnerable young person from an airliner about to take off to leave the United Kingdom. But such successes are rare; where a vulnerable young person is in the care of a local authority, for example, notification processes can be carried through more rapidly.
17. The ADCS would welcome a national review of practice, procedures and strategies relating to forced marriages, as well as of the underlying evidence relating to domestic violence.