



**Conversion ‘therapy’
ban: legislating to
protect the mental
health of the
LGBTQIA+ community**

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Summary

Conversion practices are deeply harmful to people's mental health

Being LGBTQIA+ is not something to be 'cured' of.

Conversion practices are highly damaging to people's mental health and can cause a great deal of psychological distress, including feelings of isolation and self-hatred.

“The results of conversion therapy will lead to serious mental health issues, suicide or suicide attempts with no positive outcomes.”

Project Lead at a local Mind

The Government's own research shows that conversion practices, as well as being totally ineffective, can lead to longer term mental health problems, incidences of self-harm and suicide.

Mind welcomed the UK government's consultation on the proposal to ban conversion 'therapy', published in October 2021. We agree with the government that conversion 'therapy' is 'absolutely abhorrent' with no place in a civilised society.

However, we are concerned by several loopholes in the UK government's proposals that could leave the LGBTQIA+ community inadequately protected from conversion practices and will be damaging to their mental health.

Drawing from conversations with people who have lived experience of conversion practices, Mind is proposing 5 measures to better protect the mental health of LGBTQIA+ people.

The UK government should:

1. [Reintroduce gender identity into the scope of the bill](#)
2. [Close the loophole that allows conversion practices to continue if adults 'consent' to them](#)
3. [Ensure the ban applies in religious and faith-based settings](#)
4. [Cover attempts to 'suppress', as well as change, a person's sexual orientation or gender identity in the bill](#)
5. [Explicitly protect all members of the LGBTQIA+ community in the bill](#)

Background

What is conversion ‘therapy’?

Conversion ‘therapy’ aims to change, ‘cure’ or suppress a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

These practices can include formal sessions that present themselves as ‘therapy’. But more often they can be more subtle, such as faith groups giving advice on how to not act on sexual orientation. There can also be more extreme practices such as physical and sexual violence, or exorcisms.

Cooper Report definition of conversion practices

“an act constitutes as a conversion practice where it is directed against another person or specific groups of persons, and attempts to suppress, “cure” or change that person’s or those persons gender identity or sexual orientation.”

The [UK Government’s own research](#) has found 7% of LGBTQIA+ people have been offered or undergone conversion practices.

Why we won’t use the term ‘conversion therapy’

At Mind, we reject the term ‘conversion therapy’ as we know these practices are in no way therapeutic. They are quite the opposite. Conversion practices cause psychological and physical harm to many of the individuals who are subjected to them. That’s why we prefer to use the term ‘conversion practices’.

Mind is a signatory of the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK

Mind, along with over 25 other mental health charities, NHS bodies and professional counselling and psychotherapy organisations (including British Psychological Society, the BACP, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and NHS England) are signatories of the [Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK](#). This sets out our agreed position that conversion practices are unethical and harmful and must be banned.

We've listened to lived experience

In 2021 and 2022 we talked to people about their experiences of conversion practices, as part of our qualitative research into the effects of conversion practices on mental health. We also spoke to project leads in our local Mind network who work to provide support and services for LGBTQIA+ people.

This report includes quotes from those people who talked to us about their experiences of conversion practices. They have given us permission to share their words and stories – in the hope that this will strengthen calls for a comprehensive ban that protects all LGBTQIA+ people.

Conversion practices are deeply harmful to people's mental health

“[Conversion therapy] can completely destroy a person.”

Project Lead at a local Mind

At Mind, we know about the devastating impact of conversion practices on people's mental health. Those who have experienced conversion practices have reported having suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and feelings of guilt, shame, and self-hatred.

“If you look at survivors' groups for people who have been through conversion and reparative therapy, you see an increase in levels of depression, panic disorders, anxiety, suicidal ideation, increased suicide attempts, increased substance misuse, increased self-harm.”

Chief Executive at a local Mind

Conversion practices teach people not to care about themselves as they are taught to believe there is something wrong with them.

A study conducted by [Blosnich](#) in 2020 found that people who had undergone conversion practices were:

- twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts
- 75% more likely to plan to attempt suicide
- 88% more likely to attempt suicide resulting in minor injury
- 67% more likely to attempt suicide resulting in moderate or severe injury

We heard how conversion practices can take place in many different settings – even in places where people go to be supported and to feel safe. But no matter where conversion practices have taken place, everyone told us about the terrible impact on their mental health.

“I felt like I was drowning in a pool of my own shame. I know this sounds dramatic but, in some ways, I’m surprised that I didn’t take my own life and that I am **still here.**”

Person with lived experience

Mind, along with the signatories of the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK consider conversion practices to be unethical and harmful. The psychological harm conversion practices cause requires the UK Government to intervene to end conversion practices through a total ban without exemptions.

The ban on conversion practices must cover gender identity

Trans people in the UK experience higher rates of mental health problems, self-harm and suicidal ideation.

The Government's own research suggests that trans people are much more likely to have undergone, or been offered, conversion 'therapy' (13%) than cisgender people (7%).

We are dismayed that the UK government has pulled back from a commitment to protect trans people from conversion practices.

Mind recognises there are complexities around this area of the ban. It is essential that any action does not inadvertently restrict access to therapy which seeks to help people questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation, without the aim of 'converting' them.

However, Mind along with the signatories of the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK, are clear that it is possible to achieve a ban on conversion practices that protects the trans, non-binary and intersex communities, without limiting exploratory therapy and the work of gender identity services.

The UK government cannot simply give up on protecting trans people because it is legislatively complex. By carefully drafting the bill, considering the legal definitions, and explicitly stating what is and isn't included under the ban, the government can include protections for trans people while ensuring that there are no unintended consequences.

Bans on conversion practices that cover gender identity have been implemented in other countries including Canada, New Zealand and France. This year, the Welsh Government has made a commitment to ban conversion therapy for both sexual orientation and gender identity, and the Northern Ireland Assembly has recently passed a motion in support of a full ban.

All LGBTQIA+ people deserve to be protected from the lifelong damage that conversion practices cause.

In 2022, we heard from Aitan about how stigma and discrimination around being transgender affected him. Aitan was pressurised into conversion therapy by his family. This had a devastating impact on his mental health at the time, and for many years after. [Aitan's blog](#) talks about the harmful long-term effects of attempts to suppress his true identity.

“I trusted my parent's judgement more than my own and so I attended conversion therapy for three years. I had zero confidence, felt guilty for the pain of everyone around me and believed I was unlovable.”

Aitan

The government must close the 'consent' loophole

The UK government is proposing a ban which would allow people over the age of 18 to consent to conversion practices - if that consent is voluntary and informed and given while a person has capacity.

Pressure and power imbalances make consenting to conversion practices impossible

At Mind, we do not believe that it is possible to give informed consent to conversion practices.

“[Allowing people to consent] is a massive loophole... you're going to say yes to pressure from families or from the church to be involved in something like this, even though somewhere deep down you know it's not going to be good for you, it's not going to be a positive experience.”

- Chief Executive at a local Mind

By their nature, conversion practices occur in environments where people feel pressurised and there is a power imbalance. The wish to comply with what we are told is 'normal society' can often override our reservations and can make a person vulnerable to suggestion. This pressure makes it impossible for consent to be given freely.

“I would have signed anything. If we're saying that we're banning non-consensual therapy only, to me that's not banning it at all. I was desperate. I was desperate to be straight. So, if my conversion therapist had said, 'You have to sign this to give me consent to do this therapy' then of course I would have signed it.”

- Person with lived experience

Lack of consent may be obvious in the more extreme examples of conversion practices, such as when violence is involved. However, it is just as much an issue in the more subtle examples, like in settings where people go to meet others of similar faith, where they should feel safe and protected.

The pressure to hide one's true identity and to follow a group's social norms can be great and lead people to agree to conversion practices. But often people are left feeling that they are not being true to themselves, which is confusing and causes anxiety and distress.

“There are all sorts of forms of coercion and pressure that people can find themselves under. If you're part of a religious organisation, you want to feel part of that family, you're going to go along with whatever people tell you to do to pray the gay away... look at all the subtleties that are involved in microaggressions and how we internalise that homophobia as well. So, I think it's really short sighted to say that people aren't being coerced and they can consent.”

- Chief Executive at a local Mind

“I think a lot of the time consent is very blurred, like I would never say that I have consent to have that talk. I was in the room; I knew it was going to be about relationships, but I didn't know that they were going to be praying for me and when you're in the room it's a very intense setting. You can't just really walk out.”

- Person with lived experience

‘Consent’ to conversion practices is rarely informed

Often people undergoing conversion practices agree to take part, without understanding the mental and sometime physical harm it can cause.

The government proposal states that consent should be ‘informed’. However, people are rarely given comprehensive, full information about the practice. In fact, Government research found that information is often withheld from people undergoing conversion practices.

A major issue to achieving informed consent is that often people do not know that what they’re experiencing or being offered is a conversion practice.

Of course, not recognising that what a person has experienced is a conversion practice does not mean that the subsequent impact on a person’s mental health is any less.

We spoke to one young person (22) about her shock on realising that she had undergone conversion practices:

“I never thought that I had actually experienced conversion therapy because I thought conversion therapy was the stuff you see in the media or in films of shock therapy and the really extreme forms of therapy. Then I read [the] definition of conversion therapy and I think it was a weird moment for me because I realised, I had experienced it, but I didn’t know that I had.”

“I think a lot of people aren’t aware that they’ve undergone conversion therapy and for me I think I was a bit in shock.”

Our research suggests that when written information is provided, it may not explicitly reference conversion practices by name. Leaflets for conversion practices may talk about ‘support’ or ‘help’ for ‘same sex attraction’. For example, one person we spoke to was given information leaflets about conversion practices when he was an inpatient on a mental health ward, which did not appear at first glance to be offering conversion ‘therapy’.

One person told us that a religious group in his area had been putting up posters in local GP surgeries and NHS services which invited people to a ‘support group’ for LGBT people. A friend of theirs attended and was upset to find that the group was led by a Minister who prayed over people and told them that it was a sin to be LGBTQIA+.

Conversion practices constitute torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, meaning people cannot legally consent to them.

Conversion practices lead to psychological harm and constitute torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and therefore are protected under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The real risk of severe psychological harm caused by conversion practices can only exacerbate existing mental health problems.

Harm in the form of recognised psychiatric illnesses such as depression, PTSD and anxiety are covered within bodily harm under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. This means that although under the Mental Capacity Act 2005 a person is presumed to have capacity and therefore the ability to consent unless proven otherwise, it is not possible for someone to legally consent to conversion practices as they are considered torture and so protected under the ECHR.

A full ban on conversion practices must cover religious settings

Government research shows that 51% of those who received conversion ‘therapy’ or ‘reparative therapy’ received it from a faith group.

Conversion practices may differ due to religious, cultural, or traditional norms, but the evidence shows that most often they are promoted in the name of religion.

Our interviews with people who had undergone conversion practices in religious settings showed the devastating effect they can have on a person’s mental health.

“[It] makes you feel guilty and it’s very vicious. I think it affects your mental health because if you believe in religion and they’re saying the person who created you thinks you’re wrong basically, that obviously affects your mental health quite severely like anxiety around having thoughts about the person of the same sex or even depression as well. Just feeling like you’re wrong as a person because you feel like you’re not welcome.”

- Person with lived experience

We hear from local Minds about how vital it is to protect people from the harm of conversion practices in religious settings, especially when fear of rejection from family and community, and feelings of shame, add pressure.

“[Religious conversion] is more subtle coercion, I guess, in the sense that people want to feel like they fit in to part of a religious family, and then were told that they couldn’t and didn’t unless they underwent some sort of ‘conversion or reparative therapy’ or questioned their sexuality or gender expression being seen as a sin, rather than being the natural expression of human identity”

- Chief Executive at a local Mind

People told us about how confusing it is to be offered and given ‘help’ to change their sexual orientation or gender identity, and to realise later that what happened to them was damaging and harmful. Having these realisations about people and institutions that were trusted and part of your life for many years can be traumatic.

“... this has been very traumatic and very confusing. And it has made me feel quite suicidal at times”

“I think I have been so desperate for it to be my fault rather than to have to face the very frightening reality that actually there is something really wrong with the system that I’ve grown up in. That’s terrifying. And I really feel that now. I feel so unsafe in the world because the places that have been safe, I don’t trust anymore.”

- Person with lived experience

Failing to apply the ban to religious and faith-based settings means failing to effectively protect the LGBTQIA+ community from harmful conversion practices. There is a very real risk that the majority of conversion practices will continue to take place in private and under the radar unless the ban covers religious and faith-based settings.

In fact, [the government said in their own review](#) of the evidence on conversion practices:

‘given that much conversion therapy appears to take place in religious settings, legislation that applies only to health professionals is likely to have only a limited impact on ending conversion therapy.’

We do not believe that a ban on conversion practices in religious settings would inhibit everyday religious practice or prevent people accessing genuine support from faith leaders. Issues around sexual orientation or gender identity can be openly discussed – as long as there is no pressure or coercion on a person to change or suppress this.

This view is shared with other religious denominations, including the [Church of England](#).

In 2020, [over 370 religious leaders from around the world called for a ban on conversion practices](#). Among the leaders were 10 Archbishops, 63 Bishops and 18 Deans, 66 rabbis and various religious leaders from the Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu religions.

The UK government should ban all forms of religious conversion practices. This should include prayer healing, deliverance healing, scripture reading and/or directed private prayer, that is targeted at a specific individual or group of individuals with the aim of changing, ‘curing’ or suppressing their sexual orientation or gender identity. This is vital to protect all LGBTQIA+ people from harm.

The ban must cover attempts to ‘suppress’ a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity

At Mind we agree with the definition of conversion practices set out in the [Cooper Report](#): “an act constitutes as a conversion practice where it is directed against another person or specific groups of persons, and attempts to suppress, “cure” or change that person’s or those persons gender identity or sexual orientation.”

Some conversion practices will aim to suppress rather than change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity, telling them they must not express their true self or act on their feelings. From speaking to people with lived experience and local Minds we know this can be just as damaging to people’s mental health.

“I had the women on the church as well come talking to me saying how they’re not homophobic, that I can be gay, but I can’t be with anyone for the whole of my life and that I have to suppress my desires and that my love for God should be enough...”

- Person with lived experience

Given how harmful suppression can be and the severe impact it can have on someone’s mental health, we are deeply concerned that attempts to ‘suppress’ a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation have been excluded in the current proposal.

The UK Government must adopt the Cooper Report definition of conversion practices and explicitly state that it is an offence to attempt to suppress, as well as change, a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation.

The ban must protect all LGBTQIA+ communities

The ban on conversion practices must ensure that all LGBTQIA+ communities are protected. Under the current proposals we are concerned that minority sexual orientations like asexuality are not explicitly referenced and may therefore be missed from the ban. This is despite the fact that the [UK government's own research](#) found that asexual people are at higher risk of being offered or undergoing conversion practices (10%).

We urge the government to listen to our calls to reintroduce gender identity into the ban on conversion practices. If gender identity is reintroduced, it is essential that non-binary and intersex communities are explicitly mentioned in the bill, to ensure the ban covers all gender identities.



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