



Investigating and responding to ritualistic abuse, including witchcraft and spirit possession

Operational Briefing

Commissioned by the Hydrant Programme and NAPAC

July 2025

Note to readers

This document contains descriptions of ritualised child sexual abuse that some readers may find distressing. Please prioritise your well-being. Feel free to skip sections, take breaks or choose not to continue reading.



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Purpose of this briefing

This document provides a clear, evidence-based overview of ritualistic abuse, including abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession. It outlines practical actions to enhance investigations, victim engagement and multi-agency collaboration. This guidance is both strategic and operational and is intended as the first in a series of resources on this subject.

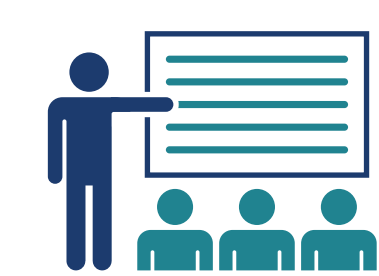
The origin of this work lies in a report produced by Dr Elly Hanson which unpacks the nature of organised ritual abuse, its motives and dynamics, the harm it causes and the barriers survivors face in speaking out. To find out more visit www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk

Key takeaways

- Ritualistic abuse – including abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession – is real. It often intersects with organised crime, familial abuse, trafficking and exploitation.
- Disbelief, investigative challenges and the complexity of belief-based abuse have led to systemic failings in recognising and responding to these crimes.
- Survivors face extreme barriers to disclosure, often due to trauma, coercion and fear of not being believed.
- Taking disclosures seriously must go together with timely, professional investigation to prevent injustice, through disbelief and ungrounded mass panic.
- Policing responses must improve through trauma-informed investigations, intelligence-sharing and multi-agency safeguarding.

Section One

Urgent actions for policing



Train officers to recognise and investigate ritualistic abuse, including spirit possession and witchcraft-linked abuse.



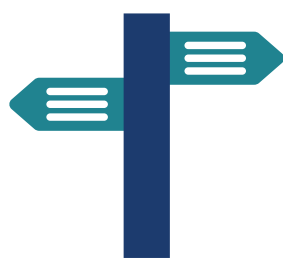
Improve survivor engagement using trauma-informed methods.



Strengthen intelligence sharing across forces.



Prioritise culturally informed community engagement to build trust, avoid harmful escalation and ensure safeguarding responses are appropriate and effective.



Establish clear pathways for safe disclosure.



Embed a clear understanding of ritualistic abuse, witchcraft and spirit possession within national safeguarding strategies through evidence-based training, professional guidance and multi-agency policy alignment.



Section Two

Key findings

Understanding ritualistic abuse, witchcraft and spirit possession

NPCC Definition (2025): Ritualistic abuse, witchcraft and spirit possession refer to forms of sexual abuse, harm, mistreatment or exploitation inflicted on individuals – both children and adults – within the context of structured belief systems, rituals or practices that attribute supernatural significance to the abuse. These may involve coercion, violence, psychological manipulation or exploitation, often justified by beliefs in spiritual forces, purification or supernatural intervention.

Included practices:

- Spirit possession: abuse linked to attempts to exorcise or deliver an individual believed to be controlled by malevolent spirits.
- Witchcraft: abuse resulting from accusations of causing harm through supernatural means, often linked to beliefs in spiritual power or misfortune.
- Harmful ritual practices: structured or symbolic acts of violence believed to yield supernatural benefit (for example forced spiritual healing ceremonies or ritual killings).

These practices often overlap with other forms of abuse (such as sexual abuse, violence against women and girls and trafficking) and are shaped by cultural, familial and online influences. Victims may be targeted due to perceived ‘difference’ – such as disability, neurodivergence, or LGBTQ+ identity.

It is important to emphasise that spirituality and religious belief are not inherently harmful. Abuse occurs when belief systems are exploited to justify coercion, control or harm.

While the 1980s and 1990s saw unfounded allegations that contributed to moral panics, it is essential to acknowledge that ritualistic abuse does occur and must be investigated professionally. Survivor testimony, corroborated with forensic methods, can secure justice and prevent both disbelief and modern-day witch hunts.



Section Three

Perpetrator psychology

Perpetrators of ritualistic abuse often use spiritual or supernatural belief systems to justify and conceal their actions. These belief systems may be genuinely held or weaponised as tools of coercion and control. Abuse is often framed as necessary for ‘cleansing,’ ‘purification,’ or punishment. These offenders commonly operate in organised or familial networks and construct elaborate systems of psychological entrapment. Tactics include:

- Instilling fear of supernatural retribution.
- Coercing victims into complicity.
- Undermining memory and resistance through isolation, drugging or dissociation.

Their ability to evade detection is compounded by the appearance of spiritual legitimacy or the use of closed community structures.

Prevalence and survivor barriers to disclosure

Prevalence remains difficult to quantify due to:

- Long delays in disclosure (often decades).
- Professional disbelief, especially when narratives seem extreme or fragmented.
- Cultural stigma or fear of spiritual retaliation.

Recent international studies suggest a small but significant proportion of the population report experiences of ritualistic or spiritually framed abuse, often overlapping with trafficking or familial exploitation.

Officers should be aware that some victims may have pre-existing vulnerabilities – such as mental health challenges, neurodivergence or chronic illness – which may have contributed to their targeting. In some cases, victims may initially have sought out spiritual or cultural healing for these concerns. This should never be interpreted as consent to any subsequent abuse, which often arises within coercive, exploitative or manipulative environments.

Survivors frequently report:

- Fragmented memory linked to trauma.
- Fear of not being believed or being blamed.
- Concerns about being prosecuted for actions coerced during abuse.

Investigative challenges

Investigating these cases is complex and resource intensive.

Key challenges include:

- Lack of physical evidence due to non-recent nature or ritual context.
- Multiple offenders, often operating across jurisdictions.
- Symbolic or coded language, requiring cultural or contextual understanding.
- Survivors with trauma-related inconsistencies, sometimes misinterpreted as fabrication.
- Investigators may struggle to differentiate between culturally legitimate practices and abusive belief-based harm. Without proper training, this can lead to either minimisation or inappropriate escalation.
- Allegations involving specific names, locations, or organisations – particularly when circulated online – must be handled with care to avoid unsubstantiated accusations gaining traction before proper investigation.

Effective investigation requires:

- Multi-agency cooperation.
- Specialist training in trauma and dissociation.
- Cultural sensitivity.
- Long-term commitment and survivor trust-building.

Investigating these crimes can have a significant psychological impact on officers, particularly first responders. Forces should ensure early access to wellbeing support, supervision and psychological debriefing where needed, to mitigate secondary trauma.



Section Four

Lived experience

Kristy Bamu (London, UK, 2010)

Bamu, a 15-year-old of Congolese heritage, was murdered in London on Christmas Day 2010 by his sister Magalie and her partner Eric Bikubi. During a family visit, Kristy and his siblings were accused of practising kindoki – a form of witchcraft associated with causing harm – after Bikubi interpreted mundane signs as spiritual threats.

To extract a confession and ‘cleanse’ him, Kristy was subjected to prolonged violence by his sister and her partner over several days under the guise of a deliverance ritual. Despite his suffering, Kristy denied the accusations, and the abuse escalated until he eventually died from his injuries.

The trial revealed that both perpetrators genuinely believed in witchcraft and framed their actions as necessary spiritual intervention. They were convicted of murder and received life sentences.

The presiding judge made clear that belief in witchcraft, however sincere, could never justify violence or murder. Kristy’s case highlighted the lethal consequences of belief-based abuse and the need for police, safeguarding professionals and the justice system to recognise and respond to signs of spiritual or ritualistic harm, particularly when cultural or religious belief systems are involved.

Project Jericho (Prescott, Canada, 1989–1994)

Project Jericho was a large-scale, multi-agency investigation into intergenerational ritualistic and organised abuse in Prescott, Ontario. It began when three siblings in foster care disclosed sustained abuse involving ritualistic acts of coercion and fear.

As the investigation widened, police uncovered a network spanning four families, revealing coordinated abuse that included symbolic rituals, confinement, and threats of supernatural retribution. Medical evidence and physical findings corroborated the children’s accounts, and the inquiry grew into one of the most significant cases of its kind.

What made the investigation successful was its survivor-led, multidisciplinary approach. A joint police and social care team was supported by ring-fenced funding, a dedicated prosecutor, forensic specialists, and therapeutic services for victims. Public communication was carefully managed to avoid sensationalism, with local leaders reinforcing community support for justice.

The case ultimately identified 162 victims and led to over 65 convictions.

Project Jericho demonstrates how complex abuse cases can be successfully prosecuted through cross-sector coordination, long-term commitment and a trauma-informed approach that centres the needs of victims.

Section Five

Recommendations

Operational recommendations for police leaders and front-line policing teams

1 - Deliver targeted training and CPD on belief-based abuse

Provide all front-line and investigative staff with regular, mandatory training on ritualistic abuse, including forms linked to witchcraft and spirit possession. This should cover trauma-informed approaches, dissociation and memory fragmentation, psychological coercion, and the use of spiritual or symbolic elements in abuse. Training should equip officers to differentiate between culturally legitimate practices and harmful abuse disguised as belief. Training delivery should be commissioned through qualified trauma-informed providers and, where appropriate, align with College of Policing-accredited frameworks.

2 - Assign and support dedicated Single Points of Contact (SPOC)

Each police force should designate a SPOC with specific knowledge of ritualistic and belief-based abuse to coordinate intelligence across teams, advise on complex cases, and act as a bridge to partners in health, education, social care, and community-based organisations. SPOCs should receive enhanced training and ongoing peer support. Where charging thresholds are not met, SPOCs should support proactive risk management through police bail conditions, inter-agency safety planning and ongoing intelligence monitoring.



3 - Strengthen multi-case and pattern analysis capability

Encourage cross-case analysis of victim disclosures that involve similar rituals, symbolic acts, or belief-driven justifications. Use specialist analysts to map links across locations, offenders, and timeframes, and to identify non-obvious patterns that may indicate networked or repeat offending. This approach should complement traditional safeguarding and organised crime tools.

In addition to investigative strategies, forces should make full use of disruption tools including Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders (STPOs), Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPOs), and Serious Crime Prevention Orders (SCPOs), where relevant.

4 - Embed belief-based abuse indicators into safeguarding protocols

Ensure that belief-based abuse markers are integrated into multi-agency safeguarding pathways (e.g. MASH, MARAC, MAPPA). This includes recognising signs of spirit possession accusations, forced exorcism, ritual ceremonies, coded language, and scapegoating of individuals perceived as ‘different’. All safeguarding professionals should be supported to identify and respond to these indicators confidently.

Where evidence of coercion, trafficking or servitude is identified, officers should consider referring victims into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in line with Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) protocols.

5 - Create safe, supported pathways for survivor disclosure

Develop phased disclosure models and adapt interviewing techniques to support victims with dissociation or complex trauma histories. Survivors should be met with open-minded professionalism, with disclosures treated with the same rigour and respect as other serious crimes. Officers should understand that inconsistencies or delays are common and trauma-informed approaches are essential for building trust and gathering reliable evidence.

6 - Build trust and cultural literacy through community engagement

Culturally informed engagement is not a supplementary activity but a foundational aspect of safe and effective safeguarding. It is necessary therefore to work proactively with trusted community and faith leaders to develop culturally safe safeguarding responses. This includes long-term relationship-building with minoritised communities, improving professional understanding of culturally specific terminology, and co-producing local protocols where appropriate. Officers must be equipped to distinguish between spiritual belief and abusive practice, avoiding both minimisation and inappropriate escalation.

Strategic recommendations for senior leaders, policymakers, and cross-sector governance bodies

1 - Embed belief-based abuse into national safeguarding strategy

Update national policy documents, frameworks and inspection criteria to explicitly reference ritualistic, witchcraft-linked, and spirit possession-related abuse. Provide guidance for all statutory agencies on identifying and responding to these cases. This ensures alignment across child protection, adult safeguarding, VAWG strategies and modern slavery responses.

2 - Align with legislative reform and prosecutorial guidance

Ensure alignment with forthcoming legislation, including mandatory reporting duties and legal protection for individuals coerced into criminal acts as part of their abuse. Promote consistent application of guidance for prosecutors and courts when dealing with trauma-impacted testimony, dissociation, and delayed disclosure.

3 - Create coordinated intelligence-sharing frameworks

Establish clear pathways for sharing intelligence on ritualistic and organised abuse across forces, regions and agencies. This should include safe channels for anonymous or third-party reporting (e.g. from therapists or community professionals), supported by centralised hubs, such as multi-agency safeguarding hubs or national SPOC function.

4 - Engage the health system and Integrated Care Boards (ICBs)

Ensure that safeguarding responsibilities relating to ritualistic and belief-based abuse are reflected in ICB strategic plans. Mental health practitioners, GPs, and emergency care providers should receive briefings and guidance on identifying abuse disguised as healing or spiritual intervention. Joint protocols between police, health, and social care must be established.



5 - Ensure therapy services are safe, trauma-informed and regulated

Commission long-term therapeutic support for survivors that works with dissociative symptoms and fragmented memory without relying on suggestive techniques. Regulators and commissioners must ensure professional standards for practitioners working with adult survivors of organised and belief-based abuse.

6 - Launch targeted public awareness and professional guidance campaigns

Develop public education that raises awareness of the signs and risks of ritualistic and belief-based abuse while explicitly challenging harmful stereotypes or conspiracy narratives. Communications should focus on survivor safety, reduce stigma, and explain the role of professional investigation. Guidance for media and social media platforms should reinforce responsible reporting.

7 - Commission and centre survivor-led research and expertise

Invest in ongoing qualitative research into lived experiences of belief-based abuse, with a particular focus on barriers to justice and effective support. Ensure that survivor experts are embedded in policy development and future iterations of operational guidance.



Section Six Contact

About the Hydrant Programme



The Hydrant Programme is a national policing programme supporting the work of the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) Child Protection and Abuse Investigation Working Group.

Originally established in 2014 to coordinate the response to non-recent child sexual abuse, but now supporting forces across all child protection and abuse investigation issues.

Hydrant develops policy and strategy on behalf of the NPCC, develops and delivers best practice advice including a learning, review and improvement function, provides a strategic analysis capability and partnership engagement with key stakeholders and partners.

Hydrant Programme LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/the-hydrant-programme

Hydrant Programme YouTube: www.youtube.com/@TheHydrantProgramme

Website: www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk



About NAPAC



NAPAC is the National Association for People Abused in Childhood and provides the only free national support service for adult survivors of all types of childhood abuse. They offer specialist, confidential support to all adult survivors of any type of abuse, operated by experienced staff and trained volunteers.

As a trusted support service, survivors engage with NAPAC to disclose childhood abuse, to be heard and comforted, and to be able to make brave, positive choices every day – including asking for help when they need it.

Those using NAPAC's services ask for support with a range of concerns, including anxiety, depression, isolation, reporting to the police, domestic and sexual violence, boundaries, and complex post-traumatic stress. For many, contacting NAPAC is a first step to recovering from trauma and leading happier, more fulfilled lives.

NAPAC has three main areas of focus:

- They run the UK's only free national telephone and email support service for all adult survivors of any kind of childhood abuse
- They provide extensive training for professionals who engage with adult survivors of childhood abuse and anyone at risk of vicarious trauma
- They conduct research and advocacy, using unique data and working in partnership to raise survivors' voices in policy and practice across the UK

NAPAC Facebook: www.facebook.com/NationalAssociationforPeopleAbusedinChildhood/

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