

# Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice inquiry into Conversion Therapy

## Humanist Society Scotland Response August 2021

### **What are your views on the action called for in the petition?**

We are supportive of any move by the Government to restrict and ban the practice of 'conversion therapy' aimed at LGBT+ people in Scotland.

Conversion therapy is a discredited and harmful practice, rooted in false and often pseudoscientific religious beliefs about what causes people to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans. Practices may be coercive or non-coercive however the attempt to cure or convert a person's sexual orientation or gender identity is an inherently flawed proposition with no legitimate scientific basis.

Such provision often happens in secret in closed-off religious communities, but evidence shows that it leads to lasting damage for the people subjected to these 'treatments'. It can result in lasting mental trauma, self-harm, and even suicide. Victims are often young and vulnerable, and are more likely to face abuse from their families or communities because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Given that provision is often associated with 'shame' it is frequently provided in relative secrecy and as such attempts to quantify the spread and promotion of such provision, particularly amongst closed-off religious communities, can be challenging to ascertain.

### **What action would you like to see the Scottish Government take, within the powers available to it?**

The introduction of a statutory ban on conversion therapy would protect vulnerable individuals from attempts to discredit and convert their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

A ban should cover conversion practices outside of therapeutic and medical settings. This is important due to the large of individuals who we know undergo 'conversion therapy' in a faith group setting. For example the 2018 National LGBT Survey found that

51% of respondents who had experienced conversion practices had received it from a religious group.<sup>1</sup>

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, told MPs in April 2021 'International human rights law is clear that the right to freedom of religion or belief does not limit the state's obligation to protect the life, dignity, health and equality of LGBT+ persons. The testimonies of survivors of conversion practices are chilling. Operating on the basis that there is something "wrong", "sinful" or "pathological" in non-heterosexual-cis forms of sexual and gender identity, LGBT+ persons are assailed with physical and emotional abuse that have haunting consequences.'<sup>2</sup>

Given that conversion therapy is already carried out in secrecy there is a danger that simply introducing a legislative ban will further drive such activity underground even more so than it currently operates. As such non-legislative work in engaging with faith and belief bodies that provide such 'conversion therapy' is paramount to ending the practice. The 2020 report<sup>3</sup> by the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, promotes an 'open dialogue between health professionals and religious groups to raise awareness around the harms of conversion therapy'.

In addition information campaigns targeted at parents informed by evidence would be useful in countering misinformation on such practices would be helpful at protecting children and young people as they are more likely to be co-opted into such a 'therapy' by parents or guardians than by self-referral. In addition information and support available to young people themselves in how to seek support should they be facing pressure to undergo conversion therapy and informing them that such practices are banned in the country. Such information should highlight the ineffectiveness of such therapies and the long term damage inflicted on those who undergo such a 'conversion'.

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/721704/LGBT-survey-research-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721704/LGBT-survey-research-report.pdf)

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<https://www.itv.com/news/2021-04-15/exclusive-un-urges-government-to-ban-chilling-conversion-therapy>

<sup>3</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/44/53>