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# My Marriage My Choice

## Finding out about forced marriage of people with learning disabilities



Easy read version of:  
My Marriage My Choice research project  
February 2018

# What is in this report



What is this about?

1



Where did we do the research?

3



Who did we talk to?

4



What did we find out from information about forced marriages of people with learning disabilities?

5



What did we find out by talking with people?

7



- What people with learning disabilities told us

7



- What family carers of people with learning disabilities told us

11



- What community and religious leaders told us 15



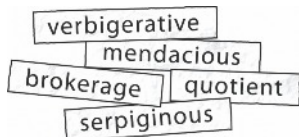
- What staff told us 19



What needs to happen 24



Who can help? 29



Words you might not know already 31

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## What is this about?



People with learning disabilities have the right to marry. They also have the right not to marry.



Sometimes people may try to make you marry someone when you do not want to. This is a **forced marriage**.



With this **research** project we want to:

- find out about people with learning disabilities and forced marriage
- tell managers and staff what is happening





- write some rules to help keep **vulnerable** adults safe from this.



The law says a forced marriage is when:

- One or both people do not agree to the marriage and they have pressure or abuse to make them marry

OR



- One or both people do not understand what marriage means. So they cannot consent to the marriage.



Forced marriage is against the law. This means families may be in trouble when they force you to marry someone.



## Where did we do the research?

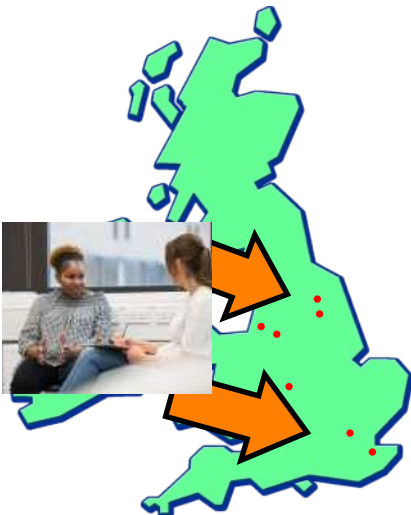


We looked at information about forced marriages and people with learning disabilities. We found that each year there are more reports of people with learning disabilities being forced to marry.



We found that most of the forced marriages reported were in these areas:

- London and south east England
- In Birmingham and round Birmingham
- Lancashire and Manchester
- Yorkshire and Humberside.



So this is where we decided to do our research.





## Who did we talk to?

We wanted to talk with people with learning disabilities and people who help them to make decisions. So we talked with:

- people with learning disabilities
- their families
- people who are important in their community and their religion or belief
- staff in services.



We met people by themselves and in small groups.



## What did we find out from information about forced marriages and people with learning disabilities?



Every year there are more forced marriages of people with learning disabilities reported.



Both men and women with learning disabilities can be forced to marry. At the moment more men with learning disabilities than women with learning disabilities are reported as being forced to marry.



People with learning disabilities are older than other people who are forced to marry.





So usually people who are forced to marry are teenage girls or young women. But for people with learning disabilities there are more people in their 20's or 30's or 40's.



Staff need to know this so they know who may need support to stop a forced marriage.



## What did we find out by talking with people?



## What people with learning disabilities told us

We talked with 19 people with learning disabilities:



- 3 people by themselves



- the others in 3 groups.



They said things like:

- There are lots of people I know who would not be able to say no to their mums and dads.



- Saying no is hard isn't it? Because you could lose everything, you could lose your family.



- Family cannot force you, it's your choice if you want to get married or not married, it's your choice.



- If I said that to my eldest uncle, I didn't want to marry her because I made a mistake, he would hit the roof ..... I was supposed to get married to her, which I didn't want to. And that's why I got ... stuck in the middle. I was forced to get married to her.



The people we spoke to know they have the right to choose who they marry. But it is not always easy to use this right.



Some people said clearly to us that they have the right to choose for themselves. But found it hard to say that to their parents.



We gave the people with learning disabilities we met different stories about marriages to talk about. They found it difficult to be sure about what was right and wrong with the stories. It was quite easy to get them to agree with what we said.



Some people wanted to marry their boyfriend or girlfriend. But family told them to stay as friends or have a long engagement with no wedding date.



Some people with learning disabilities spoke up strongly about saying no to a forced marriage. Some people did not speak up so strongly.



They were people who:

- were not so good at making decisions in all parts of their life



- did not fully understand what marriage was about



- did not have many ideas of what was good and not good in a marriage



- did not know a lot of different people and did not go out to things in their community.



Many people with learning disabilities do not know all these things. They may find it hard to say no to a forced marriage.





## What family carers of people with learning disabilities told us

We talked with 23 family carers:



- 6 people by themselves



- the others in 2 groups.



Most of them were mothers but there was one sister and an aunt. Most family carers were women but there were 2 men. One was a father and the other a brother.

They said things like:



- It's something that every parent wants for their child is for them to be happily settled in life with someone who's going to look after them when we're not around ... I think anyone's nightmare is being lonely.



- The partner if he is good, they understand the person's situation, that is okay.



- If they think oh no, there is no care, nobody is going to look after my son or daughter, then maybe they will force their son or daughter.



Their community reacted in different ways to their family having someone with learning disabilities.



Some felt accepted in their whole family and by their friends and their community.



Others felt they were left out of everything and that people thought they were strange.



Many families found it hard to see a difference between a forced marriage and an **arranged marriage**.



Family carers understand that not all people with learning disabilities can make their own decisions. But they do not really understand about **capacity**. This is about someone being able to make a particular decision or choice at a particular time.



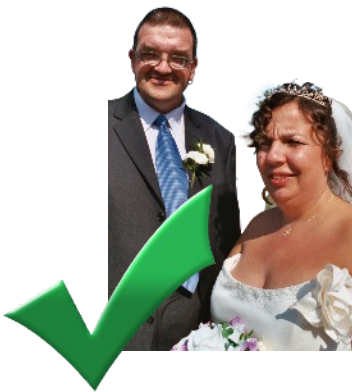
So a person can choose going in a car or a train because they understand the differences. This does not mean they understand and can choose to marry.



Capacity is very important in decisions about marriage. The law says if you don't have capacity to make a decision about marriage you cannot get married. Family carers do not know a lot about this law.



They worried a lot about if their family member should get married. They really wanted them to be happy and for many families this means people should marry.



They expect it will be possible for the person to marry. And that they can find the right partner. This may not be true.



Sometimes they worried a lot about if the partner will be able to cope. This meant they did not think about what the person with learning disabilities wanted.



Many families thought about marriage so the person would be looked after in the future. The older people in the family did not think about what other help people could get. Younger family members did think about what other help people could get. So they may be able to tell older people in the family what other help people could get.





## What community and religious leaders told us

We talked with 16 people important in the community and religions:



- 5 people by themselves



- the others in 2 groups.

They were from different religions and communities including:



- Muslim
- Baptist
- Roman Catholic
- Jewish
- West African Christian.





They said things like:

Disability we find it taboo, we find it shameful ... we try to hide it ... we don't want social services to deal with it. We find we can't talk about it openly.



In our society, in our faith as well we're expected for everyone to get married. And obviously when they don't ... it's not a big issue ... but you still hear ... negative whispers here and there.



I usually involve families in the process [marriage] but I would do it much sooner in someone with learning difficulties.



I think in the past, it [disability] was a big issue, there was a lot of **stigma**.....I don't think it's as much as before.



Different cultures see people with learning disabilities in different ways. Even different people in the same culture see people with learning disabilities in different ways.



Some treat people with learning disabilities as equal and include them in everything. Others treat them as different and strange and do not include them.



Some religious leaders didn't realise people with learning disabilities need different things. They also didn't understand capacity and consent. This means they might think marriage is okay for everyone. They don't understand that it might be against the law for some people to get married.



They said that they help people to get ready for marriage. So they would know if someone did not want to marry or could not consent. But we worry that they do not know enough about people with learning disabilities to know.



Most of the religious leaders understood that forced marriage was against the law.



They did not think it was their job to help decide who marries. But to help people get ready for marriage and then support them in marriage.



Many of the religious leaders thought families had a lot of say in who marries who. Sometimes the marriages were to help families do well. They said families know their children and what they need.

## What staff told us



We talked with people who work with people with learning disabilities or problems with forced marriage. They included:

- social services workers
- health service workers
- police officers
- staff in services for people with learning disabilities.



We talked with 37 of them:

- 6 people by themselves
- the others in 5 groups.



They said things like:

For some people, especially I think from other cultures ... capacity and consent weren't on their radar really.





It's a very tight knit community ... families talk. So even if they've had an okay experience [with services], but actually the person down the road has had a terrible experience ... the whole community is affected by those things. Communities hold those bad things that have happened.



Someone with a learning disability may be even more frightened of revealing anything, and ... well they probably don't even realise it's wrong do they? They might not be so happy but they may not know why.



Staff said that families were very different. Some used lots of services but others did not. They think there are families with someone with learning disabilities they do not know about.





It is difficult to talk easily with some families especially about things like forced marriage. For many families marriage means their person with learning disabilities will be looked after in the future.



Staff said families do not understand exactly what forced marriage is. And they do not understand about capacity and consent.



Some staff did not know any people in forced marriages. Others did and had good ways to know a forced marriage and what to do.



Staff find it hard to work around forced marriages because:

- there was not enough staff or money to sort out what was happening



- families will not say what is happening



- it is hard to say to a family what they are doing is illegal. It will mean they do not trust you anymore.



Some staff do not properly understand how to know if someone has capacity.



It was difficult sometimes because of different **cultures** and no trust in services. Staff need to work more with people from different cultures to build trust before there are problems.



Staff need good training and ways to work on:

- forced marriage



- capacity and consent for marriage.



## What needs to happen



1. For people with learning disabilities in forced marriages there is no one sort of person. For example men are at risk of forced marriage as much as women. So staff have to keep a look out for everyone.



2. Everyone involved with people with learning disabilities needs to know more about forced marriage so that:



- they can support people with learning disabilities to choose to marry or not. They will need support to do what they choose and not what someone else wants



- families understand people with learning disabilities need to have capacity to consent to marriage. They need to know that without this they are breaking the law



- families understand that they cannot decide for their son or daughter with learning disabilities. Not even when they think it is the best thing



- everyone in a community and religion understands the rights of people with learning disabilities. This includes people need to have capacity to consent to marriage



- staff know what to do when they think someone may be forced to marry.



3. Families often want someone to look after their relative in the future. They need more information so they can understand what services can support them and their relative with learning disabilities. Staff need to work at building up trust with families and help them see what is possible.





4. Families and religious leaders need to understand the difference between an arranged marriage and a forced marriage. Capacity and consent to marriage need explaining better. Younger people in families may be good to help others understand all this.



5. Staff need to do something quickly and with care when there are worries about a forced marriage. They need:



- training to know a possible forced marriage and what to do



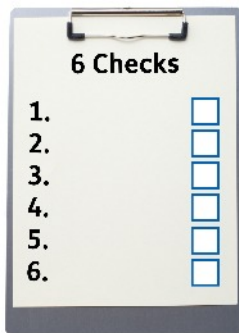
- training to understand different cultures and what that means for marriages. This will help them be careful when there are problems with forced marriage



- to know what to do when they think there will be a forced marriage. And feel safe talking about it



- find other staff who understand what to do about forced marriage who can offer support



- ways to check on capacity to consent and how to tell families the decision on this.



- 6. All services need to work together on how to decide when someone has capacity to consent. Also how to support people with learning disabilities and families when they decide the person cannot consent.



7. There is stigma about people with learning disabilities in some communities. Staff need to work to change this. All communities need to understand that there are good things about telling services that you have learning disabilities because then they can help and support you.



## Who can help?



Many of the people we have spoken to during our research said that there was a chance that people with learning disabilities could get hurt or abused if they are forced to marry.



If you are worried about this or think you might be at risk of forced marriage you could talk to:

- a family member or friend that you can trust



- your doctor



- your social worker



- a police officer



- a care-worker



- a neighbour

OR



- you or someone else could call The Forced Marriage Unit:  
**020 7008 0151**



## Words you might not know already

**Arranged marriage** – when a family chooses the person you will marry but do not make you marry them.

**Forced marriage** - when people make you marry someone when you do not want to.

**Capacity** – being able to make a particular decision or choice at a particular time.

**Consent** – being able to say yes or no to something.

**Culture** - people's 'way of life', meaning the way groups do things. Different cultures may have things like different food or ways to dress.

**Research** – finding something out.

**Stigma** – saying something is bad.

**Vulnerable** - people who might be more at risk from abuse because, for example, they have a learning disability or are older.

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