

Banning Conversion Practices: Consultation Summary Report

Eóin Tennyson MLA

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Introduction

This report presents a summary analysis of responses to Eóin Tennyson MLA's consultation on a proposed Private Members' Bill to ban conversion practices in Northern Ireland.

Conversion Practices, which aim to change or suppress an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, are inherently harmful and violate the human rights of those subjected to them.

Not all forms of conversion practices are currently covered by existing offences, for example, talking therapy aimed at suppressing or changing someone's sexual orientation or gender identity is not likely to be prosecutable under existing law.

The proposed Bill would create two new criminal offences: (1) an offence of engaging in conversion practice and (2) an offence of removing a person from Northern Ireland for the purposes of subjecting them to conversion practice.

It is proposed that an offence of engaging in conversion practices would apply where the following requirements are met:

- Intent – the individual accused of engaging in conversion practices did so with the intention that the sexual orientation or gender identity of the victim would be suppressed or changed.
- Acts – that either a provision of a service or course of coercive behaviour took place.
- Victim – that the service or course of behaviour pertains to another specific, identified individual.
- Harm – that the act has caused the individual physical or psychological harm.
- Defence – the accused person has a defence if their conduct was reasonable in the circumstances.

The consultation sought views on these specific elements, the broader principles underlying the proposed approach, as well issues such as the appropriate sentencing ranges for the proposed offences.

The consultation was launched on 5th December 2024 and closed on the 28th March 2025, following an extension of one week.

In addition to conducting this consultation, a series of stakeholder meetings have been conducted by the Bill proposer. These are listed in Annex 2.

Profile of respondents

In total, 1,291 responses were available for analysis.

Respondents were asked whether they were responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation. Most responses (1,253 of those available for analysis) were submitted by individual members of the public.

The 38 organisational responses were allocated to one of six groups by the Bill proposer. However, in several cases respondents could have been placed in more than one group. In these instances, they were placed in the group which was felt to be most appropriate based on the focus of their

submission. A breakdown of the number of responses received by respondent type is set out in Table 1. A full list of organisations that responded, excluding those who wished to remain anonymous, is available at Annex 1.

Table 1: Respondent by type

Respondent Type	Number of Respondents
LGBTQ+ Group	7
Other	6
Political Party	3
Religious or Belief Body	13
Trade Union or Professional Body	6
Women's Group	3
Total Organisations	38
Individuals	1,253
All respondents	1,291

In addition to submitting their own responses, a number of organisations and groups developed briefing materials for others to draw on when developing their responses. Whilst many individuals appear to have accessed these briefings, respondents frequently personalised their submissions.

It is important to note that as with any public consultation exercise, those responding generally have a particular interest in the subject area and the views they express cannot be taken to be representative of wider public opinion.

At the outset of the consultation, correspondence was issued to the Minister for Communities, Minister of Health and Minister of Justice.

The Minister of Justice responded and noted that the policy rested with the Department for Communities. She expressed support for the proposals, noting that the proposed fines and penalties were “consistent and proportionate.”

The Minister of Health noted that whilst the policy rests with the Department for Communities, he acknowledged the potential health implications for those subjected to conversion practices.

Following correspondence with the Minister for Communities, a meeting was held to discuss the proposal in more detail. He advised that he had asked officials to scope options for further research and engagement that will inform the development of policy. However, no legislation is planned for the remainder of this mandate.

Analysis and Reporting

The consultation questionnaire asked 18 questions. Most questions included both an open and closed element. However, Questions 4 and 5 were closed questions unless the respondent selected ‘other’. Questions 16, 17 and 18 were entirely open questions.

1,279 responses were received online via SurveyMonkey. A further nine submissions based on the consultation questionnaire were received via email.

Three respondents did not make their submission on the consultation questionnaire but rather responded in statement-style format. The content of these responses has been analysed qualitatively under the most directly relevant consultation question.

All data gathered during the consultation will be discarded once the current Northern Ireland Assembly mandate (2022-27) is completed. All information in this document is accurate as of the end of the consultation on 28th March 2025.

Overarching Themes

Most respondents took one of two positions, either broadly in favour of legislation to ban conversion practices, or broadly against.

Those broadly in favour tended to see a clear case for change, citing gaps in existing law and the need for a clear deterrent. These respondents emphasised the inherent harm of conversion practices, describing them as unethical, ineffective and psychologically damaging. Amongst these respondents, there tended to be strong endorsement for the inclusion of both sexual orientation and gender identity within the scope of the ban on conversion practices, and for ensuring 'suppression' of both was also captured.

This was the perspective of the majority of individual respondents, and a clear majority of LGBTQ+ groups, political parties, trade unions or professional bodies, women's groups and others.

Those broadly opposed expressed a recurrent concern about vague definitions or unintended consequences, fearing that the proposal could criminalise legitimate therapeutic, pastoral or parental support. These respondents were concerned that the legislation could infringe upon freedom of belief, expression, and the right to a private and family life. This group was much more likely to favour the inclusion of a reasonableness defence than the former groups.

This was the perspective of a minority of individual respondents and the clear majority of religious and belief bodies.

Much of the remainder of this report sets out a question-by-question analysis of the responses received.

Consideration of convention rights and other competence issues

Compliance with Section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 has been carefully considered through a summary of legal advice from Assembly Legal Services, engagement with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and via public consultation. The Bill proposer is satisfied that the Bill complies with the requirements under Section 6.

The proposed Bill does not deal with excepted matters as defined in Schedule 2 of the Northern Ireland Act. Rather it deals with matters which have been transferred and fall within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It also would not form part of the law of any country other than Northern Ireland, nor would it confer or remove functions exercisable outside of Northern Ireland.

Additionally, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland stated it had not identified any breach in respect of the proposed Bill's compliance with Article 2 of the Windsor Framework.

ECHR Considerations

The Scottish Government considered the impact of a similar proposal to ban conversion practices on competing rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Legislation passed in the Scottish Parliament, as with the Northern Ireland Assembly, must be compatible with the Convention. Specifically, the Scottish consultation paper considered the right to private and family life (Article 8); freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9); and freedom of expression (Article 10).

These rights are qualified rights, which means that interference with them is permissible under ECHR. This can be justified when:

1. The interference is legal;
2. It pursues a legitimate aim, and;
3. It is "necessary in a democratic society" to pursue the aim in question. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) view proportionality as being key to this. It has recognised that it is primarily for national authorities to safeguard human rights and strike the right balance and provides states with a "margin of appreciation" to strike such a balance.¹

In this case, the aim is the protection of the rights of LGBTQIA+ people and the Bill proposer, like the Scottish Government, is of the view that the proposed Bill is necessary and proportionate to achieve this. The Scottish Government considered that by ensuring the ban targets acts that are harmful and coercive, and that conversion practices are defined as having a specific intention to suppress or change a person's sexual orientation, a balance of rights would be achieved as general statements of

¹ Council of Europe, [Articles 8-11](#)

opinion without such an intention, or voluntary practices undertaken in line with a person's own belief, would not be prohibited.²

² Scottish Government, [Ending Conversion Practices in Scotland: Consultation](#) (2024), p. 56

The Need for Legislation

Question 3: Do you agree or disagree that legislation is necessary to ban conversion practices?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-
Other	4	-	1
Political Party	2	1	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	10	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	6	0	0
Women's Group	2	1	0
Total Organisations	22	12	1
Individuals	778	454	21
All respondents	800	466	22

1,288 respondents answered Question 3. 800 respondents (62%) agreed that legislation is necessary to ban conversion practices in Northern Ireland. This included all LGBTQ+ groups, trade unions and professional bodies. 466 respondents (36%) disagreed, including all but one of the religious or belief bodies. 22 (2%) indicated that they were unsure.

The most frequently made points made by those who agreed were:

- Conversion practices are inherently harmful to the individuals subjected to them, and can lead to an increased risk of mental ill-health, self-harm and suicide.
- That conversion practices are unethical and violate the human rights and dignity of those subjected to them. Some respondents argued that forms of conversion practice amount to torture, degrading treatment and punishment.
- Conversion practices are ineffective, and not supported by medical or scientific evidence. A number of respondents pointed to the 2017 memorandum of understanding, signed by 25 health, counselling and psychotherapy bodies in this regard.
- That religious or cultural sensitivities in respect of a ban are superseded by the damaging and unethical nature of conversion practices.
- The existence of conversion practices perpetuates stigma and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people in wider society.
- The vulnerability of many victims of conversion practices. For example, it was noted that victims are often minors, or that individuals may initially seek legitimate talking or counselling support only to be exposed to a harmful conversion practice.
- Existing legislation is insufficient to capture all forms of conversion practice. These respondents argued that standalone legislation would close gaps in existing law, enhance protections for LGBTQIA+ people, and send a strong signal that such practices are unacceptable.

- There was a particular need for legislation in Northern Ireland as the UK Government's National LGBT Survey demonstrated a higher prevalence of LGBTQIA+ people being offered and undergoing conversion practices in NI than in other parts of the UK.
- Legislation is necessary to protect all LGBTQIA+ people, on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity.

Those who disagreed with the need for legislation argued:

- Existing laws are already sufficient to cover people from harmful, discriminatory or degrading conduct. Respondents who took this view cited equality laws protecting individuals from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender reassignment, and laws covering physical and verbal abuse, stalking, harassment and domestic violence.
- 'Conversion practices' is not a sufficiently defined term and, as such, the legislation would cover too broad a range of behaviours and infringe upon freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right to a private and family life.
- Gender identity should not - or could not - be covered by legislation in the same manner as sexual orientation. These respondents argued that gender identity is more complex and contested than sexual orientation, citing recent debates in respect of the Cass Review.
- Conversion practices are not sufficiently prevalent to justify legislation. Others suggested the evidence pertaining to conversion practices in Northern Ireland was subjective or based on small sample sizes.
- Legislation would result in a chill factor and thus be detrimental for parents, teachers, religious leaders and healthcare professionals supporting children and young people who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

A number of respondents, both for and against the proposal, expressed that it was suboptimal that the proposal was being brought via a Members Bill rather than via the Department for Communities with the support of the Northern Ireland Executive.

Some comments argued that legislation alone was insufficient to deal with conversion practices. These respondents made the case that the creation of criminal offences should be accompanied by steps to improve education and awareness of conversion practices and wider issues impacting the LGBTQIA+ community.

Others expressed support for alternative measures to tackle conversion practices and enhance existing law. For example, one religious or belief body suggested that statutory aggravators could be introduced to ensure conversion practice motives are reflected in sentencing for existing offences.

Defining Conversion Practices

Question 4: Do you support an approach to defining conversion practices which covers techniques intended to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity?

Responses by respondent type are set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Yes	No	Not sure	Other
LGBTQ+ Group	6	-	-	1
Other	4	-	1	-
Political Party	2	1	-	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	9	-	1
Trade Union or Professional Body	6	-	-	-
Women's Group	2	1	-	3
Total Organisations	21	11	1	2
Individuals	682	490	27	54
All respondents	703	501	28	56

1,288 respondents answered Question 4. 703 respondents (55%) indicated that they supported an approach to defining conversion practices which covered techniques intended to change or suppress a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. 501 respondents (39%) did not support this approach, while 28 respondents (2%) said they were not sure and 56 (4%) selected 'Other'.

Question 4 was a closed question unless respondents selected the 'Other' option. Those who provided commentary in respect of this question offered a range of views. These submissions tended to focus on gender identity and 'suppression' forming part of the definition.

Gender Identity

Some comments emphasised the importance of an inclusive definition, including both sexual orientation and gender identity. Particular reference was made to the need to ensure transgender people and those who are asexual are included. One organisation pointed to the UK Government's National LGBT Survey, which suggested that transgender people were more than twice as likely to undergo or be offered conversion practices than their cisgender counterparts, to support this argument.

Others expressed opposition to the inclusion of gender identity, stating that it could not be legislated for in the same way as sexual orientation. Respondents of this view tended to argue that the inclusion of gender identity would prevent explorative conversations or counselling for people who are questioning their gender identity.

Suppression

Those in favour of inclusion of 'suppression' argued this was in line with international examples of legislation and necessary to ensure the legislation was comprehensive and free of loopholes which would allow conversion practices to continue. These respondents tended to be of the view that practices which seek to 'suppress' an individual's sexual orientation and gender identity carry the same harms as those which seek to enact a 'change'.

Respondents opposed to the inclusion of 'suppression' expressed a fear that this approach would risk criminalising voluntary celibacy, those supporting people who choose voluntary celibacy, or those advocating celibacy from a religious perspective.

Concern was expressed that this definition would threaten religious expression, and capture teaching, prayer, and pastoral support. These respondents believed the proposed definition would fail to acknowledge the difference between abusive conversion practices and legitimate expressions of faith.

Expression

One LGBTQ+ group expressed that a comprehensive definition must include practices which target the 'expression' of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, in addition to the orientation or identity itself. Some respondents referenced the Scottish Expert Advisory Group which recommended that there should be criminalisation of efforts to change 'gender expression' as loopholes could be created whereby somebody could claim they only had the intention to change or suppress the expression of an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, not their identity itself.

Offence of Engaging in Conversion Practice

Question 5: Do you agree or disagree with an approach that creates a new criminal offence of engaging in conversion practice?

The responses by response type are set out in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Respondents by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	Other
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-	-
Other	3	1	1	-
Political Party	2	1	-	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	10	-	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	4	-	1	1
Women's Group	2	1	-	-
Total Organisations	19	13	2	1
Individuals	770	439	14	30
All respondents	789	452	16	31

1,288 respondents answered this question. 789 respondents (61%) agreed with the creation of a new criminal offence of engaging in conversion practice. 452 respondents (35%) disagreed with this approach while 16 (1%) were not sure and 31 (2%) selected 'Other'.

This was a closed question unless respondents selected the 'Other' option. Those who provided commentary in respect of this question expressed a range of views, including:

- Individuals who are the subject of conversion practices must not be captured by an offence of engaging in conversion practice, as these individuals are victims and unable to provide informed consent. Any ban should therefore focus on perpetrators of these practices.
- One respondent indicated that whilst they believed legislation was necessary to end conversion practices, they were unsure that a criminal offence was required.

Provision of a Service

Question 6: Do you agree or disagree with the proposal that the offence will cover provision of a service intended to suppress or change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Respondents by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-
Other	4	-	1
Political Party	2	1	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	10	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	5	1	-
Women's Group	2	1	-
Total Organisations	21	13	1
Individuals	767	451	35
All respondents	788	464	36

1,288 respondents answered this question. Of those, 788 respondents (61%) agreed that the offence should cover provision of a service intended to suppress or change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. 464 respondents (36%) disagreed and 36 respondents (3%) indicated that they were unsure.

Arguments made by those in favour of this approach included:

- Current legislation is insufficient to protect individuals who experience conversion practices conducted under the guise of counselling, talking therapy or coaching.
- Conversion practices are often pseudo-therapeutic or pseudo-medical in nature.
- Misuse of counselling or psychotherapy techniques in an attempt to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity would be ineffective, potentially harmful and against the ethics and principles of evidence-based, client-centred practice.

Those opposed:

- These respondents expressed concern at the impact of proposed changes on therapists, social workers, teachers, youth workers and parents, and felt they would create a "tightrope" for those working with or caring for LGBTQIA+ young people. These respondents often pointed to the complexity of supporting children who are experiencing gender dysphoria.
- It was argued that the definition of 'service' was unclear and ill-defined. Respondents expressed concern that the term 'service' could be interpreted to mean a 'church service' or that it could extend to cover prayer, preaching and provision of legitimate pastoral care.
- Legislation would create a chill factor amongst therapists, counsellors and other professionals when offering legitimate services to LGBTQIA+ individuals, and could create unintended barriers to LGBTQIA+ people accessing services.

Respondents both for and against the proposal highlighted the need for a clear definition of what constitutes 'provision of a service' in this context. A number of trade unions and professional bodies

argued that legislation would have to be clear that it did not include non-directive and non-judgmental forms of support, provided ethically by trained professional therapists.

One organisation emphasised that 'suppression' should not be interpreted in a way that restricts LGBTQIA+ individuals from accessing legitimate services such as counselling associated with infidelity, or addiction to sex or pornography. The same respondent suggested that steps should be taken to ensure chemical suppression for sex offenders could not be viewed to fall within this element of the offence.

A number of comments noted concern that intent is largely a subjective test. This view was expressed by those who both agreed and disagreed with the need for legislation to ban conversion practices. Those who broadly supported legislation were more likely to note that intent is difficult to prove beyond reasonable doubt, and so could make securing prosecution difficult. Those broadly against legislation tended to express concern that those providing legitimate services, with no intent to bring about a predetermined change, may subsequently have intent ascribed to them by a client. Others observed that without a requirement for intent, the offence would risk criminalising an array of behaviour beyond its intended remit.

Avoidance of Doubt

Question 7: Do you agree or disagree that an ‘avoidance of doubt’ clause should be included in the proposed legislation.

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 6 below:

Table 6: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	1	5	1
Other	-	4	1
Political Party	1	2	-
Religious or Belief Body	-	1	9
Trade Union or Professional Body	4	2	-
Women’s Group	-	3	-
Total Organisations	6	17	11
Individuals	546	253	454
All respondents	552	270	465

1,287 respondents answered this question. Of those, 552 respondents (43%) agreed that the offence should cover provision of a service intended to suppress or change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity. 270 respondents (21%) disagreed and 465 respondents (36%) indicated that they were unsure.

A majority of trade unions and professional bodies agreed with the inclusion of an avoidance of doubt clause. Most LGBTQ+ groups were opposed, as were all women’s groups and ‘others’. All but one religious and belief group indicated they were ‘not sure’, with a number expressing a view that there was a disparity between the treatment of healthcare and religious settings.

Those who agreed:

- An avoidance of doubt clause would ensure that legitimate psychological and mental health support are not impacted in an unintended manner. Respondents argued that whilst they did not believe these practices would fall within the requirements of the offence, such a clause would be welcome to place this beyond doubt.
- That this approach would guard against a chilling effect for clinicians providing legitimate support to LGBTQIA+ people.
- It would assist with clarifying the scope of the legislation, aiding courts and law enforcement in distinguishing between harmful practices and legitimate care, and making it harder for perpetrators to claim their actions were legitimate or misunderstood.

Those who disagreed:

- Professionals engaging in conversion practice would likely already be in breach of the guidelines or code of ethics set down by their professional body. These respondents pointed to the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2017 by a range of healthcare organisations. As such, any avoidance of doubt clause for regulated professionals would be largely redundant.

- The offence of engaging in conversion practices is already sufficiently well-defined, and so the inclusion of an avoidance of doubt clause was unnecessary.
- Others argued that the offence is ill-defined, vague and subjective, and that an avoidance of doubt clause is insufficient to address this.
- An avoidance of doubt clause gives rise to a risk of self-regulation, whereby professionals have a defence that they are behaving in line with their own ethical, medical or professional rules and guidelines.
- Some comments expressed a view that an avoidance of doubt clause would be inconsistent with other jurisdictions, as no such term appears in comparable legislation in other European countries.

Amongst those who indicated they were 'not sure':

- Some respondents indicated that they could not take a view on the inclusion of an avoidance of doubt clause without first seeing the content of such a clause.
- Many respondents indicated they wished for the legitimate work of churches to be included within the scope of any avoidance of doubt clause, in a similar manner to healthcare.
- Others took the view that if the clause was to be included, it should apply exclusively to regulated healthcare professionals only.

Respondents both broadly in favour and broadly against legislation queried who would determine what constitutes a legitimate counselling, psychological or healthcare service for the purposes of an avoidance of doubt clause. One professional body argued that the clause should cover professionals who are on an accredited or statutory register, such as those meeting the standards set by the Professional Standards Authority, and operating within the code of ethics for their relevant professional body.

Another organisation argued that the avoidance of doubt clause should be extended to cover health services providing gender-affirming care for transgender patients.

Coercive Course of Behaviour

Question 8: Do you agree or disagree with the proposal that the offence will cover a coercive course of behaviour intended to suppress or change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-
Other	4	-	1
Political Party	2	1	-
Religious or Belief Body	2	9	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	6	-	-
Women's Group	2	1	-
Total Organisations	23	11	1
Individuals	801	410	42
All respondents	824	421	43

1,288 respondents answered this question. Of those, 824 respondents (64%) agreed that the offence should cover a coercive course of behaviour intended to suppress or change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. This included all LGBT groups and trade unions or professional bodies. 421 respondents (33%) disagreed, and 43 respondents (3%) indicated that they were unsure.

Respondents who agreed:

- All forms of conversion practice should be covered under the law. Many respondents stressed that conversion practices often occur outside of formal service provision, and that this approach would deliver comprehensive protection against those practices which are conducted in a non-clinical, informal or community-based setting.
- It was appropriate to draw upon the approach taken to defining coercive and abusive behaviour for the purposes of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI) 2021. Some comments emphasised that this approach has already been legally tested.
- Coercion can often manifest itself via monitoring, isolation, threats and emotional manipulation. These tactics are often subtle and insidious, and so legal recognition is important.

Respondents who disagreed:

- Sufficient legislation already exists to deal with harmful and coercive behaviour, such as that covering domestic abuse, stalking and threatening and abusive behaviour.
- 'Coercive behaviour' is ill-defined, subjective or vague and could lead to unintended consequences. Some comments pointed to a fear that ordinary parenting (e.g. setting boundaries or monitoring behaviour), church discipline (withdrawing membership), pastoral care or traditional teaching in respect of sexual ethics could be construed as coercive.

Some comments considered the impact between a single event and repeated events. These respondents noted that single events can be harmful, but may not be captured under the requirement for a course of behaviour.

Other respondents made the case that a number of individuals may be involved in a coercive course of behaviour in the context of a conversion practice. For instance, a single visit to a practitioner might be the result of sustained pressure or controlling behaviour from one or more people, coercing the victim into engaging with the service.

One organisation (in this case a professional body) stressed that all coercive and controlling behaviours set out in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI) 2021 be covered by the definition, including through incorporating financial abuse.

Harm

Question 9: Do you agree or disagree that the conduct of the perpetrator must have caused the victim to suffer physical or psychological harm (including fear, alarm or substantial distress) in order for it to be an offence?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	5	1	1
Other	4	-	1
Political Party	2	1	-
Religious or Belief Body	-	11	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	3	2	1
Women's Group	2	1	-
Total Organisations	16	16	3
Individuals	433	669	151
All respondents	449	685	154

A majority of respondents disagreed with the requirement for the conduct of the perpetrator to cause physical or psychological harm to the perpetrator in order for it to be an offence. Of the 1,288 respondents who answered this question, 685 (53%) disagreed, while 449 (35%) agreed and 154 (12%) indicated they were unsure.

Respondents who agreed:

- Many respondents believed that harm provided a clear prosecutorial threshold. They stated the intention of a criminal offence is not to capture every behaviour which is not affirmative towards an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, but rather to criminalise those behaviours which are most serious and harmful.
- A number of respondents believed a harm requirement would provide an additional safeguard for freedom of speech and religion where no harm was caused, protecting ordinary conversation, prayer or pastoral care.

Respondents who disagreed:

- Conversion practices by their nature carry an inherent risk of harm and, as such, every instance of conversion practice should constitute a criminal offence, irrespective of whether harm has actually been caused to an individual victim. These respondents argued that intent ought to be a sufficient test, and often made analogies to attempted offences.
- Victims may not immediately be aware of the harm caused, or that psychological harm may only become apparent a period of time after they were subjected to conversion practice. These respondents argued that a requirement to prove harm may therefore delay justice, place an unfair burden on the victim, or contribute to retraumatisation.
- There is an inconsistency with other offences, such as female genital mutilation and domestic abuse, where it is not necessary to prove that harm was actually caused to the victim.
- The definition of 'harm', and particularly 'psychological harm' is too subjective. A number of comments objected to the inclusion of 'fear, alarm or substantial distress'.

Those who indicated they were unsure:

- Some noted the merit in the inclusion of a harm requirement to avoid inadvertently criminalising too broad a range of behaviour, but indicated they were unsure how terms such as 'psychological harm' and 'fear, alarm and distress' would be interpreted.

A number of comments focused on alternative methods of dealing with harm via an additional mental element of the offence. Some argued that intention to cause harm should replace the requirement that harm must have been caused. These respondents made the case that the proposed approach could criminalise well-intentioned behaviour, where harm was not intended but nonetheless caused.

Another perspective was expressed that the requirement should be either: (1) that the conduct of the perpetrator caused harm to the victim, or (2) that the perpetrator was reckless/negligent as to the harm caused. This was argued with a view to ensuring all manifestations of coercive behaviour are covered.

Reasonableness Defence

Question 10: Do you agree or disagree with the inclusion of a defence of reasonableness. It is proposed that it is a defence for the accused to show that the course of behaviour was, in the particular circumstances, reasonable?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	-	5	2
Other	-	4	1
Political Party	1	2	-
Religious or Belief Body	9	1	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	3	2	1
Women's Group	-	3	-
Total Organisations	13	17	4
Individuals	607	461	185
All respondents	620	478	189

A plurality, though not a majority, of respondents agreed with the inclusion of a defence of reasonableness. Of the 1,287 respondents who answered this question, 620 (48%) agreed, while 478 (37%) disagreed and 189 (15%) indicated they were unsure. A clear majority of LGBT groups, women's groups and 'other' organisations opposed the inclusion of a defence of reasonableness. All but one religious or belief bodies were in favour.

Those who agreed:

- The inclusion of a defence of reasonableness would be consistent with the approach taken to other similar offences, such as those dealing with domestic abuse, stalking and harassment.
- That a reasonableness test, if applied consistently and robustly, could enhance confidence in the application of the offence. This would avoid a judgement being made on whether an offence has been committed solely based on the assessment of the victim. These respondents argued that a reasonableness defence would encourage consideration of intent, context and the specific circumstances of each case when determining if an offence had occurred.
- A reasonableness test would act as a safeguard against overreach, by ensuring legitimate conversations or expressions of belief are not inadvertently captured, particularly in religious or cultural contexts.

Those who disagreed:

- A reasonableness defence could be exploited by perpetrators to justify harmful behaviour, undermining the purpose of the legislation and making enforcement more difficult. These respondents often argued that conversion practices are inherently coercive and harmful, and a reasonableness defence would risk legitimising or excusing such practices.
- There was a concern that this defence would create an undue pressure on victims to "prove" that the behaviour they experienced was unreasonable, potentially retraumatising them and discouraging reporting.

Consent

Question 11: The proposal does not include a defence of consent for conversion practices. Do you agree or disagree with this approach?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 10 below.

Table 10: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-
Other	4	-	1
Political Party	2	1	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	10	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	6	-	-
Women's Group	2	1	-
Total Organisations	22	12	1
Individuals	691	487	75
All respondents	713	499	76

A majority of respondents agreed with the approach of not including a defence of consent for conversion practices. Of the 1,288 respondents who answered this question, 713 (55%) agreed, while 499 (39%) disagreed and 76 (6%) indicated they were unsure. Every LGBTQ+ group, trade union or professional body, and all but one 'other' organisation, agreed with this approach. The vast majority of religious or belief bodies disagreed.

Those who agreed:

- Respondents highlighted that those subjected to conversion practices may “consent” due to power imbalances, external pressure or coercion, particularly in familial, cultural or religious contexts. As such, this challenges the validity of any such consent.
- It is not possible to give informed consent to conversion practices. Often those participating will be misled into believing that change is possible or harmless, and will not be fully aware of the nature or potential risks associated with conversion practice.
- That victims of conversion practices are often vulnerable, and that the exclusion of a defence of consent was necessary to safeguard those at risk. These respondents cited the need to protect minors and individuals struggling with internalised homophobia, biphobia and transphobia from being manipulated into harmful situations.
- That the exclusion of a defence of consent is consistent with the approach taken in legislation dealing with female genital mutilation (FGM) and domestic abuse, where consent is not a valid defence due to the inherent harm involved.
- The inclusion of a consent defence would allow perpetrators to evade accountability by claiming that the victim agreed to the behaviour in question, even if that agreement was coerced or uninformed.

Those who disagreed:

- Some respondents were of the view that adults, in particular, should have the right to choose what support or guidance they seek, even if it involves identity-related issues or carries risk

of harm. They argued that excluding a consent defence erodes individual autonomy and agency.

- Concerns were raised that the exclusion of a consent defence could risk criminalising voluntary interactions, even where these are actively sought out by the victim. Some felt that this approach could blur the line between abusive practices and genuine support, particularly in the context of pastoral care, counselling or religious guidance.
- A few respondents argued that a blanket exclusion of a consent defence fails to adequately account for the context, such as the age, capacity, intent or information provided to the victim. They suggested courts should assess consent on a case-by-case basis.

Sentencing Range (for the offence of engaging in conversion practice)

Question 12: Do you consider that the following sentencing range would be appropriate for this offence?

- ***On summary conviction: imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months, or a fine not exceeding the statutory minimum, or both.***
- ***On conviction on indictment: imprisonment for a term not exceeding 7 years, or a fine, or both.***

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 11 below.

Table 11: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	Other
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-	-
Other	4	-	1	-
Political Party	2	1	-	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	9	-	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	2	-	2	2
Women's Group	2	1	-	-
Total Organisations	18	11	3	2
Individuals	605	455	174	19
All respondents	623	466	177	21

A plurality, though not a majority, agreed that the proposed sentencing range would be appropriate for the offence. Of the 1,287 respondents who answered this question, 623 (48%) agreed, while 466 (36%) disagreed, 177 (14%) indicated they were unsure and 21 (2%) indicated 'other'. All LGBT Groups and the clear majority of 'others' agreed. All but one religious or belief body disagreed. Most trade unions or professional bodies selected 'not sure' or 'other'.

Those who agreed:

- Those in support were of the view that the proposed sentencing range was proportionate and consistent with the approach taken to legislation dealing with domestic abuse, stalking and threatening and abusive behaviour, as well as with international legislation dealing with conversion practices.
- Many respondents emphasised the serious psychological and emotional harm associated with conversion practices, and stated they felt that the proposed sentencing range reflects the gravity of the offence.
- Strong sentencing parameters were cited as necessary to enhance the deterrence value of the offence and to signal societal condemnation of such practices.
- The range was believed to offer sufficient judicial discretion to tailor sentences based on severity, intent and impact upon the victim.

Those who disagreed:

- These respondents often argued that a 7-year prison sentence was excessive, particularly for an offence which they perceived to be vaguely defined, and based on subjective interpretations of intent and harm.
- A dominant concern was that the offence and sentencing range would criminalise parents, pastors or religious leaders offering guidance and prayer, infringing on freedom of belief and expression.
- Some respondents indicated a preference for alternative approaches to custodial sentences, such as restorative justice, education or community sentences, particularly for first-time offenders.

Organisations that selected 'other' did not feel they could answer this question as it fell outside their remit to do so but commented that any sentencing range should have a deterrent effect.

Offence of Removing a Person from Northern Ireland for the Purpose of Conversion Practice

Question 13: Do you agree or disagree that it should be a criminal offence to remove someone who is habitually resident in Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland for the purpose of subjecting them to conversion practice?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 12 below.

Table 12: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-
Other	4	-	1
Political Party	2	1	-
Religious or Belief Body	2	9	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	6	-	-
Women's Group	2	1	-
Total Organisations	23	11	1
Individuals	791	406	56
All respondents	814	417	57

A clear majority of respondents agreed with the creation of a new offence to remove someone who is habitually resident in Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland for the purpose of subjecting them to conversion practices. Of the 1,288 respondents, 814 (63%) agreed, including all LGBTQ+ groups and trade unions or professional bodies responding. 417 (32%) respondents disagreed, including a majority of religious or belief bodies. 57 (5%) respondents were not sure.

Those who agreed:

- Respondents frequently cited the psychological, emotional and physical harm that can be caused by conversion practices. Removing someone from Northern Ireland to undergo such a practice elsewhere was viewed as potentially compounding the trauma of the victim by isolating them from support networks.
- Many argued that without this offence, perpetrators could exploit the absence of bans in other jurisdictions, including other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, to circumvent protections in Northern Ireland.
- Comparisons were made to existing laws dealing with female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and human trafficking, which criminalise removal for harmful practices abroad. Respondents were often of the perspective that conversion practices warranted similar treatment.
- Particular concern was raised for LGBTQIA+ migrants and refugees resident in Northern Ireland. Some respondents expressed a fear that these groups might be more vulnerable to being coerced or forced to return to a jurisdiction with more hostile attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ identities to undergo conversion practice.

Those who disagreed:

- A dominant concern was that the proposal is too vague, and could potentially criminalise ordinary travel for religious events, conferences or family visits. These respondents expressed a fear about the potential for misuse, overreach, and the impact of vexatious allegations based on subjective interpretations of intent.
- Many felt the proposal would infringe on civil liberties, particularly religious freedom, by restricting the ability to travel freely for religious practice.
- Some argued that existing laws dealing with kidnapping and human trafficking are already sufficient to cover the scenarios where a person would be coerced into leaving Northern Ireland for the purposes of conversion practice.
- Several respondents believed there should be a distinction made between coercion and voluntary travel. These respondents were of the view that adults who consent should be free to seek conversion practices abroad without fear of criminalisation.

Sentencing Range (for the offence of removing a person from Northern Ireland for the purpose of conversion practice)

Question 14: Do you consider that the following sentencing range would be appropriate for this offence?

- **on summary conviction: imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months, or a fine, or both.**
- **on conviction on indictment: imprisonment for a term not exceeding 3 years, or a fine, or both**

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 11 below.

Table 11: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	Other
LGBTQ+ Group	7	-	-	-
Other	4	-	1	-
Political Party	2	1	-	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	9	-	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	1	-	3	2
Women's Group	2	1	-	-
Total Organisations	17	11	4	2
Individuals	585	478	163	27
All respondents	602	489	167	29

Out of 1,287 respondents, 602 (47%) respondents agreed that the proposed sentencing range would be appropriate for this offence whilst 489 (38%) respondents disagreed with the proposed sentencing range, 167 (13%) respondents were not sure if the sentencing range would be appropriate and 29 (2%) respondents suggested other options.

Those who agreed:

- Supporters believed the proposed sentencing range was proportionate to the seriousness of the offence. These respondents were of the view that the penalties would act as a meaningful deterrent against removing a person from Northern Ireland for the purposes of subjecting them to conversion practice.
- Some respondents compared the offence to existing laws on FGM, forced marriage and human trafficking, suggesting that the sentencing range set out was appropriate and proportionate when compared with these examples.
- A number of supporters who agreed emphasised the need for justice for victims, particularly those who are vulnerable. They believed the proposed sentencing range reflected the seriousness of the offence.

Those who disagreed:

- Some felt the proposed penalties were too harsh or excessive, often arguing that arranging travel should not warrant imprisonment where there is no clear evidence of harm.

- Conversely, a smaller group was of the view that the sentence was too lenient, arguing that due to the potential harm and violation of a victim's human rights, and removing a person from NI for conversion practice ought to carry a stronger sentence.

Similar to the previous offence, some respondents who selected 'other' expressed a desire to see a greater focus on restorative justice rather than criminal offences or financial penalties.

Human Rights and Financial Implications

Question 15: How, if at all, do you think the proposed legislation will impact on human rights?

The responses by respondent type are set out in Table 14 below.

Table 14: Responses by respondent type

Respondent Type	Significant positive impact	Slight positive impact	No impact	Slight negative impact	Significant negative impact	Not sure
LGBTQ+ Group	5	2	-	-	-	-
Other	4	-	-	-	-	1
Political Party	2	-	-	-	1	-
Religious or Belief Body	1	-	-	-	10	-
Trade Union or Professional Body	4	2	-	-	-	-
Women's Group	2	-	-	-	1	-
Total Organisations	18	4	0	0	12	1
Individuals	675	100	25	19	411	21
All respondents	693	104	25	19	423	22

Of the 1,286 respondents who answered this question, a majority indicated they believed the proposed legislation would have a significant or slight positive impact. 693 (54%) indicated they believed it would have a significant positive impact, 104 (8%) a slight positive impact, 423 (33%) a significant negative impact, 19 (1%) a slight negative impact, 25 (2%) indicated it would have no impact and 22 (2%) indicated that they were not sure.

Positive impacts:

- Many respondents viewed the proposed legislation as a positive safeguard against degrading treatment and psychological harm, aligning with protections under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).
- The proposed legislation was viewed as enhancing the right to live authentically and protecting individuals' privacy and family life in line with Article 8 of the ECHR.
- Respondents highlighted the role of banning conversion practices in promoting non-discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community and advancing LGBTQIA+ rights and equality.

Negative impacts:

- Many expressed concern that the proposed legislation would criminalise religious expression, pastoral care and free speech, in conflict with Articles 9 and 10 of the ECHR.
- Some feared that the legislation would interfere with parental rights, infringing on Article 8 of the ECHR in this respect.

Question 16: Do you have any comments on the likely cost/financial implications of the proposed legislation?

555 respondents answered this question, including 22 organisations.

Perceived financial benefits or justifications:

- Many respondents argued that any cost associated with implementing the legislation would be justified by the legislation's role in preventing harm, protecting vulnerable people and upholding human rights.
- Several respondents suggested there could be a small, positive impact on costs in other areas of the public sector by preventing trauma and mental health issues often associated with conversion practices.
- A number of respondents believed the legislation would not carry with it significant costs to the public sector as it would likely be a low volume offence.

Concerns about financial impact:

- Some respondents expressed a view that any funding would be more adequately directed towards healthcare, education and infrastructure.
- Concerns were raised about the potential cost to the judiciary, police and legal aid associated with increased litigation, training or administrative overheads.
- Some viewed the legislation as unnecessary or redundant, arguing they felt it was a waste of resources and would duplicate existing laws.

Other issues

Question 17: In your view, could the proposal have any unintended consequences?

771 respondents answered this question, including 24 organisations.

Positive unintended consequences:

- Many respondents believed that the legislation would foster a more inclusive and accepting society for LGBTQIA+ people. These respondents tended to argue that the ban could challenge stigma, shame and discrimination, and encourage LGBTQIA+ people to live more openly and authentically.
- Some respondents hoped that the legislation would set a legislative precedent, inspiring similar protection in other jurisdictions.
- The proposal could be a catalyst for broader public awareness and education around conversion practices, as well as broader conversations about issues of identity, coercion and human rights.

Negative unintended consequences:

- A number of respondents restated their fear that the legislation would infringe upon religious freedoms, particularly Christian teaching and practice, resulting in unintended consequences for freedom of belief and religion.
- Concerns were raised that the law could interfere with parenting, particularly in the context of conversations around sexual ethics and gender, infringing upon the right to private and family life.
- Some worried about the impact on freedom of speech, expressing a fear that traditional or dissenting views would be criminalised.
- Some feared that banning conversion practices might inadvertently restrict, or create a chill factor, for legitimate therapeutic support – particularly for young people with gender dysphoria.
- Several responses expressed a concern that banning conversion practices could drive them further underground, making them even harder to detect and regulate.

Question 18: Do you have any other comments on the proposed legislation?

646 respondents answered this question, including 28 organisations. In summarising this question, we have not repeated points which have already been addressed in other sections of the report. However, some of the additional comments included:

- A desire for the introduction of civil protection orders, to allow civil action to be taken to prevent conversion practices.
- Suggestion that powers should be granted to an appropriate public body to allow investigations even where an individual victim has not come forward.
- That promotion and advertising of conversion practices ought to be banned.

Concluding remarks

It is clear that many individuals and organisations that responded to the consultation voiced their support for the overall objective of the bill to end conversion practices in Northern Ireland and send a clear signal that practices which attempt to change or suppress an individual's sexual orientation and/or gender identity are wrong and harmful.

The broad spectrum of evidence received through consultation responses and extensive engagement with various stakeholders will significantly shape the final proposal that will be submitted to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly in due course. Some of the overarching themes identified in the consultation have suggested alternatives to the proposed legislation which will inform further development of specific elements of the proposal.

For example, the avoidance of doubt provision will be further developed to ensure legitimate healthcare services are not interfered with, and to provide additional reassurance around compatibility with ECHR rights. This reflects concerns and suggestions raised during the consultation process by faith groups and professional bodies, and post-consultation engagement with the Professional Standards Authority in particular.

In addition, the definition of harm will be refined to align with that set out in domestic abuse legislation. This is in response to concern expressed by LGBT groups and individuals that the proposed legislation would place an unfair burden on the victim to prove 'substantial distress'.

Updates on the progress of the Bill will be shared via social media platforms used by Eóin Tennyson MLA and the Northern Ireland Assembly website.

Annex 1

Respondents by type

LGBT Group

Ban Conversion Practices Coalition

Causeway Pride

LGBTQ+ Women's Group Newry

Omagh Pride

Plus Importance Project

Queer Women Collective

Rainbow Refugees NI

Other

Alliance for Choice

Menstruation Matters

National Secular Society

NUS-USI

Reclaim The Agenda

Show Some Love Ltd

Political Party

Green Party NI

SDLP LGBT+

TUV – Traditional Unionist Voice

Religious or Belief Body

Caleb Foundation

Christian Action Research Education (CARE)

Christian Institute

Clogher Valley Free Presbyterian Church

Evangelical Presbyterian Church – Public Morals Committee

Fellowship of Independent Methodist Churches

Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster Government and Morals Committee

Methodist Church in Ireland – Council on Social Responsibility

Northern Ireland Humanists

Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Trade Union or Professional Body

Association of Child Psychotherapists

British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy

British Medical Association

Royal College of Nursing

Unison

Women's Group

Women's Rights Network

Women's Policy Group NI

Annex 2

Other Consultation Engagements

Organisation	Meeting Date(s)	Comments
Ban Conversion Practices Coalition	29 th May 2025	Content with general principles of the Bill. Raised reservations in respect of the inclusion of an avoidance of doubt clause and reasonableness defence.
Christian Institute	10 th April 2024	Opposed the proposals on the basis of their impact on religious freedom and the work of churches.
Evangelical Alliance	6 th February 2024	Recognised the need to tackle harmful and coercive behaviour, but expressed concern regarding the impact of the proposals on parental responsibility and religious freedom.
HERe NI & The Rainbow Project	25 th July 2024	Supportive of proposals and indicated they would provide sectoral support were needed. Raised queries regarding the avoidance of doubt and reasonableness defence provisions.
Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland	10 th April 2025	Expressed support for a ban on conversion practices due to the detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of victims.
Minister for Communities	11 th November 2024 19 th May 2025	Raised concerns in respect of potential human rights implications. During the meeting on 19 th May 2025, the Minister indicated he wanted to initiate a call for evidence on a conversion practices ban which has not yet been published.
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission	5 th September 2024	Raised no objections to the policy objectives and noted their view that a ban would not constitute an unlawful restriction on freedom of expression or religion.
Presbyterian Church in Ireland	30 th April 2025	Voiced their concern that the proposed Bill would result in religious

leaders feeling that they cannot engage in pastoral conversations.

Professor Fidelma Ashe & Dr. Danielle Mackle	20 th August 2024	Supportive of the proposed ban and noted the need for legislation, as evidenced in their research published in May 2024.
Professional Standards Authority	25 th September 2025	Voiced their support for a conversion practices ban. Discussed how an avoidance of doubt clause would function in practice to ensure accredited and registered professionals offering legitimate support are protected.
PSNI Justice Branch	12 th March 2025	Did not take a view on the substantive policy. However, noted that a clear definition and guidance would be needed for the law to be effectively implemented.
Public Prosecution Service	13 th March 2025	Did not take a view on the policy itself, though did not raise any substantive practical issues.
Saúl Castro (President of No Ees Terapia)	20 th February 2025	Supportive of the proposed Bill and indicated that it was stronger than the current law in Spain which is now being updated to enhance its effectiveness.
Advisory board of the research project 'Conversion treatments: Contexts. Practices. Biographies' in Germany	30 th January 2025	Provided insights into how the German legislative ban operates and noted that the proposed ban in NI is more robust.