



7 July 2017

Dear Headteacher/Principal

I am writing to remind you of your responsibilities to help ensure that children and young people remain safe while they are in schools and colleges in Wales, and to seek your assistance in ensuring that we play a strong role in helping eradicate a particularly abhorrent form of violence against women and girls – Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

FGM is child abuse and a criminal offence. It cannot be justified as a cultural or religious practice and leaders of all the main faiths have spoken out against it. The prevalence of FGM is difficult to estimate because of the hidden nature of the crime. However, there are an estimated 137,000 women and girls affected by FGM in England and Wales¹.

It is imperative we all recognise the warning signs of a child who might be at risk. Schools have an important role to play in identifying potential victims and safeguarding them from FGM. In 2015, statutory guidance, *Keeping learners safe* was published to support schools and education services in ensuring that child welfare concerns are acted upon appropriately and effectively, involving investigating agencies where necessary.

All school and college staff can play a crucial role in safeguarding children and young people from abuse and neglect, including FGM. It is vital that all school staff have the knowledge to ensure they are alert to the signs of FGM and what action to take if they have concerns. The Welsh Government has produced a suite of e-learning safeguarding modules – available on Hwb - to support schools in managing child protection issues.

The Voices Over Silence campaign includes a short film that includes survivors' experiences, together with doctors and religious leaders. Materials from this campaign would be useful to display in schools. These were developed by NSPCC and Bawso with young women in Cardiff and is on the Welsh Government Live Fear Free Website: <http://livefearfree.gov.wales/campaigns/?lang=en>

All education staff should be aware that young girls may be taken abroad in summer holidays to undergo FGM, as procedures take up to four weeks to heal. The procedure may therefore be performed before a girl returns to school at the start of the autumn term. Staff should be vigilant in looking for signs of FGM after the school holidays and report anything that may seem suspicious to the appropriate professional.

The all-Wales child protection procedures provide a consistent framework for referral, consideration and determining action by all safeguarding partners and include a dedicated

1. Macfarlane, A. and Dorkenoo, E. (2015) Prevalence of female genital mutilation in England and Wales: national and local estimates.

protocol on FGM. The procedures clarify how individuals and agencies should communicate and work together to identify vulnerable children, keep them safe from harm and improve outcomes. These procedures are currently being updated by Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan Safeguarding Board and will be published over the next eighteen months.

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 introduced a duty on relevant partners – including education - to report to the local authority where they suspect a child is at risk of abuse, neglect or other forms of harm. The Welsh Government has recently consulted on guidance on the duty to report (part 7 of the Working together to safeguard people guidance) which will be published over the autumn period.

A more specific mandatory reporting duty for FGM introduced in October 2015 under the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 also requires regulated health and social care professionals and teachers in England and Wales to report known cases of FGM, in under 18-year-olds to the police. While this duty is limited to regulated health professionals and teachers, other practitioners also have a responsibility to take appropriate safeguarding action in relation to any identified or suspected case of FGM.

The NSPCC has established a helpline for anyone who is worried a child may be at risk of FGM. Calls can be made anonymously to the free 24 hour FGM helpline on 0800 028 3550 or by emailing fgmhelp@nspcc.org.uk. The NSPCC can give advice, information and support to anyone concerned a child's welfare is at risk from FGM and has also developed resources which can be found at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/female-genital-mutilation-fgm/>

I am confident that you will want to help ensure children in your school are safeguarded so that they can learn, grow and reach their potential. Therefore, we ask you to raise awareness of this unacceptable abuse, so together we can put an end to FGM in Wales.

Yours sincerely

Kirsty Williams AC/AM

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education