

# THE AMBER PROJECT

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Enhancing the response to child abuse linked to faith & belief



**METROPOLITAN  
POLICE**

London Borough of

**Redbridge**



University of  
**Chester**

**NATIONAL  
FGM  
CENTRE**



**UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE**

1.

# Introduction

# Who we are

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- ✓ The London Borough of **Redbridge Out of Schools Settings Team** (OOSS)
- ✓ The **Metropolitan Police** Service - Honour Belief & Sex (crime & vulnerability) Partnership Team
- ✓ Dr **Lisa Oakley**, Associate Professor in Psychology, University of Chester & Chair of the National Working Group for Abuse Linked to Witchcraft + Spirit Possession (NWG ALWSP)
- ✓ Dr **Naomi Richman**, Fellow in Anthropology at the University of Cambridge

The organisations and individuals who have contributed to the Amber Project come from a wide range of religious and cultural backgrounds.

All are united in their common goal to eradicate child abuse in a faith context.

# Important considerations

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In general, faith communities play **positive roles** in the lives of children and take safeguarding **seriously**



Many of the beliefs discussed here are found in almost **all religions and cultures** around the world, including in the UK



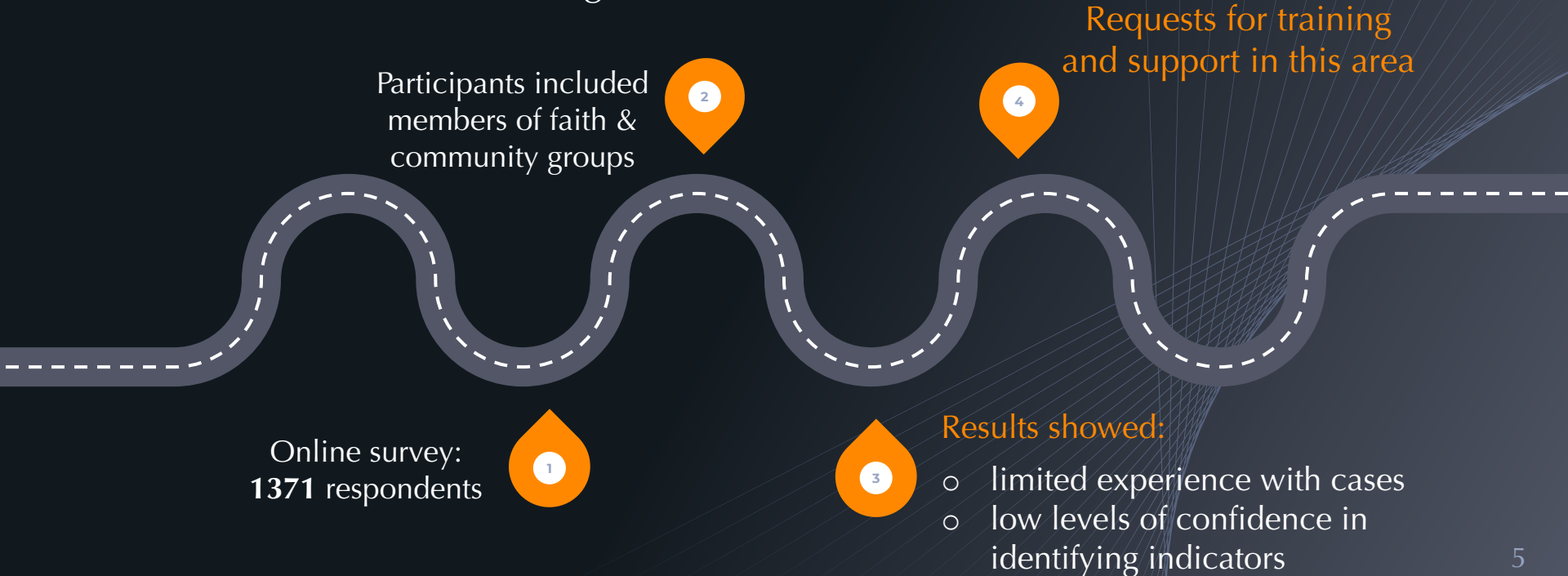
The Amber project does not try to change cultural or religious beliefs - its goal is to **safeguard children**



# What the **research** shows

Oakley, Kinmond,  
Humphreys, 2019;  
Oakley, Kinmond,  
Humphreys & Dioum,  
2017; Kinmond, Oakley,  
Humphreys & Dioum,  
2017

- ✓ A desire to improve safeguarding
- ✓ A need for further training in this area





The Amber Project focuses on a particular example of abuse linked to faith & belief.

This is called **Abuse Linked to Witchcraft and Spirit Possession (ALWSP)**.



What you need to know



- ✓ Witchcraft and spirit possession are **normal** beliefs and practices found in many religions and cultures around the world.
  - ✓ Like all beliefs, they can be used **positively** or **negatively**.
  - ✓ Only in **extreme cases** are they **deployed** to cause harm to others.
  - ✓ These beliefs and practices are **not a problem** – but **abuse** is.

# Objectives

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- ✎ To **provide training** on Abuse Linked to Witchcraft & Spirit Possession (ALWSP) and promote **best practice**
- ✎ To encourage **information sharing**
- ✎ To **promote awareness** of how **Covid-19** has impacted ALWSP
- ✎ To **drive referrals** in this area

## 2. Witchcraft and Spirit Possession (WSP)



# What is witchcraft? [1]

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There is **no universal definition** of witchcraft.

Ideas vary between cultures, religions and places.

Belief in witchcraft is also often **held alongside** religious adherence to major faiths like Christianity, Islam etc.

In most places...



**Witchcraft:** an evil spiritual force.



**Witchcraft accusation:**  
when someone is accused of being a witch - i.e. of using witchcraft to harm other people.



**Witchcraft accusations can sometimes result in considerable harm to the person accused.**



**Witch:** someone who practices witchcraft, knowingly or unknowingly.



In 2021, the UN passed an historic resolution on harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft that **result in human rights violations**.



Need to know



- ✓ In recent years, some people have begun to consciously self-identify as witches. They practice a religion called 'Wicca' or 'Neo-paganism'.
- ✓ For them, witchcraft can be a spiritual force for good. Accusations are not generally a part of their practice.
- ✓ This is not the belief-system we are concerned with here, (unless it were to be used to abuse others).

# Explaining ALWSP

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When life is turned **upside down**, many people seek **spiritual answers**.

Some people who believe in witchcraft may feel that it is the reason for their **misfortune**.

They might believe a **particular person** has performed witchcraft on them and is responsible for their misfortune. They may **accuse** that person of witchcraft.

In recent years, it has become more common for **children** to be accused of witchcraft. This is why its important for you to know about this topic.

# Witchcraft abuse: Timeline of events

*For example:*  
Loss of job  
Sickness  
Death in family

This person is responsible.  
This is called **scapegoating**.

External  
trigger

Witchcraft  
belief

Accusation

Someone may be  
responsible

Remember:  
It is only in the context of socio-economic instability  
that witchcraft accusations result in harm

# What is spirit possession?

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**Spirit possession:** when a person is controlled by a spirit

This can be a **positive** spirit (e.g. a god/goddess) or a **negative** one (e.g. a demon).

The spirit may also cause a person to become a **witch**.

**Context** matters!

Possession by a god/goddess can become harmful if used in the **wrong way**.

Similarly, spiritual practices used to expel a negative force like a demon, like **exorcism** or **deliverance**, can be helpful, if used in the **right way**.



# Spirit possession & deliverance [1]

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- ✓ Where a person is considered possessed by a demon /evil spirit, an **exorcism** or **deliverance** might be performed.

## Deliverance

A spiritual practice designed to end the spirit possession.

It could be performed by a faith-leader, family member  
or independent/freelance deliverance minister.

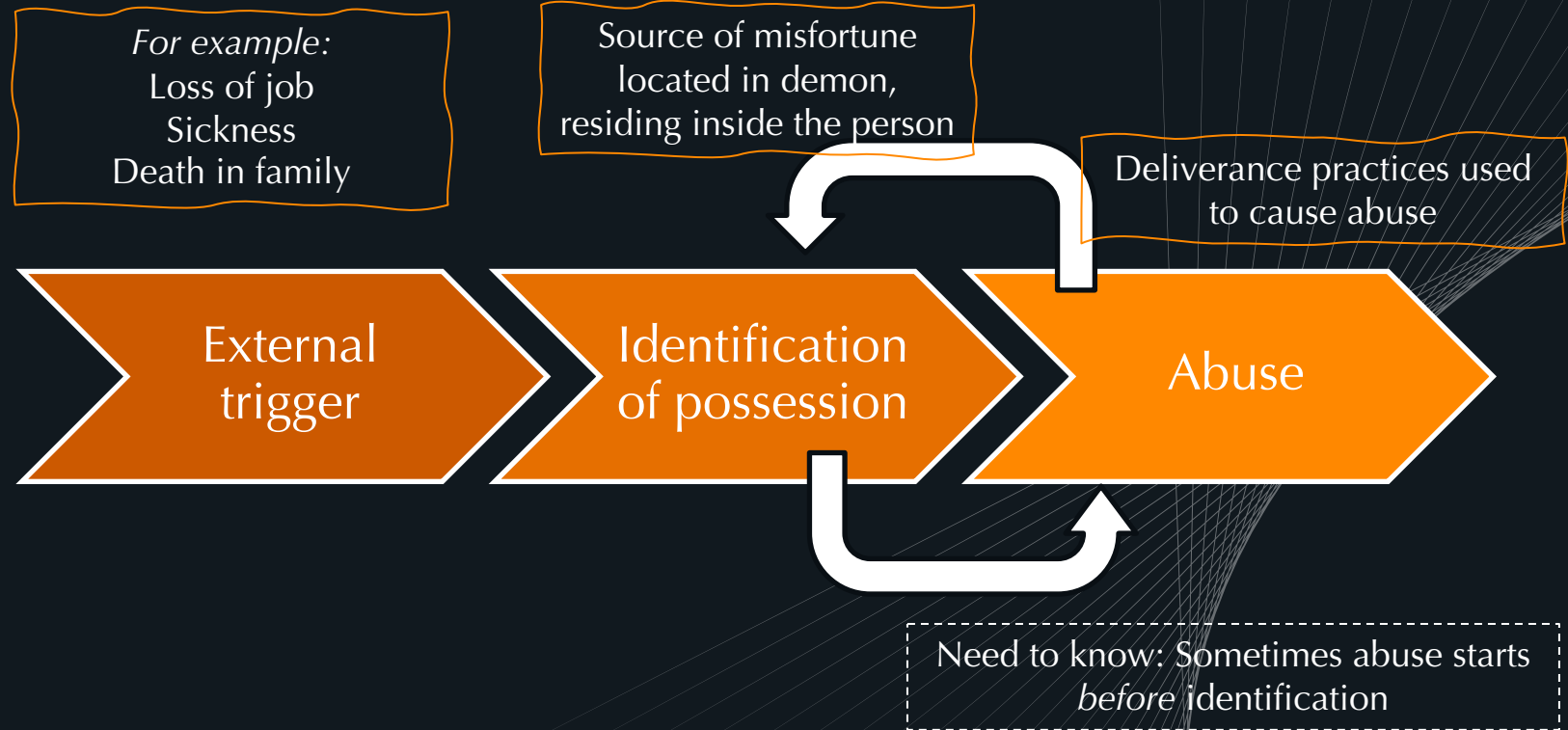
# Spirit possession & deliverance [2]

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- ✓ **Botched deliverance:** deliverance can sometimes go wrong. Trying to force out the demon can involve physical practices like extended fasting, cutting, burning etc.
- ✓ Accusing a child of being possessed can also make a child **vulnerable** to abuse.
- ✓ And sometimes, the child is already in an **abusive context** - *before* the accusation takes place.
- ✓ One challenge we face is that those doing the deliverance may believe they are **helping** the child by making them undergo deliverance.

# Deliverance abuse: Timeline of events



## Terminology



A word cloud featuring various terms related to magic, spirits, and witchcraft. The words are arranged in a dense, overlapping cluster. The most prominent words are 'evil spirits' in large red font, 'juju' in large blue font, and 'sorcerer' in red font. Other visible words include 'jinns', 'djinnns', 'voodoo', 'bondo', 'black magic', 'bruja', 'dayan', 'witchcraft', 'umthakati', 'ndoki', 'evil eye', 'obeah', 'muti', 'Kindoki', 'sorcery', 'Aje', 'Demons', 'heks', 'witch', 'Devil', 'unclean', and 'Bayie'. The colors of the words vary, including red, blue, orange, and black.

evil spirits  
juju  
sorcerer  
jinns  
djinnns  
voodoo  
bondo  
black magic  
bruja  
dayan  
witchcraft  
umthakati  
ndoki  
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obeah  
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sorcery  
Aje  
Demons  
heks  
witch  
Devil  
unclean  
Bayie

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# Factors and indicators



# Tragic case studies

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**Victoria Climbié (d. 2001).** Prompted Operation Violet and development of National Action Plan.



**Ayesha Ali (d. 2013)**



**Khyra Ishaq (d. 2008).**

# What you can do

## RECOGNISE

Know the signs

R

## RESPOND

Ask the right questions

R

Keep clear and accurate records

## RECORD

R

Refer promptly

## REFER

R

# ALWSP specific indicators

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- ✓ A child reporting that they have been told they are evil, demonic, have juju, a djinn, kindoki or other relevant terminology
- ✓ A child reporting that they are having the 'devil beaten out of them'
- ✓ A child starting to wear items (e.g. jewellery) they have been told will protect them from evil spirits
- ✓ A parent wanting to take the child out of school to be taken overseas for a deliverance/exorcism
- ✓ A child disclosing that they being forced to engage in rituals to 'cleanse' or 'deliver' them from evil.

# Generic child protection concerns

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- ✓ A child becoming noticeably **confused, withdrawn, disorientated** or **isolated** and appearing **alone** amongst other children
- ✓ A child's **personal care deteriorating** (e.g., rapid loss of weight, being hungry, turning up to school without food or lunch money, being unkempt with dirty clothes)
- ✓ A child's parent or carer not having a **close bond** with the child, or **visibly disliking** the child
- ✓ **Physical injuries** such as bruises or burns
- ✓ A child's **attendance** at school or college becomes **irregular** or a deterioration in a child's performance
- ✓ A child being **taken out of school** altogether without another school in place

# Characteristics that increase the odds of a child being accused

Physiological	Personality traits	Behaviours	Social set-up
Chronic illness	Non-conformist	Stealing	Being a twin
Physical deformities	Rebellious	Nightmares	Being privately fostered
Epilepsy	Disobedient	Sleepwalking	Being LGBT+
Extreme ugliness / beauty	Defiant	Stammering	Difficult birth for mother
Learning disabilities	Highly intelligent	Enuresis & bedwetting	Orphan
Mental health difficulties	Violent	Soiling	Living in a complex family structure
Autism	Malicious	Talking to oneself	Engaged in domestic servitude (links to trafficking)
Down's syndrome		Getting into trouble at school	Divorced parents
Deafness			
Albinism			



# Examples of ALWSP

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## Physical

Beating  
Burning  
Stabbing  
Cutting  
Strangling  
Poisoning  
Applying oils or  
chilli powder to  
genitals and other  
body orifices

## Spiritual

Use of spiritual  
beliefs to shame,  
humiliate or  
manipulate  
Accusations of  
being a witch  
Accusations of  
being possessed by  
a demon/evil spirit  
Use of religious  
texts/practices to  
justify abuse  
Forced healing and  
deliverance rituals

## Emotional

Enforced isolation  
Blaming and  
scapegoating  
Psychological  
coercion and  
manipulation  
Humiliation &  
constant criticism  
Demanding victim  
stays silent

## Neglect

Starvation  
Seclusion  
Poor personal  
hygiene &  
environmental  
sanitation  
Inadequate clothing  
Repeated/regular  
illness  
Untreated injuries  
Irregular  
attendance at  
school

## Sexual

Made to perform  
sexual acts  
Be subjected to  
unwanted sexual  
acts  
Sexual touching on  
a child's body  
Coerced into child  
sexual exploitation

# Spot the signs

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## Questions to ask yourself:

- ✓ Is one child being **treated differently** from the others?
- ✓ Where does the child **sleep**?
- ✓ Does the child **eat** with the rest of the family?
- ✓ Are there any signs of **restraints**?
- ✓ Is there religious **literature/films** relating to witchcraft and exorcism?
- ✓ Are there **ritualistic objects** around that could be used to cause harm?
- ✓ Has the child's attendance to **school**/activities been irregular?
- ✓ Do the parents/carers want to take the child **out of school**?
- ✓ What is the situation at home – has there been an '**external trigger**' recently?

4.

Recognise, respond,  
record, refer

## Safeguarding is everybody's responsibility

**Duty Of Care Common Law** – you have an obligation to anticipate risks and try to prevent harm of others

**Section 11 of the Children's Act 1989** - places duties on organisations and individuals to ensure that any services that they provide safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

- This responsibility includes ensuring that all adults who work with children are competent, confident and safe.

# A multi-level response

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The Amber Project is a **multi-agency** partnership that seeks to enhance the response to child ALWSP at a local authority level.

This involves engaging with **schools** and **out of school settings**.

**Teachers told us:**

*'I'm concerned I have never heard the phrase and I may be missing out on training to help protect children.'*

*'I would not feel confident to tackle a situation where the abuse was linked to belief in demon possession'*



# School settings

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- ✿ Schools are the main source of referrals.
- ✿ Teachers are best placed to pick up on signs of abuse.

## Schools should:

- ✓ Provide **safeguarding training** for staff on child ALWSP
- ✓ Promote uptake of the **School's Charter to End Harmful Practices**
- ✓ Provide opportunities for **children** to discuss issues of faith and belief
- ✓ Provide opportunities for **parents** to **discuss** their faith or belief
- ✓ **Read** up and share **resources** with staff



# Out of school settings (OOSS)

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OOS **religious settings** can be a significant part of children's lives.



There are currently no legal requirements for the majority of OOSS, and many fall short of standards in place at mainstream schools.



Children in these cases are at risk of being taken overseas, so **respond quickly to concerns**. You may need to involve police.

If a child of school age leaves a school/OOSS, the **Local Authority missing education procedures** should be followed.



The Amber Project is available to promote **best practice** and help everybody understand their responsibilities and the various **reporting structures** available.

# Why do we need more referrals?

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- ✓ This kind of abuse is often **hidden**.
- ✓ Our research shows it is significantly **underreported**. **Covid-19** has exacerbated this problem.
- ✓ ALWSP is **misunderstood** by professionals and considered 'taboo'
- ✓ There is sometimes a **rapid escalation** of abuse, which can result in considerable **harm** and even **murder**.

Between 2019 - 2020, we recorded

# 2,080 cases

That's over **5 per day**.

And a **42% increase** in the last 3 years.

5.

# Making referrals



# Concerned about someone?

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## Step one

- ✿ If someone is in immediate danger, **call 999**
- ✿ Ask yourself, will the child be safe if they return home?

## Step two

- ✿ **Gather information.** Note a child's words, behaviour, presentation, physical, emotional & psychological condition
- ✿ **Refer.** Pass on as much information as possible. You can turn to:
  - Local Children's Services
  - NSPCC
  - School
  - **Know your designated safeguarding lead (DSL)**

# Information you need to make a referral

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This list is not exhaustive, for a full list, see  
[https://www.londoncp.co.uk/referral\\_assess.html](https://www.londoncp.co.uk/referral_assess.html)


# Tips for referrals


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 Do not **delay**

 **Who? What? Where?**  
**When? How?**  
Provide specific  
details

 Be **clear** about  
what actions  
have been taken

 Use **clear** and  
**simple** language.  
Do not use  
abbreviations

 Provide referrer's  
**contact details**  
and/or first  
complainant

7.

# Further resources



- [Met Police Advice](#)
- [MPS Guidance for Schools and Colleges: Safeguarding Young People from Sexual Violence, CSE and Harmful Practices](#)
- [National FGM Centre resources on CALFB](#)
- [Oakley, Kinmond, Humphreys & Dioum \(2017\). An exploration of knowledge about child abuse linked to faith or belief.](#)
- [A short film introducing CALFB by the National Working Group](#)
- [A short film introducing CALFB in an LGBT+ context by the National Working Group](#)
- [Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network \(WHRIN\)](#)
- [The Schools Charter to End Harmful Practices](#)
- [The Independent Safeguarding Authority](#)
- [The Crown Prosecution Service](#)

# Contact details

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## Email:

[OOSS@redbridge.gov.uk](mailto:OOSS@redbridge.gov.uk)

[CPICMailbox-.HonourBeliefandSexCandVPartnershipTeam@met.police.uk](mailto:CPICMailbox-.HonourBeliefandSexCandVPartnershipTeam@met.police.uk)



## Social Media:

[https://twitter.com/Redbridge\\_OOSS](https://twitter.com/Redbridge_OOSS)

<https://www.instagram.com/redbridgeooss/>



## Website:

<https://www.redbridgescp.org.uk/professionals/out-of-school-settings/the-amber-project/>