CONTROLLING OR COERCIVE BEHAVIOUR IN THE WIDER COMMUNITY:

PROPOSAL FOR NEW LEGISLATION

October 2026

The Family Survival Trust is a registered charity (no. 1121388) whose mission is to prevent and provide information on coercive control, cultic behaviour and psychological manipulation. We support those affected by groups that use these techniques. We educate regarding the risks these groups pose to individuals and society and seek appropriate controls on these groups' activities.

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action against cultic abuse

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coercive control is the modern term for brainwashing, grooming (for malicious intent), thought reform, resocialization, total conversion, mind control, bounded choice or abusive power and control.

Coercive control is already a criminal offence but only in an ***intimate or family relationship***.

By removing this limitation (to an intimate or family relationship) the law will criminalise activities (currently legal) that blight thousands of lives in this country at a huge social and financial cost.

Coercive control is the technique used to entrap individuals into extremist groups, cults, gangs and a multitude of other highly controlled ‘communities’. It is also used by individuals in positions of authority to silence those they abuse, be it for sexual activities, financial exploitation, modern slavery or to assist them in criminal activities. Currently, prosecution of those coercively controlling others is only possible if they also commit another crime, for example rape or activities that fall under terrorism legislation. Other victims are unprotected by the law and most often lead a miserable existence that will scar them for life.

This proposal will remove the need to identify an organisation as “illegal” or having to decide, for example, if a self declared “church” is truly a benevolent religious establishment or in fact an exploitative cult. Indeed if individuals or factions within a larger well respected community coercively control others, their activity will be illegal regardless of the pedigree of the rest of that community.

The proposal is to make it a criminal offence for anyone to coercively control any individual (including children) or any group of people.

THE PROPOSAL

The proposal is to amend existing, or create alternative legislation and associated guidance so as to remove the limitations to *intimate or family relationships* from the controlling or coercive behaviour legislation.

The current offence of *Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship* (Serious Crime Act 2015 c. 9 PART 5 S 76[1] see APPENDIX 1) forms part of the domestic abuse legislation.

In the associated Home Office guidance[2] it is stated that the legislation does not apply if the *victim and the perpetrator were not "personally connected" at the time the behaviour occurred*.

WHY MAKE THIS LEGISLATION CHANGE?

It is already accepted that this behaviour is a criminal offence in a close family relationship. There should be crossparty acceptance that anyone exhibiting this same behaviour to unrelated individuals or groups of individuals would also constitute a criminal offence.

- There is no good reason for it to be legal for any adult to coerce another, subsequently controlling their behaviour in this insidious way.
- This would be a useful addition to the tools available to those countering extremism and ganglike or cultic organisations.
- By targeting the behaviour as opposed to groups, classification of organisations or groupings is avoided. The arguments about if a group is a cult or a religion or a company or a gang or a political party or a family all go away. It would be illegal to coercively control other human beings whatever the circumstances, in any organisation or grouping or none.
- The Home Office guidance recognises that victims of coercive control may not have the ability and willingness to recognise or report abusive behaviour "T*he restrictive nature of controlling or coercive behaviour means that, in the context of ongoing abuse, victims can be limited in their ability to exercise autonomy. … This narrowing of options can lead to a victim's ability to make decisions, act or implement change, being limited*"[3].

[1] Serious Crime Act 2015 c. 9 PART 5 S 76
[2] Home Office, Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship Statutory Guidance Framework (Home Office: 5 April 2023)
[3] Ibid Paragraph 62

- Where the victim and the perpetrator were not “personally connected” at the time the behaviour occurred, the current Home Office guidance suggests that it should be considered whether bringing charges under existing stalking and harassment legislation is appropriate. However the harassment legislation[4] addresses quite different harmful behaviour. The associated legal guidance[5] defines harassment as 'causing alarm or distress' or 'putting people in fear of violence'. Coercion is a different phenomenon and is described below. Many of the behaviours that constitute coercive control would likely not be considered harassment according to the current guidance.

THE MECHANISMS OF COERCIVE CONTROL

The mechanisms of entrapment and psychological coercion have long been recognised. As a result of studying techniques used by China in the 1950s, Lifton[6] identified eight social-psychological influence techniques. Examination of these techniques show that they actually employ many of the *Types of behaviour* listed in the Home Office’s Statutory Guidance Framework[7]. The most important technique Lifton discusses is “Milieu Control” or control of the victim’s environment. This refers to the isolating strategy of controlling communication with others, as well as with oneself. Within the Home Office guidance we see:

- Isolating the victim from family, friends …
- Controlling or monitoring the victim's daily activities and behaviour, for example making them account for their time …
- Using digital systems, such as smart devices or social media, to coerce, control, upset and monitor the victim.
- Controlling or monitoring the victim's daily activities and behaviour, for example making them account for their time, dictating what they can wear, what and when they can eat, when and where they may sleep, who they meet or talk to, where they may work, restricting access to training/development etc

Another of Lifton’s influencing techniques is “The Demand for Purity”. He describes how *ideological totalists become the ultimate judges of good and evil within their world, they are able to use these universal tendencies (i.e. susceptibilities to guilt and shame) toward guilt and shame as emotional levers for their controlling and manipulative influences.* Within the behaviours listed in the CPS Guidance (see Appendix II), we find, amongst many others, the following *Types of behaviour*:

- repeatedly putting them down such as telling them they are worthless;
- enforcing rules and activity which humiliate, degrade or dehumanise the victim;

[4] Protection from Harassment Act 1997
[5] CPS Stalking and Harassment Guidance Updated 23 May 2018
[6] Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A study of “Brainwashing” in China* (New York: Norton, 1961)
[7] Home Office, Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship Statutory Guidance Framework (Home Office: 5 April 2023)

More recently Dr Stein writes[8] "Coercive persuasion within the closed domain controlled by the charismatic and authoritarian leader leads to the triple isolation of the follower. [Isolation from the outside world; isolated from authentic relationships to others; isolation from his or her self and hence the ability to think clearly about the situation.] … An MI5[9] report confirmed what many scholars of terrorist and cultic groups have long known: there is no single, or simple, demographic or psychological profile of those likely to be indoctrinated. From the adherents of David Koresh and Jim Jones who followed (or were forced to follow) their leaders to their deaths, to contemporary suicide bombers, and to highly controlling personal growth groups, a range of persons across nationalities, age, class and racial categories have been successfully [manipulated to act against their own survival interests]. The toll in lost and wasted lives, in shattered relationships and communities and in broken beliefs continues to grow."

The detection of coercive or controlling behaviour (as described in the current Home Office Guidance for the existing law) is a very strong indicator that one or more individuals are being, or have been, drawn into, or are being kept in, what we would now call an extremist, totalist or cultic organisation or grouping. They will be being denied the liberal values and choices all should enjoy in Britain today. In the worst cases, they may be being abused or abusing others. They will be under the coercive control of the charismatic and psychologically manipulative leader or leadership group.

We believe that making it a criminal offence to undertake the coercive activities required to implement coercive control, thought reform, resocialization, total conversion, mind control, brainwashing, bounded choice or whatever term is flavour of the day, will at last make it illegal to take away others' freedom in this insidious (and currently apparently legal) way.

CHILDREN

The Serious Crime Act 2015 2015 c. 9 PART 5 S 76 (see Appendix 1) excludes child victims where the perpetrator has responsibility for the child, for the purposes of Part 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (see section 17 of that Act), and the child is under 16. The Home Office guidance says "This is because the criminal law, in particular the child cruelty/ neglect offence in section 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 as amended by section 66 of the 2015 Act, already covers such behaviour"[10]. The amendment adds the the words "*whether physically or otherwise"* to the offence of *Cruelty to persons under sixteen*:

> … wilfully assaults, ill-treats (whether physically or otherwise), neglects ...

The assumption that coercive control is already covered is not immediately apparent when

[8] Alexandra Stein (2017), *Terror, Love & Brainwashing,* (pp 21-22) Routledge,
[9] Travis, Alan. 2008. "MI5 Report Challenges Views on Terrorism in Britain Exclusive: Sophisticated Analysis Says There Is No Single Pathway to Violent Extremism, *The Guardian*, London: Guardian News & Media Ltd. This was confirmed more recently by terrorism scholar Martha Crenshaw at the 2011 conference in Bielefeld, Germany, on Processes of Radicalization and Deradicalization, International Journal of Conflict and Violence. Also see John Horgan, 2014, *The Psychology of Terrorism*, 2nd ed. Routledge, for an interesting discussion of attempts to map profiles of terrorists.
[10] We would require further guidance if there could be someone who is in a close family relationship with a child but is not responsible for the child who would be 'caught' under the current law.

reading the CPS Child Abuse guidance[11]. This document does not mention coercive control nor does it have a list of types of behaviour similar to that in the Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship Statutory Guidance Framework (See Appendix II). It also lacks an understanding that in the context of these groups that parents will not have autonomy over decisions regarding their children. Lalich writes, *Children are especially vulnerable to systems of influence because their selves are not fully formed and therefore uniquely susceptible to influence and persuasion. Parents in cults do not provide much protection, given that they're often entrapped themselves. In many cases, cult parents are not really parents in the classic sense; instead they are pawns or instruments of the leader and the transcendental belief system.*[12]

The impact of coercive control on children is particularly severe. Early years upbringing is critical to life-time mental health and wellbeing. We would seek to include in the list of behaviours those which specifically impact children. For example

- denying a modern education,
- denying access to toys,
- time to play and explore,
- access to playmates or friends
- desensitising to violence
- indoctrination with racial or political hatred.
- isolation

This list is a work in progress but it is imperative that it encompasses an upbringing that is intended to limit life choices in a way that would deny the child its human rights, choices and self determination in adulthood.

To quote M Bloom and J Horgan[13] "PATHWAYS TO INVOLVEMENT, Coercion: *Violence is a slippery concept—nonlinear, destructive, and reproductive. . . . Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality—force, assault, or the infliction of pain—alone. Violence also includes assaults on the person, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning … many of these tactics mirror those used by pedophiles to recruit victims for sexual exploitation*".

Despite numerous reports of abusive behaviour towards children from survivors, in the press and in academic research, there are relatively few judgments from the Family Court where children have been removed from such organisations. This is indicative of the lack of safeguarding and access to these secretive groups. The Family Court have, however, over the years identified organisations as "corrupt, sinister and dangerous"[14] (Scientology) and "a *cult with some potentially harmful and sinister elements*"[15] (Universal Medicine). In both these cases a child was moved to the care of a parent who had left the organisation, the

[11] CPS Child Abuse (non-sexual) - prosecution guidance
[12] Janja Lalich and Karla McLaren (2018). *Escaping Utopia, Growing Up in a Cult, Getting Out, and Starting Over*. (pp 95-96) Routledge
[13] Bloom, Mia and John Horgan. (2019) *Small Arms: Children and Terrorism*, Quoting Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe I. Bourgeois, *Violence in War and Peace* (pp74). Cornell University Press
[14] Latey J in Re B and G (Minors) (Custody) [1985]
[15] S (Parental Alienation: Cult: Transfer of Primary Care) [2020] EWHC 1940 (Fam) (15 July 2020)

decisions being upheld on appeal. We can only speculate on how many thousands of other children remain to be raised within these and similar extremist organisations.

We believe that the legislation we are proposing will at the very least be a very strong message that society considers these practices child cruelty and if they are not reformed, the tools to prosecute organisation leaders will be available.

IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of this modification to the law related to coercive control could be implemented either through changes to the law or guidance to existing law(s) or probably both.
The current Domestic Abuse legislation[16] (reproduced in APPENDIX 1) is short and could be used as a basis for the new legislation. The associated guidance would be similar in many respects to the guidance for the current coercive control law. We would expect additional guidance may be required to cover children and guidance if coercive control appears to be organisation wide. That is who would be the criminally responsible individuals where many members conspire together. The details will be the responsibility of the Home Office legislation drafting professionals however we imagine something along these lines:

Controlling or coercive behaviour

1) *A person or group of people or those acting on behalf of an organisation (A) commits an offence if—*

    a) *A repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person or group of people (B) that is controlling or coercive,*

    b) *the behaviour has a serious effect on B, and*

    c) *A knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B.*

2) *A's behaviour has a "serious effect" on B if—*

    a) *it causes B to fear, on at least two occasions, that violence will be used against B, or*
    b) *it causes B serious alarm or distress which has a substantial adverse effect on B's usual day-to-day activities.*

3) *For the purposes of subsection (1)(c) A "ought to know" that which a reasonable person in possession of the same information would know.*

4) *In proceedings for an offence under this section it is a defence for A to show that—*

[16] Serious Crime Act 2015 c. 9 PART 5 S 76

a) *in engaging in the behaviour in question, A believed that he or she was acting in B's best interests, and*

b) *the behaviour was in all the circumstances reasonable.*

5) *A is to be taken to have shown the facts mentioned in subsection (4) if—*
   a) *sufficient evidence of the facts is adduced to raise an issue with respect to them, and*

   b) *the contrary is not proved beyond reasonable doubt.*

6) *The defence in subsection (4) is not available to A in relation to behaviour that causes B to fear that violence will be used against B.*

7) *A person guilty of an offence under this section is liable—*

   a) *on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding N years, or a fine, or both;*

   b) *on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding M months, or a fine, or both.*

Guidance about investigation of offences under the above section

(1)The Secretary of State may issue guidance about the investigation of offences under section XX to whatever persons the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(2)The Secretary of State may revise any guidance issued under this section.

(3)The Secretary of State must arrange for any guidance issued or revised under this section to be published.

This text is presented here for those readers who might find it useful to imagine what a new law might 'feel' like. It is quite possible that considered legal opinion may result in significant changes to the text. The objective, however, will remain to criminalise this objectionable and detrimentally life-changing behaviour.

NOTE ON THIS VERSION

This version (v1.2c) has not been scrutinised by any legal authority and as such represents the 'spirit' and direction that the *Family Survival Trust: Action Against Cultic Abuse* would see as essential for the control of damaging extremist and cultic activity in the UK.

If you have comments or would like to support our campaign efforts, please contact the Family Survival Trust: Action Against Cultic Abuse via info@thefamilysurvivaltrust.org

APPENDIX 1

Serious Crime Act 2015 c. 9 PART 5 S 76

Changes to legislation: *There are currently no known outstanding effects for the Serious Crime Act 2015, Cross Heading: Domestic abuse. (See end of Document for details)*

Serious Crime Act 2015

2015 CHAPTER 9

PART 5

PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND OTHERS

Domestic abuse

76 Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship

(1) A person (A) commits an offence if—

(a) A repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person (B) that is controlling or coercive,

(b) at the time of the behaviour, A and B are personally connected **[**F1(see subsection (6))**]**,

(c) the behaviour has a serious effect on B, and

(d) A knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B. F2(2) . . .

. . . . . .

(3) But A does not commit an offence under this section if at the time of the behaviour in question—

(a) A has responsibility for B, for the purposes of Part 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (see section 17 of that Act), and

(b) B is under 16.

(4) A's behaviour has a "serious effect" on B if—

(a) it causes B to fear, on at least two occasions, that violence will be used against B, or

(b) it causes B serious alarm or distress which has a substantial adverse effect on B's usual day-to-day activities.

(5) For the purposes of subsection (1)(d) A "ought to know" that which a reasonable person in possession of the same information would know.

[F3(6) A and B are "personally connected" if any of the following applies— (a) they are, or have been, married to each other;

(b) they are, or have been, civil partners of each other;

(c) they have agreed to marry one another (whether or not the agreement has been terminated);

(d) they have entered into a civil partnership agreement (whether or not the agreement has been terminated);

(e) they are, or have been, in an intimate personal relationship with each other;

(f) they each have, or there has been a time when they each have had, a parental relationship in relation to the same child (see subsection (6A));

(g) they are relatives.

(6A) For the purposes of subsection (6)(f) a person has a parental relationship in relation to a child if—

(a) the person is a parent of the child, or

(b) the person has parental responsibility for the child.**]**

(7) In **[**F4subsections (6) and (6A)**]** —

"civil partnership agreement" has the meaning given by section 73 of the Civil Partnership Act 2004;

"child" means a person under the age of 18 years;

"parental responsibility" has the same meaning as in the Children Act 1989;

"relative" has the meaning given by section 63(1) of the Family Law Act 1996.

(8) In proceedings for an offence under this section it is a defence for A to show that— (a) in engaging in the behaviour in question, A believed that he or she was acting in B's best interests, and

(b) the behaviour was in all the circumstances reasonable.

(9) A is to be taken to have shown the facts mentioned in subsection (8) if— (a) sufficient evidence of the facts is adduced to raise an issue with respect to them, and

(b) the contrary is not proved beyond reasonable doubt.

(10) The defence in subsection (8) is not available to A in relation to behaviour that causes B to fear that violence will be used against B.

(11) A person guilty of an offence under this section is liable—

(a) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years, or a fine, or both;

(b) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding **[**F5the general limit in a magistrates' court**]**, or a fine, or both.

Textual Amendments

F1 Words in s. 76(1)(b) inserted (5.4.2023) by Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (c. 17), **ss. 68(2)**, 90(6); S.I. 2023/406, reg. 2(a) (with reg. 3)

F2 S. 76(2) omitted (5.4.2023) by virtue of Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (c. 17), **ss. 68(3)**, 90(6); S.I. 2023/406, reg. 2(a) (with reg. 3)

F3 S. 76(6)(6A) substituted for s. 76(6) (5.4.2023) by Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (c. 17), **ss. 68(4)**, 90(6); S.I. 2023/406, reg. 2(a) (with reg. 3)

F4 Words in s. 76(7) substituted (5.4.2023) by Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (c. 17), **ss. 68(5)**, 90(6); S.I. 2023/406, reg. 2(a) (with reg. 3)

F5 Words in s. 76(11)(b) substituted (7.2.2023 at 12.00 p.m.) by The Judicial Review and Courts Act 2022 (Magistrates' Court Sentencing Powers) Regulations 2023 (S.I. 2023/149), regs. 1(2), 2(1), **Sch. Pt. 1**

Commencement Information

I1 S. 76 in force at 29.12.2015 by S.I. 2015/1976, **reg. 2(a)**

[F6 76A Offences under section 76 committed outside the United Kingdom (1) If—

(a) a person's behaviour consists of or includes behaviour in a country outside the United Kingdom,

(b) the behaviour would constitute an offence under section 76 if it occurred in England and Wales, and

(c) the person is a United Kingdom national or is habitually resident in England and Wales,

the person is guilty in England and Wales of that offence.

(2) In this section—

"country" includes territory;

"United Kingdom national" means an individual who is—

(a) a British citizen, a British overseas territories citizen, a British National (Overseas) or a British Overseas citizen,

(b) a person who under the British Nationality Act 1981 is a British subject, or

(c) a British protected person within the meaning of that Act.]

Textual Amendments

F6 S. 76A inserted (29.6.2021) by Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (c. 17), s. 90(2), **Sch. 3 para. 3**

77 Guidance about investigation of offences under section 76

(1) The Secretary of State may issue guidance about the investigation of offences under section 76 to whatever persons the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(2) The Secretary of State may revise any guidance issued under this section.

(3) The Secretary of State must arrange for any guidance issued or revised under this section to be published.

Commencement Information

I2 S. 77 in force at 29.12.2015 by S.I. 2015/1976, **reg. 2(b)**

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APPENDIX II

Types of behaviour

[From Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship . This Code for Crown Prosecutors is a public document, issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions that sets out the general principles Crown Prosecutors should follow when they make decisions on cases.]

"Repeated or continued behaviour that is controlling or coercive"

A pattern of Coercive and Controlling Behaviour (CCB) can be well established before a single incident is reported. In many cases the conduct might seem innocent – especially if considered in isolation of other incidents – and the victim may not be aware of, or be ready to acknowledge, abusive behaviour. The consideration of the cumulative impact of CCB and the pattern of behaviour within the context of the relationship is crucial. This approach will support the prosecutor to assess effectively whether a pattern of behaviour amounts to fear that violence will be carried out; or serious alarm or distress leading to a substantial adverse effect on usual day-to-day activities.

Building on examples within the CPS Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship, relevant behaviour of the suspect can include:

- isolating a person from their friends and family
- depriving them of their basic needs
- monitoring their time
- monitoring a person via online communication tools or using spyware
- using digital systems such as smart devices or social media to coerce, control, or upset the victim including posting triggering material

- taking control over aspects of their everyday life, such as where they can go, who they can see, what to wear and when they can sleep – this can be intertwined with the suspect saying it is in their best interests, and ‘rewarding’ ‘good behaviour’ e.g. with gifts
- depriving them of access to support services, such as specialist support or medical services
- repeatedly putting them down such as telling them they are worthless
- enforcing rules and activity which humiliate, degrade or dehumanise the victim
- forcing the victim to take part in criminal activity such as shoplifting, neglect or abuse of children to encourage self-blame and prevent disclosure to authorities
- economic abuse including coerced debt, controlling spending/bank accounts/investments/mortgages/benefit payments
- controlling the ability to go to school or place of study
- taking wages, benefits or allowances
- threatening to hurt or kill
- threatening to harm a child
- threatening to reveal or publish private information
- threatening to hurt or physically harming a family pet
- assault
- physical intimidation e.g. blocking doors, clenching or shaking fists
- criminal damage (such as destruction of household goods)
- preventing a person from having access to transport or from working
- preventing a person from learning or using a language or making friends outside of their ethnic or cultural background
- family ‘dishonour’
- reputational damage
- sexual assault or threats of sexual assault

- reproductive coercion, including restricting a victim's access to birth control, refusing to use a birth control method, forced pregnancy, forcing a victim to get an abortion, to undergo in vitro fertilisation (IVF) or other procedure, or denying access to such a procedure
- using substances such as alcohol or drugs to control a victim through dependency, or controlling their access to substances
- disclosure of sexual orientation
- disclosure of HIV status or other medical condition without consent
- limiting access to family, friends and finances
- withholding and/or destruction of the victim's immigration documents, e.g. passports and visas
- threatening to place the victim in an institution against the victim's will, e.g. care home, supported living facility, mental health facility, etc (particularly for disabled or elderly victims

This is not an exhaustive list and prosecutors should be aware that a suspect will often tailor the conduct to the victim, and this conduct can vary to a high degree from one person to the next. Prosecutors should consider the conduct of the suspect in each individual case to assess whether it discloses controlling or coercive behaviour.

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[This list has been considerably extended in the latest version of the Home Office guidance.]