

A renewed vision for the fight against modern slavery in the UK

A programme for Government

May 2024

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About the Modern Slavery Policy Unit

The Modern Slavery Policy Unit is a joint initiative led by an anti-slavery charity, Justice and Care, and a leading think tank, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ). The joint policy unit has a core mission – to keep modern slavery at the top of the British political agenda and ensure the UK fights the crime. This means better understanding of the nature and scale of modern slavery, increased investment and a sophisticated national response proportionate to the level of threat. Utilising the experience of frontline practitioners, developing creative and evidence-based ideas, fostering a new understanding of the scale of the crime and listening to the voices of survivors, the Modern Slavery Policy Unit works to catalyse the political leadership needed to achieve systemic change.

The Modern Slavery Policy Unit:

- 1) Advocates for policy and legislation that places victims and their recovery needs at its heart.
- 2) Bridges the gap between those working to disrupt this crime and support its survivors, and decision-makers in Westminster, ensuring that voices from the frontline are heard and heeded.
- 3) Works on a cross-party basis, bringing together and equipping a strong caucus of parliamentarians to lead the fight against slavery.

Acknowledgements

This report brings together key recommendations based on research conducted by the Modern Slavery Policy Unit between 2020 and 2024.

We are grateful to all the individuals and organisations that have engaged and shared their knowledge and expertise with us during these years, particularly the survivors whose desire to protect others by contributing to research has been inspiring.

Special thanks go to the Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Unit and their regional coordinators and modern slavery police special points of contact, The Salvation Army and its 12 subcontractors, Bakhita House, Justice and Care's Victim Navigators, and the CSJ Alliance charities.

Foreword

The introduction of the Modern Slavery Act in 2015 established the UK as a clear global leader in the fight against modern slavery. Nearly ten years on, despite some initial progress, overall, we are moving in the wrong direction.

Modern slavery is a complex crime in which victims suffer horrendous abuse and exploitation, and when found, are often traumatised, fearful of authorities and find it difficult to rebuild their lives. The true scale and nature of it is unknown, yet there is no corner of our country left untouched by the scourge of modern slavery.

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA) and Illegal Migration Act 2023 (IMA) gravely threaten the proud legacy of the Modern Slavery Act. Whilst making victim support statutory in the UK, NABA put more onus on victims to prove exploitation in order to access support provided through the National Referral Mechanism. The IMA penalises victims based on the means of arrival to the UK excluding them from support if they had arrived at the UK illegally, even if they were trafficked. Reducing access to support for victims means leaving them in the hands of traffickers to suffer further abuse and exploitation. Modern slavery victims across the UK are being failed, and perpetrators are allowed to act with impunity.

The next government has a unique opportunity and a duty to put things right by reinvigorating the UK's response to modern slavery, where political leadership has waned. The nature of the crime has evolved and as such our response must adapt and be strengthened to meet the new challenges posed by this rapidly growing threat to our communities. This report sets out six priority recommendations for how the next government can take seriously the challenge of modern slavery in the first year after the election. This includes by treating the crime of modern slavery as it truly is - a crime against some of the most vulnerable in our society. The next government must increase the safeguarding and support for victims to enable their recovery and cooperation with the criminal justice system; hold the perpetrators to account; develop a strategy that prioritises prevention; coordinate a criminal justice response; and partner with businesses, trade unions and non-governmental organisations to effect real change.

We firmly believe that a collaborative and coordinated response is required if we are to succeed in our aim to eradicate modern slavery from our country and beyond. Strong political leadership is vital to spearhead the fight, thus we hope that the recommendations of this report will be acted upon.



Lord Randall of Uxbridge



**Baroness O'Grady of
Upper Holloway**

Executive summary

In 2013, the CSJ published its first report on modern slavery called *It Happens Here*, calling for political leadership and new robust legislation to outlaw the abhorrent crime of modern slavery in the UK.¹ Significant progress has been made since, in particular under the leadership of the former Prime Minister, Rt Hon Theresa May MP, which set the UK as the global leader in the fight against slavery. Yet, in the last few years, this progress has stalled, political leadership has waned and new legislation has been introduced that undermines the legacy of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Eleven years on and in the run-up to a general election, the CSJ and Justice and Care are calling for fresh political leadership in the fight against slavery in the UK. We believe the next government, whoever that may be, has a unique opportunity to take stock and re-energise its response to modern slavery based on three key principles:

- 1) Modern slavery is fundamentally not an issue of immigration. It is a crime against a person and needs to be dealt with as a serious crime.
- 2) Victim support is key to prosecuting perpetrators and putting an end to modern slavery.
- 3) Partnership with the voluntary and private sector is required to strengthen the fight against modern slavery.

Action is needed to tackle modern slavery urgently. With the above principles in mind, this report makes the following top six recommendations for action in the first year of the new government's term:

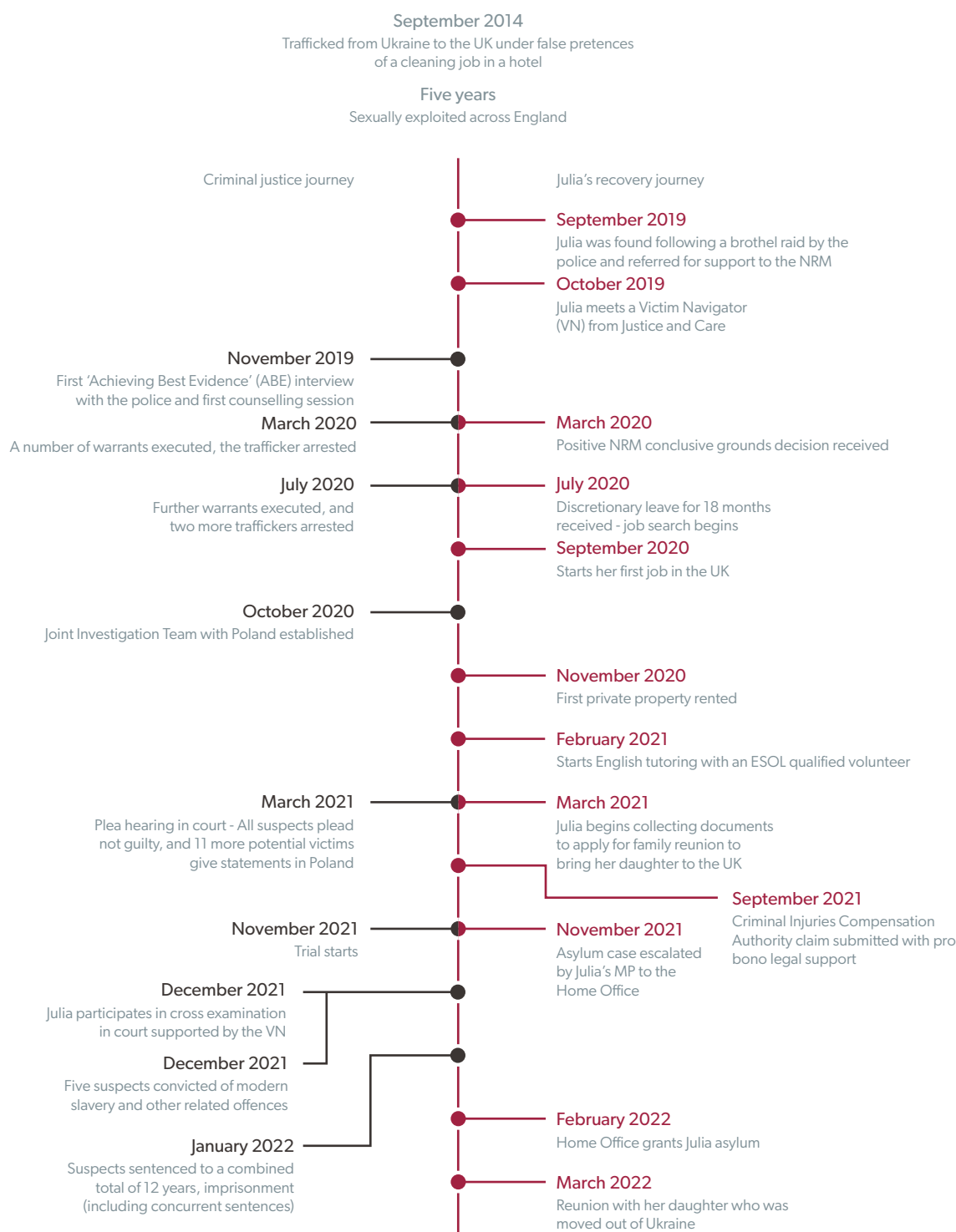
- 1) Re-assign ministerial responsibilities to reflect the true nature of modern slavery crime.
- 2) Review and address the impact of the recently introduced policy and legislation, particularly the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023.
- 3) Develop a new cross-departmental strategy to reinvigorate the response to modern slavery.
- 4) Ensure needs-based support is available to all victims of modern slavery by reviewing the National Referral Mechanism and rolling out the Victim Navigator programme.
- 5) Close legal gaps by introducing a new Modern Slavery Bill that would strengthen our response to criminal exploitation: 1) amend the Modern Slavery Act to include the definition of criminal exploitation and 2) introduce a new criminal offence of cuckooing.
- 6) Strengthen UK Government policy and legislation to prevent modern slavery in business and public sector supply chains.

¹ Centre for Social Justice, *It Happens Here: Equipping the United Kingdom to Fight Modern Slavery*, March 2013

Survivor journey - Julia's story

Julia's story is an example of how long the recovery and criminal justice journey can take. Her journey was not straightforward, but with the support of a Justice and Care Victim Navigator who accompanied Julia throughout, she was able to rebuild her life and secure justice against those responsible.

The timeline of Julia's story was kindly provided by Justice and Care. For more details, listen to the Guardian podcast 'Trafficked'.²



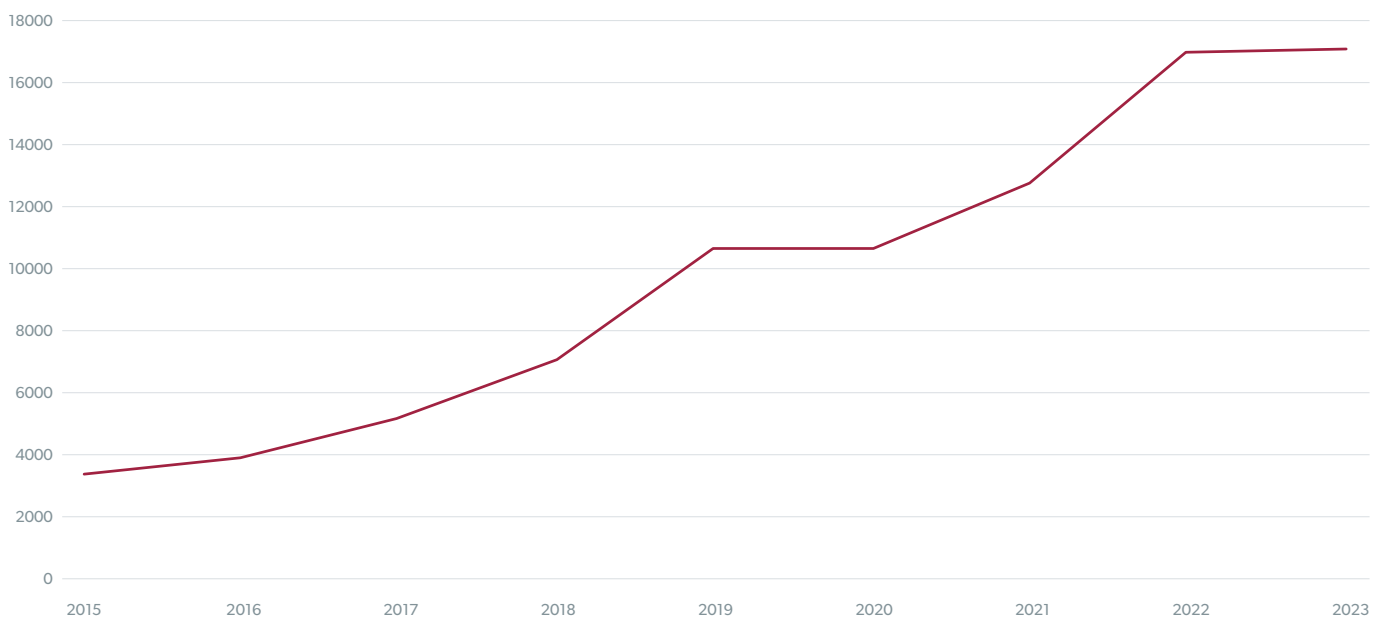
² Guardian podcast Trafficked, March 2023

Background

Modern slavery is a crime where British, as well as foreign national men, women and children are being forced into sex, labour and criminal activity across the UK. It is hidden, complex and largely unreported, yet there is no corner of our country that is untouched by this crime.

The true scale of modern slavery remains unknown. Since 2009, the number of potential victims identified and referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – the government’s gateway to support - has been growing year on year on average by 30 per cent, except for 2020 and 2023, with a total of 17,004 potential victims identified and referred for support in 2023 (Figure 1).³ However, in 2020, based on police data, we estimated that there could be at least 100,000 men, women and children trapped in modern slavery across the UK.⁴ This is nearly ten times the number of potential victims found in the UK in that year.⁵ Underestimating the true scale of the crime undermines the government’s ability to deploy a proportionate and appropriate response.

Figure 1. Number of potential victims of modern slavery referred to the NRM from 2015 to 2023



Modern slavery is a transnational crime. People from more than 120 countries across the world have been trafficked and exploited in the UK. Yet, British nationals are consistently the top nationality of potential victims of slavery referred for support into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). In 2023, one in four possible victims of modern slavery were British nationals, most of whom were British children. Our research suggests that many British victims still go unidentified as they are not recognised as being trafficked and exploited within the borders of their own country.⁶

Modern slavery offences recorded by the police have increased nearly 700 per cent since the year ending June 2016 to 9,694 offences in the year ending June 2023.⁷ However, despite a continuous rise in the number of victims identified and the number of modern slavery crimes recorded by the police, the number of criminals convicted for perpetrating modern slavery crimes remains consistently low. In 2022, there were 307 prosecutions and 101 convictions for modern slavery offences on an all-offence basis where modern slavery is charged as a principal offence or alongside another principal offence (Figure 2).⁸ There were only 79 defendants prosecuted and 35 convicted for modern slavery on a principal offence basis in 2022 (Figure 3).⁹ This clearly shows that criminals are acting with impunity.

³ Home Office, [NRM and Duty to Notify statistics: End of Year summary 2023](#), March 2024

⁴ Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, [It Still Happens Here: Fighting UK Slavery in the 2020s](#), July 2020

⁵ Home Office, [NRM and Duty to Notify statistics: End of the Year summary 2020](#)

⁶ Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, [A Path to Freedom and Justice](#), February 2022; [It Still Happens Here: Fighting UK Slavery in the 2020s](#), July 2020; St. Mary's University, Justice and Care et al [Identifying Pathways to Support British Victims of Modern Slavery towards Safety and Recovery: A Scoping Study](#), September 2022

⁷ Home Office, [Police recorded crimes and outcomes data](#) (revised January 2024)

⁸ Ministry of Justice, [Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2022 All Offence Prosecutions and Convictions data tool](#) (revised January 2024)

⁹ Ministry of Justice, [Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2022 Outcomes by Offence data tool](#) (revised January 2024)

Figure 2. Number of prosecutions and convictions for modern slavery on all-offence basis 2017-2022

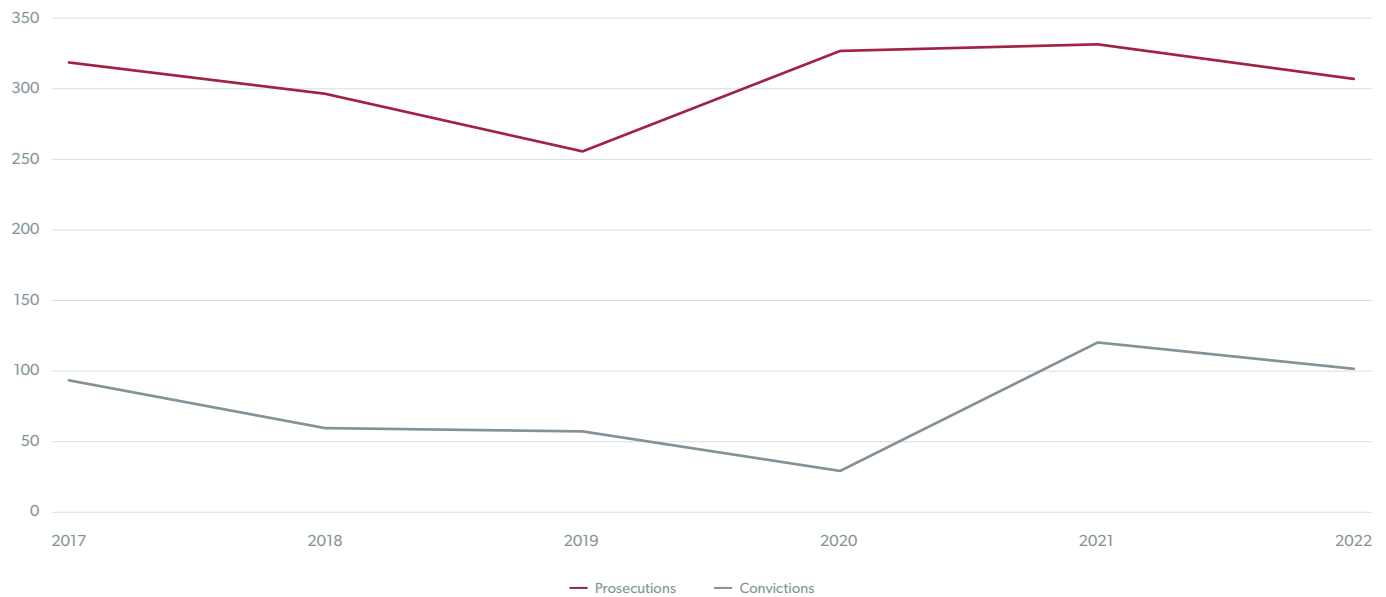
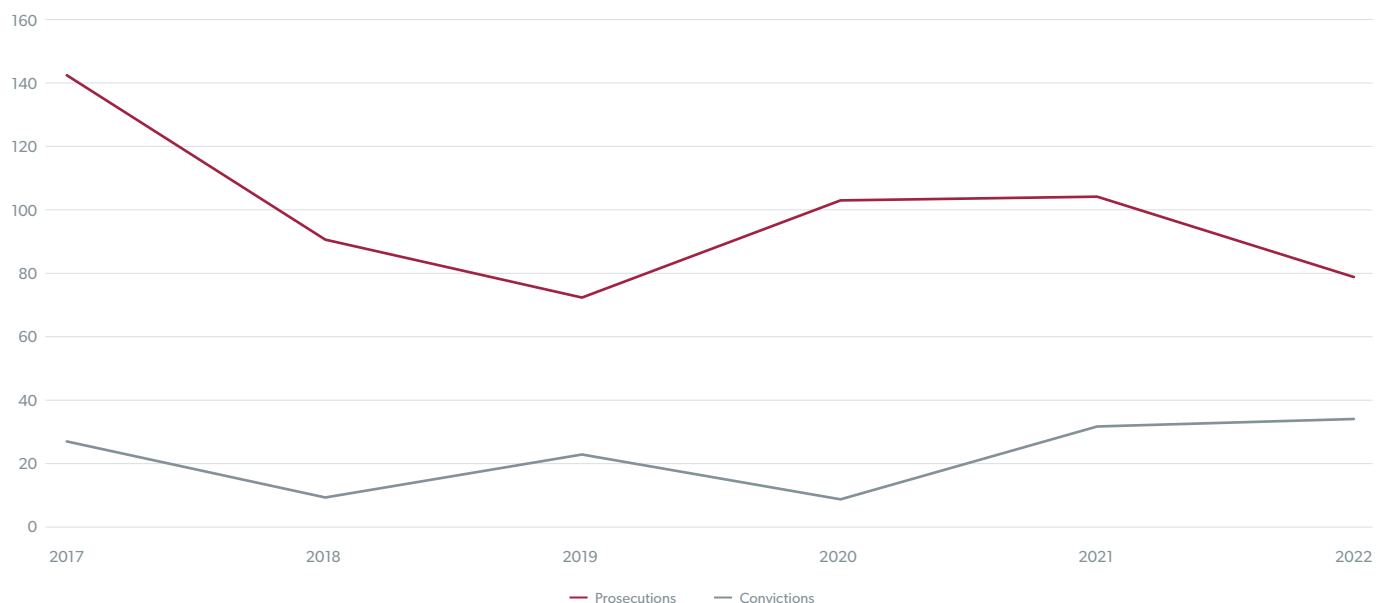


Figure 3. Number of prosecutions and convictions for modern slavery as a principal offence 2017-2022



In 2015 the Modern Slavery Act (MSA) marked a turning point in the fight against slavery and human trafficking and set the UK as a global leader in tackling this horrendous crime. Yet, in recent years, political leadership in the fight against modern slavery has significantly waned. The response to modern slavery has been incorporated into the Organised Immigration Crime agenda. Politicians and the media have been speaking about human trafficking and people smuggling interchangeably, leading to further confusion. As a result, measures changing support for victims of modern slavery were included in the two most recent immigration laws, the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act (IMA) 2023, while there is no mention of modern slavery victims in the Victims and Prisoners Bill. The recent changes have made it even more difficult for victims to access the support they need, which is critical to bringing criminals to justice. The government has cited “abuse of our generous support system” to defend the changes, yet has failed to produce any evidence proving widespread abuse.¹⁰ In December 2023, the Home Affairs Select Committee concluded that modern slavery was “no longer a priority” for the government and that its focus on illegal migration had come at a cost, particularly for thousands of British victims of modern slavery who continue to fall through gaps in support.¹¹

¹⁰ Home Office Press Release, March 2021

¹¹ House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, *Human Trafficking report*, December 2023

Priority recommendations for action to tackle modern slavery in the new government's first year in office

Recommendation 1: Re-assign ministerial responsibilities to reflect the true nature of modern slavery crime

Modern slavery is not primarily an issue of immigration. In fact, since 2014, 21,462 British nationals were referred to the NRM for modern slavery that had occurred in the UK (which accounted for 46 per cent of all those referred for exploitation occurring on UK soil). Separating modern slavery from immigration is fundamental to building an appropriate response to this serious crime, especially in making sure British victims do not go unseen. It should be the first priority for a new government to make sure that modern slavery is treated as a serious and organised crime and that its victims are safeguarded appropriately. This will set the direction for modern slavery policy and ensure victims of modern slavery are treated as any other victim of crime. Getting victim support right is key to unlocking successful prosecutions against the criminals.

Building resilient supply chains is core to a strong and thriving economy. Currently general supply chain policy sits with the Department for Business and Trade. Yet responsibility for the business risk posed by modern slavery in supply chains is held by the Home Office rather than part of a comprehensive supply chain policy. The Department for Business and Trade is far better placed to support UK companies to act responsibly and create a level playing field with respect to forced labour in an integrated manner.

- 1.1 Remove responsibility for modern slavery from the portfolio of the Minister for Countering Illegal Migration and add it back to the responsibility of the Minister for Victims and Safeguarding.
- 1.2 Move responsibility for addressing slavery in supply chains into the Department for Business and Trade.

Recommendation 2: Review and address the impact of the recently introduced policy and legislation

The NABA and the IMA penalise victims of modern slavery and see them solely through an immigration lens. Following the introduction of the new guidance under NABA in January 2023, the number of positive reasonable grounds decisions has fallen from 88 per cent on average during 2022,¹² to 54 per cent in 2023 (Figure 4).¹³ At the same time, the number of reconsideration requests at the reasonable grounds stage has more than tripled in 2023 compared to 2022, with 60 per cent having a positive outcome.¹⁴ This implies that far from sifting out spurious claims, the changes in the law have put likely genuine victims through a more onerous process instead of providing them with much-needed support. In addition, the waiting time for the reasonable grounds decision has increased from a median average of five days in Quarter 4 of 2022 to 42 days in the same quarter of 2023,¹⁵ despite the statutory guidance still giving an expected timescale of five working days for these decisions.¹⁶ The IMA goes even further by denying access to support and placing a duty on the Secretary of State to remove those victims who entered the UK illegally.

12 Home Office [Modern Slavery NRM and Duty to Notify statistics, annual summary 2022](#), March 2023

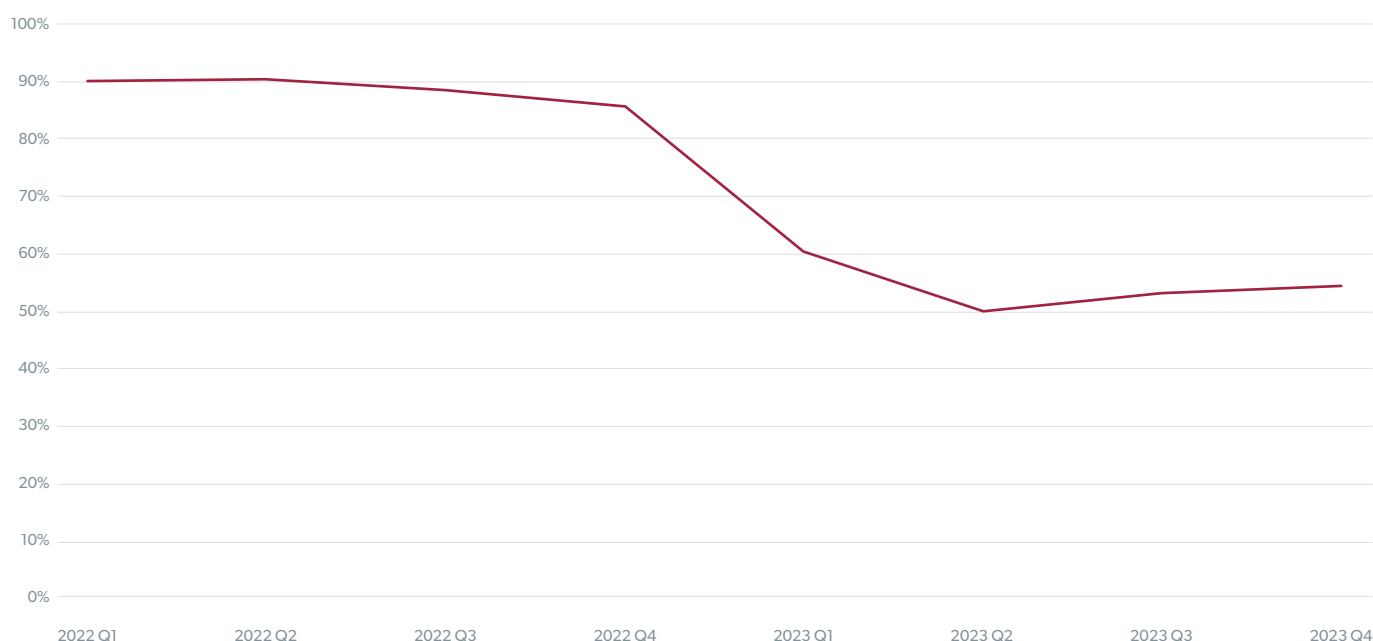
13 Home Office [Modern Slavery NRM and Duty to Notify statistics annual summary 2023](#), March 2024

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Home Office [Modern Slavery: statutory guidance for England and Wales \(under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015\) and non-statutory guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland](#), February 2024, paragraph 14.52

Figure 4. Percentage of positive NRM reasonable grounds (RG) decisions in 2022 vs 2023



To better understand the reality potential victims of modern slavery are facing on the ground behind these numbers, we spoke to a number of frontline charities providing support to adult victims of slavery and to police officers conducting modern slavery investigations.¹⁷ Sadly, the reality is bleak and worrying.

The increased waiting times appear to be delaying victims' access to support and safe accommodation, which not only hinders their recovery but also reduces their capacity and confidence to engage with police investigations. This means that traffickers are much more likely to act with impunity, resulting in more victims, more crime and a deeper cost to the British economy. The Salvation Army, who hold the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC,) told us that when a potential victim is destitute, they are eligible for safe house accommodation prior to a Reasonable Grounds decision being made. However, due to the higher rate of negative RGs, when a negative decision is made the subcontractors are under a lot of pressure to safely move on increasing numbers of people in a short period of time without clear alternatives. Where a potential victim is not destitute, the burden of finding emergency accommodation prior to a positive Reasonable Grounds decision often lies with the First Responder. Police officers noted that they have difficulty finding suitable alternative accommodation, as the accommodation offered by local authorities is often not suitable for traumatised victims (for example, in hostels where other residents are drug users). Police told us that often they pay for hotel accommodation to house these victims. Increased waiting times clearly make this less sustainable.

Not being able to access support immediately is likely to increase victims' trauma as well as the risk of re-trafficking.¹⁸ Charities working with victims on the ground said that they are noticing victims have much higher needs on entering their support, exacerbated by the waiting period. Similarly, police officers have told us that after initial positive engagement, victims' participation with investigations is dropping off due to the lack of support while waiting for the RG decision. We also heard that some police officers are waiting for the RG decision to come through before recording a crime and starting an investigation. This issue needs to be looked into, as during this time, vital evidence is lost, as is the engagement with the victim.

Another area of concern is the application of Section 63 of the NABA which introduced criteria for disqualifying potential victims from the NRM after a positive RG decision on the grounds of public order or bad faith. Analysis by the International Organisation for Migration of NRM data to September 2023 found that 70% of people who were disqualified had received a positive RG decision as a potential victim of criminal exploitation.¹⁹ This highlights the possibility that a significant number of victims being disqualified were forced to commit the crimes as part of their exploitation and that prior convictions made them vulnerable to exploitation in further criminality.

17 The Salvation Army and its subcontractors, MSOIC regional coordinators and police leads, Bakhita House, Ella's House, Justice and Care Victim Navigators

18 [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care It Still Happens Here, July 2020, A Path to Freedom and Justice, February 2022](#)

19 [IOM, Updated analysis of the National Referral Mechanism data, January 2024](#)

The IMA is likely to have an even greater detrimental impact on victims' engagement and recovery and, therefore, police investigations. Under the IMA, many victims who entered the UK illegally will be detained and removed without support, which puts them at high risk of re-exploitation. The exemption in the Act for victims cooperating with police investigations will only apply when the Secretary of State deems the presence of the victim in the UK necessary for the prosecution. Victims will need to already be engaging with police from the start to have any chance of support. However, as our research shows, it is support that enables victims to engage with prosecutions, so it needs to come first.²⁰ The Act presumes that removed victims will be able to engage with the police from overseas, which is going to be highly difficult and unsustainable due to the cost and the high risk of victims losing interest and contact. Victims removed to their country of origin are at risk of being found by their traffickers. Therefore, fear of reprisals will deter them from engaging with police and without support they will not have the stability to do so.

The IMA also amended NABA to make disqualification on public order grounds the default approach rather than a discretionary power. It will also apply to any foreign national who has been convicted of any offence and imprisoned for any period of time, however short, who will now be disqualified from receiving support under the NRM. It means that a high number of potential victims, especially those exploited for committing crime, will be excluded from support, and therefore their evidence will be lost. While the victims will be removed from the UK, the criminals who trafficked them will continue to operate with impunity and will bring more vulnerable people into the country for exploitation.

The emerging evidence that the new legislation and policy have a negative impact on victims' access to support, their recovery and engagement with the police is worrying and underlines concern about the additional harm that may be caused by the provisions in the Illegal Migration Act, which are not yet in force. This evidence needs to be thoroughly assessed by the new government.

- 2.1 Review the impact of the Nationality and Borders Act, in particular, the application of the new reasonable grounds threshold that has led to a reduction in the number of victims initially referred to the NRM accessing support provisions.
- 2.2 Bring to an end the implementation of the Illegal Migration Act Sections 22-25 (if in force) as early as possible (through the regulation-making power or at the end of the sunset clause window) and, in the meantime, mitigate the negative impact through statutory guidance to exempt potential victims of slavery who were exploited in the UK.

Recommendation 3: Develop a new cross-departmental strategy to reinvigorate the response to modern slavery

Measures to address modern slavery and provide support for its victims and survivors in the UK are the remit of numerous government departments, local government agencies and a wide range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from across civil society. Such diverse activity requires independent oversight and coordination for it to be effective.

Without a coordinated and strategic response, modern slavery remains a low-risk and high-reward crime in the UK. Traffickers are ahead of the game. We estimate they make at least US\$361 million (approximately £287 million) in illicit profits per year exploiting victims in the UK.²¹ Low conviction rates and prioritisation of legal enforcement of organised immigration crime over modern slavery mean perpetrators can walk away with impunity, which makes Britain an attractive market for modern slavery criminals. Narrowed access to support increases the risk of victims remaining in exploitation or being re-exploited, bringing traffickers even more profits instead of bringing them to justice. The National Crime Agency's National Strategic Assessment 2023 concluded that the modern slavery and human trafficking threat increased in 2022, alongside illicit drugs, fraud, money laundering and organised immigration crime.²²

20 [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care It Still Happens Here, July 2020, A Path to Freedom and Justice, February 2022](#)

21 Our calculation based on the number of potential victims referred to the NRM in 2023 and the ILO estimate of US\$21,248 illegal profits per victim in Europe and Central Asia. [Home Office Modern Slavery NRM and Duty to Notify statistics annual summary 2023, March 2024](#); [International Labour Organisation Profits and Poverty: the economics of forced labour, Second Edition March 2024](#)

22 [HM Government Serious and Organised Crime strategy 2023-2028, December 2023](#)

The UK Government's response needs an urgent update. The Modern Slavery Strategy is ten years old and significantly out of date. We have recommended a new strategy be produced since 2020.²³ Since the current strategy was first published, the nature and scale of slavery have changed, and new forms, such as cuckooing, have emerged. A review of the 2014 Modern Slavery Strategy was promised in the New Plan for Immigration,²⁴ and the new plan was due to be published in 2022,²⁵ yet it was shelved after a change in ministers. The Human Trafficking Report of the Home Affairs Select Committee echoed our call for a new strategy.²⁶

3.1 Develop a new cross-departmental strategy and action plan to provide strategic leadership and spearhead the UK's fight against modern slavery. The Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Business and Trade should be involved in the renewed strategy, along with the Home Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

The strategy should include, but not be limited to:

- A coordinated criminal justice response that would provide guidance and encourage the police, Crown Prosecution Service and judiciary to work hand in glove to put traffickers behind bars.
 - Guidance and strategic direction for police forces with the aim of increasing prosecutions and convictions of modern slavery offenders, including (but not only) increasing the number of specialist investigation teams across all police forces.
 - Support for victims of slavery to cooperate with the police, which could be achieved by enabling access to Victim Navigators for every police force.
 - A commitment to review the National Referral Mechanism and develop pathways for support for British national victims of slavery (see recommendation 4 for further detail).
 - A dedicated focus on tackling child exploitation and modern slavery. This should at least include the national rollout of the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) scheme across England and Wales and a commitment to consider extending direct support to children who have someone with parental responsibility and those beyond the age of 18.
 - Prevention in source and transit countries by continuing to provide official development assistance (ODA) funding for programmes that focus on addressing the root causes and underlying vulnerabilities to modern slavery, particularly those exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and climate and conflict-induced crises.
 - Prevention in the UK by funding programmes focused on 1) addressing underlying vulnerabilities, such as school exclusions, addiction, neurodiversity, learning disabilities and family breakdown; 2) awareness-raising programmes among children and their families to address the risks of exploitation and equip them with necessary tools to spot risky behaviours and where to seek help.
 - A commitment to strengthen UK Government policy and legislation to prevent modern slavery in business and public sector supply chains (see recommendation 6 for further detail).
- 3.2 Appoint a strategic cross-departmental ministerial group chaired by the Home Secretary to provide oversight of the implementation of the strategy and to publish annual reports on the government's action to tackle modern slavery in the UK.

23 [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, It Still Happens Here, July 2020](#)

24 [Home Office, New Plan for Immigration: policy statement, updated March 2022](#)

25 A Ministerial answer to a written parliamentary question on 5 July 2022 said "The new Modern Slavery Strategy is due to be published shortly" [House of Lords, Written Questions and Answers, Question HL1104](#)

26 [Home Affairs Select Committee, Human Trafficking, December 2023](#)

Recommendation 4: Ensure needs-based support is available to all victims of modern slavery

The government-funded gateway to support for victims of slavery – the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – is failing, with many victims unable to access the support they need. Our research has shown significant difficulty in accessing safe and appropriate accommodation and support prior to an NRM referral. Our findings highlight that victims are often distrustful of the authorities and fear reprisals from their exploiter.²⁷ Adult victims need time to build trust and consider their options, but there is a lack of safe accommodation, advice and support before victims consent to enter the NRM. A 2017 government commitment to introduce pre-NRM places of safety in England and Wales has not been implemented despite being included in the current Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC).²⁸ In December 2023, the Home Office NRM Reform Newsletter informed stakeholders that they had “reviewed its viability and funding is unavailable to introduce and efficiently implement this new service, and therefore, we are not moving forward with a ‘places of safety’ support model within the current MSVCC contract.”²⁹

As described above, the two most recent pieces of legislation relating to modern slavery have made it even more difficult for victims to access the support they need, which is also critical to bringing criminals to justice.

Those victims who are able to access support wait, on average, one and a half years for a final decision on whether they are to be recognised as victims of modern slavery or not.³⁰ Even when the decision is positive and victims are conclusively confirmed as victim, of slavery, there is no guarantee of longer-term support to help their reintegration or their cooperation with the police. Our research shows that modern slavery survivors continue to need support after a positive conclusive grounds decision is made.³¹ The current Recovery Needs Assessment for extending support is ineffective, in large part because it requires victims to provide evidence of their need at repeated assessments after short periods of support, creating instability.³² Many victims exit the NRM still vulnerable. The government committed in 2021 to providing a minimum of 12 months’ support for confirmed victims who need it,³³ but in late 2023, announced the commitment had been dropped.³⁴ The Home Affairs Select Committee, in its report published in December 2023, concluded, “There is clearly an absence of support for victims of human trafficking once they exit the statutory support provided under the MSVCC whilst in the NRM. This is in part because the Recovery Needs Assessment process is ineffective in assessing and meeting the needs of victims within 45 days following a positive Conclusive Grounds decision.”³⁵

British nationals who are victims of slavery often have some of the most complex needs, including mental health issues or drug and alcohol dependencies. They often come from very vulnerable backgrounds and need specialist support.³⁶ Inability to provide such support means that their needs remain unaddressed, which inhibits their ability to recover and take control of their lives.

More needs to be done to help survivors reintegrate into society, whether it is here in the UK or back in their home country, to prevent re-trafficking, including reconnecting with family, education and employment opportunities. It is important to address the push factors that led to vulnerability to trafficking in the first place. For example, Justice and Care’s approach to safe returns to Romania includes not only reintegration support for victims on arrival but also support in finding them a job to be able to sustain themselves and their families, which is provided by Victim Navigators in Romania. For the UK national victims, more needs to be done to understand their complex needs and, due to the large proportion of victims they represent, the particular needs of vulnerable young people who are criminally exploited.

27 [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, A Path to Freedom and Justice, February 2022](#)

28 [Official Report 26 October 2017 Column 512; Ministerial letter to Public Bill Committee Nationality and Borders Bill, 28 October 2021; Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, A Path to Freedom and Justice, February 2022](#)

29 [Home Office NRM Reform Newsletter 1 December 2023](#)

30 [Home Office, Modern Slavery NRM and Duty to notify statistics annual summary 2023, March 2024](#)

31 [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, A Path to Freedom and Justice, February 2022; Ashiana, Hestia, Red Cross, Hope for the Future, 2019](#)

32 [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, A Path to Freedom and Justice, February 2022; Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, One day at a time, April 2022](#)

33 [Official Report 8 December 2021, Column 427](#)

34 [Home Office NRM Reform Newsletter 1 December 2023. The Home Office confirmed its conclusion that the current RNA process is adequate in House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee Human Trafficking: Government Response to the Committee’s First Report HC566 at paragraph 98](#)

35 [House of Commons, Home Affairs Select Committee, Human Trafficking First Report of Session 2023-24 HC124 paragraph 247](#)

36 [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, A Path to Freedom and Justice, February 2022; St. Mary’s University, Justice and Care et al Identifying Pathways to Support British Victims of Modern Slavery towards Safety and Recovery: A Scoping Study, September 2022](#)

In 2021, in its New Plan for Immigration, the government recognised a further need to provide additional support enabling victims' engagement with the police to increase successful criminal justice outcomes.³⁷ However, to date, no such support has been put in place by the government. We believe Justice and Care's innovative Victim Navigator Programme is an example of how wrap-around support for a victim enables them to engage with the police, leading to successful prosecutions and convictions. Victim Navigators develop support plans for each individual based on their needs and help them access the support they need, including accommodation, health care, education, counselling, legal advice, etc.

Designed in consultation with national police leaders with the aim of forming a trusted bridge between the police and victims of modern slavery, the Navigator Programme has seen significant positive impact on both victim recovery and criminal justice outcomes. For example:

- 92 per cent of survivors engaging with investigations compared to 44 per cent without a Navigator, with the engagement 'strongly and systematically correlated with improved investigative outcomes';
- 43 convictions secured (for modern slavery and other charges), with 374 years in sentencing given to the perpetrators;
- 8,285 frontline professionals trained by Victim Navigators;
- 128 victims freed from exploitation directly due to Victim Navigator involvement;
- 553 survivors supported with an average of 81 per cent of survivors showing improved overall recovery and wellbeing.³⁸

In December 2023, the Home Affairs Select Committee concluded, "The role fulfilled by Victim Navigators is essential to supporting victims in the criminal justice process and enabling investigation teams to build evidential cases" and recommended, "The Victim Navigator programme should be expanded and utilised in all cases."³⁹

4.1 Commence a review of the National Referral Mechanism to ensure the right pathways to support are in place for adult and child potential victims of all nationalities.

The review should consider the following:

- Increasing awareness and competence of the designated First Responders, as well as considering increasing the number of expert NGO First Responders;
- Embedding a multi-agency approach to victim identification and support, similar to the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) approach for victims of domestic abuse;
- Applying a more efficient and timely decision-making process that would save resources by allowing victims to move on with their lives. This should include a national rollout of devolved decision-making to the local safeguarding structures for child modern slavery cases⁴⁰ and undertaking a scoping exercise to expand the approach to adults;
- Ensuring safe accommodation for victims of slavery from the moment of rescue before an NRM referral is made;
- Enhancing specialist support available for all trafficked children, including but not limited to the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian Programme;
- Developing pathways to support British national victims of slavery based on their complex needs;
- Introducing a minimum of 12 months' support for all confirmed victims with a positive conclusive grounds decision to support a transition into mainstream services, with attached temporary leave to remain for those victims with pending immigration status;
- Reintegration pathways, including safe and voluntary return to the country of origin.

4.2 Ensure each police force has access to a specialist Victim Navigator⁴¹ to support modern slavery victims through the criminal justice process.

37 Home Office, *New Plan for Immigration: policy statement*, updated March 2022

38 Justice and Care Data, as of 21 March 2024

39 House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee *Human Trafficking: First Report of Session 2023-24 HC124* paragraphs 181 and 182

40 Home Office, *Devolving child decision making pilot programme: general guidance*, updated December 2023

41 Victim Navigator is a specialist Justice and Care staff embedded within senior policing teams to broker support and act as a trusted bridge between victims of modern slavery and police investigations

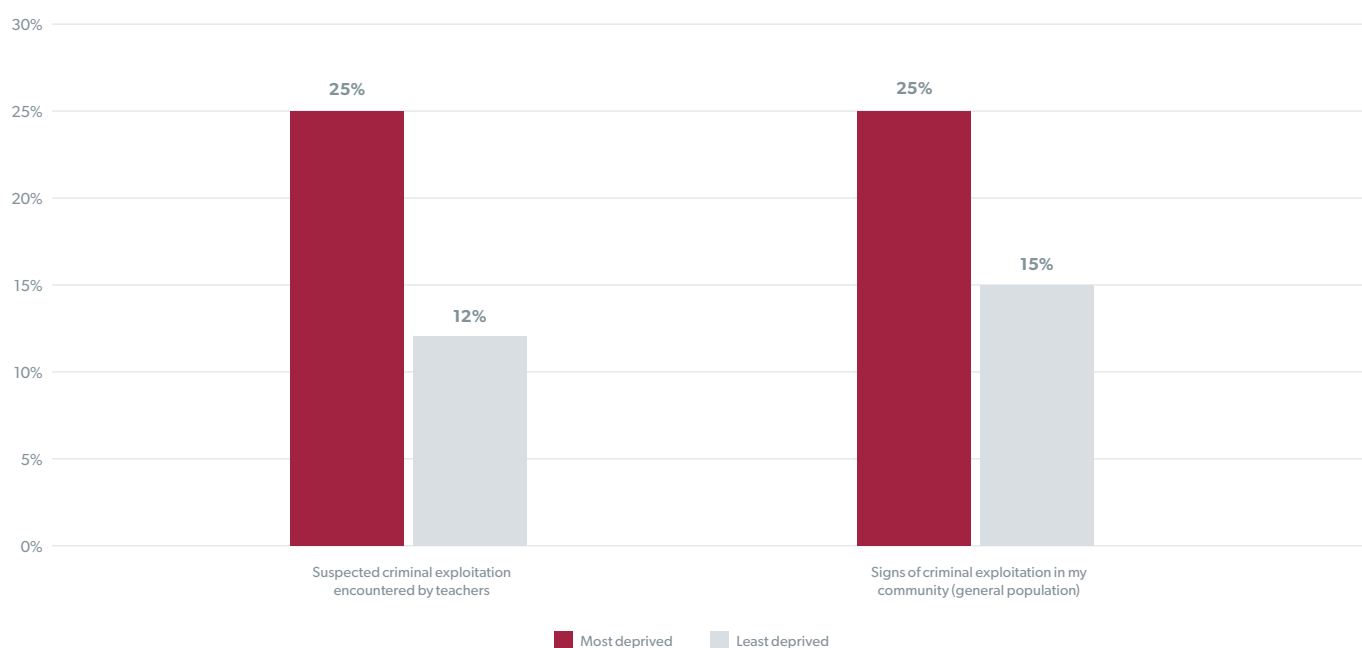
Recommendation 5: Close legal gaps by introducing a new Modern Slavery Bill that would strengthen our response to criminal exploitation

Criminal exploitation has been the most prevalent form of modern slavery since the Home Office started recording it as a separate type of exploitation in the last quarter of 2019. Our recent analysis has shown that in the four years from September 2019 to August 2023, two-thirds of all potential victims of modern slavery referred to the NRM for exploitation in the UK reported criminal exploitation, 19,877 people in total. 64 per cent (12,641 people) of these were British, and 8,879 (45 per cent) were British boys aged 17 or under when they were exploited.⁴²

In 2023, 28 per cent of all potential victims referred to the NRM reported criminal exploitation alone.⁴³ Of those who reported exploitation in the UK, this rises to 49 per cent.⁴⁴ More still reported criminal exploitation alongside other forms of modern slavery.

Our research has found that factors such as substance misuse, adverse family circumstances, learning disabilities, school exclusion or financial deprivation put people at greater risk of criminal exploitation as criminals use them to coerce their victims. Deprived communities are impacted the most. In October 2023, our polling found that 25 per cent of people in the most deprived parliamentary constituencies had seen signs of criminal exploitation in their community, compared to 15 per cent in the least deprived communities. Twice as many teachers in schools with the most deprived student body had encountered suspected criminal exploitation as teachers at the most affluent schools (25 per cent compared to 12 per cent).⁴⁵

Table 5. Criminal exploitation identified more by the public and teachers in deprived communities



Source: Polling conducted for the Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care of over 7,800 teachers by Teacher Tapp on 1 November 2023 and of a nationally and politically representative sample of 2050 adults in the UK by Opinium, fieldwork 25-27 October 2023.

As with many forms of modern slavery, criminal exploitation has devastating impacts on victims. Beyond physical and mental health impacts, many victims of criminal exploitation become homeless or have their education disrupted. At its worst, victims go unrecognised and end up with criminal convictions, pulled deeper into serious offending. However, the impact spreads beyond individual victims. There is also a ripple effect, spreading the harm to families, neighbours, and wider communities. Younger siblings are drawn into exploitation and families are threatened and held responsible for drug debt. Neighbours face anti-social behaviour and intimidation. Communities can become normalised to criminality and exploitation.

⁴² Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Criminal exploitation: Modern slavery by another name*, February 2024.

⁴³ Home Office Modern Slavery NRM and Duty to Notify statistics annual summary 2023, March 2024.

⁴⁴ Our analysis of Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2024). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2023. [data collection]. 11th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-11>

⁴⁵ Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Criminal exploitation: Modern slavery by another name*, February 2024.

Our research shows that the response to criminal exploitation across the country is inconsistent, and many victims are still not being identified or referred for support.⁴⁶ Despite its prevalence, criminal exploitation is not expressly defined in the Modern Slavery Act.

A rapidly growing form of criminal exploitation is ‘cuckooing’, which is where someone’s home is taken over and used for criminal purposes. The true scale is unknown as no data is collected, but in just one week of police action across England and Wales from 4-10 March 2024, 1,284 cuckooed properties were visited.⁴⁷ In 2022, CSJ and Justice and Care polling found that one in eight people had seen signs of cuckooing in their community.⁴⁸

Despite the exploitation intrinsic to cuckooing, it is not currently a criminal offence and cannot be prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act unless additional exploitation is present.⁴⁹ It has been suggested that other criminal charges can be brought against cuckooing offenders, including drugs and organised crime offences, and that the exploitation can be addressed as an aggravating factor at the point of sentencing.⁵⁰ However, this does not recognise the true nature of the crime, nor hold offenders to account for the abuse and harm done to the individual victim. Nor are these offences necessarily applicable to every situation of cuckooing; for example, cuckooing need not involve drug offences or organised crime groups.

5.1 Amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to strengthen the Act’s ability to crack down on criminal exploitation as follows:

- Amend the title to the ‘Modern Slavery and Exploitation Act’;
- Amend section 3 to include a definition of criminal exploitation and recognise it as a specific form of exploitation;
- Amend Part 2 on Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders (STPOs) and Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders (STROs) to:
 - a) make imposition of an STPO mandatory on conviction for MSA 2015 offences, and to require notification of an offender’s name and address as part of all STPOs and STROs (which would create a national register for modern slavery offenders similar to the sex offenders register);
 - b) allow imposition of orders on acquittal for modern slavery offences and conviction for other related offences where exploitation is indicated;
 - c) empower the Chief Constable of British Transport Police to apply to the court for orders to be made, varied, discharged or renewed;
 - d) allow police forces to apply for orders in respect of individuals not residing in their force area.

5.2 Create a specific offence to criminalise the act of cuckooing as a form of modern slavery.⁵¹ The provision should:

- Ensure victims have access to support and special measures in court as modern slavery victims;
- Ensure those offenders who are themselves victims of modern slavery are able to access the statutory defence;
- Make the crime identifiable in recorded crime and court statistics.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen UK Government policy and legislation to prevent modern slavery in business and public sector supply chains

The ILO has estimated there are 27.6 million people in forced labour worldwide, mostly in the private sector (63 per cent), excluding commercial sexual exploitation.⁵² The global profits from forced labour have recently been estimated at US\$63.9 billion, including US\$35.6 billion in industry, US\$20.9 billion in services and US\$5 billion in agriculture.⁵³ The inherent difficulties involved in monitoring extremely fragmented production processes render workers — especially

46 Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Criminal exploitation: Modern slavery by another name*, 2024.

47 National Police Chiefs’ Council, *Police dismantle hundreds of county line networks* Press Release 15 March 2024.

48 Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Slavery at Home*, 2023;

49 Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Slavery at Home*, 2023; Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Cuckooing*, 2021;

50 For example Official Report, House of Lords 22 November 2021 Column 712;

51 On 15 May 2024 the House of Commons passed Government amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill introducing ‘cuckooing’ as a criminal offence. However, the General Election was called before the Bill completed its passage through Parliament.

52 ILO, *Walk Free, IOM Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*, 2022.

53 ILO, *Profits and poverty: The economics of forced labour*, Second Edition, 2024 Total estimated profits including forced commercial sexual exploitation are US\$ 236 billion.

those in and from developing countries—vulnerable to exploitation.

There is an urgent need for the government to strengthen its response to forced labour in business supply chains. About US\$26.1 billion worth of products imported to the UK were identified as being at risk of being produced through forced labour.⁵⁴ UK public procurement is also at high risk: 21 per cent of NHS suppliers were identified as at 'high risk' of modern slavery in December 2023.⁵⁵

Preventing modern slavery and creating a level playing field for UK businesses is an integral part of ensuring a resilient trading economy. The UK was seen as a global leader when it introduced Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act which required companies with a turnover of more than £36 million to produce an annual statement on transparency in their supply chains. However, Section 54 has high rates of non-compliance (40 per cent in 2021) and no enforcement action through injunctions or administrative penalties.⁵⁶

Since Section 54 was introduced in 2015, a number of countries across the world, such as EU member states, Australia, Canada, and the US, have followed and gone beyond the requirements of the Act to increase the transparency and accountability of corporations in addressing modern slavery risks in globalised supply chains. If the UK does not act swiftly, it risks becoming a dumping ground for goods produced with forced labour as other neighbouring and competitor markets tighten their rules. In order to create a level playing field for responsible businesses and investors, the UK needs to strengthen the framework to encourage action to identify, remedy and prevent modern slavery in company supply chains.

The government has indicated an intention to strengthen Section 54, first in response to specific consultations and later in the new Modern Slavery Bill announced in the 2022 Queen's Speech.⁵⁷ However, new legislation has not yet been brought forward. We are concerned that these commitments are now under review, as stated in the government response to the Home Affairs Committee Human Trafficking Report.⁵⁸ The UK Government and businesses must do more to ensure supply chains are free from slave labour and protect the UK economy.

6.1 Strengthen the Modern Slavery Act 2015 Section 54 reporting requirements by:

- Extending them to public authorities and investment organisations;
- Setting mandatory minimum reporting requirements, including new measures to increase the quality of information provided (such as details of all instances of forced labour identified and the remediation taken or giving reasons for why none has been found);
- Introducing penalties for failure to comply with the section, including a level of personal responsibility for company directors such as disqualification and fines set at an appropriately dissuasive level, proportionate to an organisation's turnover.

6.2 Commence a review to assess how to further strengthen UK public and private sector supply changes, including consideration of:

- Legislative developments in other jurisdictions (particularly of key trade partners and markets where UK companies do business) and their impact on the UK;
- New policy and legislative options for the UK, including mandatory human rights due diligence legislation and import controls.

54 Walk Free, *Global Slavery Index: UK country study, 2023*

55 Department for Health and Social Care and NHS England, *Review of risk of modern slavery and human trafficking in the NHS supply chain, December 2023*

56 Home Office, *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015: Final Report May 2019, updated December 2021*; Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, *Modern Slavery Act: Five Years of Reporting, February 2021*

57 Home Office, *Transparency in supply chains consultation Government response, September 2020*; Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, *Establishing a new single enforcement body for employment rights Government response, June 2021*; HM Government, *Queen's Speech 2022: background briefing notes, May 2022*

58 House of Commons Home Affairs Committee *Human Trafficking: Government Response to the Committee's First Report HC566* para 32

Conclusion

A new government has a unique opportunity to inject fresh energy and political leadership to ensure Britain rids itself of slavery and leads the global fight against modern slavery. This must be done by working alongside the private and third sectors. The UK needs:

- Robust legislation and policy that protects victims and punishes the perpetrators;
- A joint and coordinated criminal justice response to dismantle the criminal networks;
- A safeguarding approach to support victims of slavery through a system that nurtures them to their recovery from the moment of rescue;
- Legislation that will support businesses to tackle forced labour in their supply chains with consequences if they do not;
- Education and prevention programmes to ensure that slavery is not given a chance to flourish in generations to come.



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