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Report

# Practitioner Responses to Child Trafficking: Emerging Good Practice

**Ailish Saker**

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# Emerging Good Practice

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# Foreword

This report presents the key findings of a conference convened by Cumberland Lodge in partnership with the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Dame Sara Thornton. The conference brought together practitioners, academics, charity representatives, policymakers, and survivors in a safe and peaceful environment to share best practice and ideas for improving the multi-agency response to child trafficking. Drawing on the insights, experience and expertise of conference speakers and attendees, practical recommendations emerged and have been summarised in this report by our freelance Research Associate, Ailish Saker. Underlying the report is the recognition that all responses should be child-centred, culturally competent, contextual, and collaborative.

Launched in London during our 75th anniversary year, this is an important report which we hope to share widely to influence policy and practice in the UK and beyond for years to come.

We are grateful to everyone who has contributed to this report, in particular to Dame Sara and her colleagues in the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's Office, and our Conference Advisory Committee, whose enthusiasm, expertise and resilience during the pandemic have helped to shape a productive conference, and what we hope will be an impactful report.

**Canon Dr Edmund Newell**

Chief Executive

# About the author

Ailish Saker was commissioned to support *Practitioner Responses to Child Trafficking: Emerging Good Practice*, as a freelance Research Associate.

Ailish's expertise lies in responding to child exploitation. She is currently undertaking doctoral research at the University of Oxford on the experiences of victims of non-recent child sexual abuse in football within the criminal justice system. This project has received funding from the FIFA Research Scholarship, which resulted in the development of an in-depth report exploring the findings from this research in 2021. Alongside her research, Ailish is also a Junior Dean at St Hilda's College in Oxford.

Prior to undertaking the PhD, she completed the MPhil in Criminology & Criminal Justice at the University of Oxford (2017-19) and also holds an undergraduate degree in American Studies from the University of Sussex (2012-16). Ailish has a strong interest in youth justice, which was sparked while facilitating creative arts workshops at a local youth detention centre in Michigan, USA. On returning to the UK, Ailish worked for two years as an Appropriate Adult, supporting juvenile and vulnerable adult detainees upon their arrest, before continuing her academic studies at Oxford.

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# Abbreviations

AFRUCA: Africans Unite Against Child Abuse

BAME: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

CCE: Child Criminal Exploitation

CPS: Crown Prosecution Service

CSE: Child Sexual Exploitation

CSEM: Child Sexual Exploitation Material

CSSW: Children's Service South West

ECPAT: Every Child Protected Against Trafficking

EMDR: Eye Movement Desensitisation And Reprocessing

IASC: Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

ICAI: Independent Commission for Aid Impact

ICTG: Independent Child Trafficking Guardian

LA: Local Authority

LAC: Looked After Child

NCA: National Crime Agency

NICE: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

NSAB: Newcastle Safeguarding Adults Board

NSCB: Newcastle Safeguarding Children Board

NRM: National Referral Mechanism

OCG: Organised Crime Group

PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

PWITS: Possession with Intent to Supply

SCRA: Scottish Children's Reporter Administration

SERAF: Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework

TF-CBT: Cognitive Behavioural Therapies With A Trauma Focus

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

WHO: World Health Organization

# Executive summary

The Modern Slavery Act 2015[i], as well as the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 and Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support For Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, has gone some way to addressing the multifaceted and widespread phenomenon of modern slavery, but several challenges remain, particularly with regards to trafficked children. Although there is not enough data to fully convey the scale of child trafficking in the UK, we do know the number of potential victims identified is rising year on year. A staggering 4,946 children were recognised as potential victims of exploitation in the UK in 2020 (an almost 10% increase on the previous year). In response to this, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) and Cumberland Lodge held a cross-sector conference, *Practitioner Responses to Child Trafficking: Emerging Good Practice*, in October 2021. The conference brought together practitioners, academics, policymakers, and representatives from wider civil society, as well as survivor organisations, for candid conversations about the role of practitioner evidence in responding to child exploitation in the UK. Some contributors were invited to take part following their response to the pre-conference call for evidence, allowing practitioners, academics and policymakers to share best practice.

There was a clear consensus across many practitioners that the current response is failing those who are vulnerable to, and are victims of, child trafficking. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples and models of best practice operating throughout the United Kingdom, which have the potential to be scaled up and replicated across all local areas. Although many of these initiatives were a response to different areas of need, a number of core values linked these practices together. These values need to be entrenched into every sector that responds to victims of child trafficking, and to young people generally.

It was agreed that a **child-centred**, or public health approach, would be the most effective whole system response to child trafficking and modern slavery. Modern slavery is an outcome

of systematic and structural harms, such as poverty and racism, operating within the UK and elsewhere. This focuses modern slavery as a symptom of the core structural problems existing in our society, which have deep impacts on individuals and communities. As a result of this, some young people and communities are disproportionately impacted by exploitation, yet have limited access to support services. By going beyond a solely criminal justice response, practitioners are better equipped to take on an empathetic approach to working with young people, which is trauma-informed and **culturally-competent**. It is crucial that all professionals working within the sector are culturally competent to root out unconscious bias and prejudice within institutions. As part of a wider diversity and inclusion strategy, it is essential to offer training in cultural competency and ensure its values are embedded within the structure of the organisation and its processes.

This approach would also centre the child's context and individual needs, allowing a tailored support package to be developed with the young person which recognises that a whole range of environmental factors influence children. A **contextual** safeguarding approach focuses on the environments and spaces in which young people face risk, including those outside of their family and home. It acknowledges the need for two inter-linked strategies, which respond to a young person's immediate harm and the systemic issues which present risk. Ultimately, the need for **collaborative** working was at the heart of the discussion, as it best ensures children and their families receive a thorough and joined-up support package. Organisations can often work separately on new and innovative practices to better support children, however best practice needs to be shared across sectors and co-developed to ensure better consistency for young people. There were excellent examples of practitioners co-producing models with young people to establish a truly child-centred response. Post-intervention, it is important to incorporate the voices of young people to judge the effectiveness of the interventions.

Leading on from this, there is a clear need for existing innovative practice to inform policy, as a means to ensure that best practice is embedded widely across the UK. At the moment, many initiatives are reliant on short-term funding grants and the follow-through is dependent on how much priority and time stakeholders dedicate to it. By enforcing these ideas and values within policy, it would create long-term structural change, as real progress requires initiatives to be sustainable and well-resourced. It is essential to move away from short-term thinking to enable better support for children. The system needs to be reframed from a crisis response to one focused on prevention and early intervention. Responding in a proactive rather than a reactive manner would better support those vulnerable to exploitation and also lead to savings in the long term. For this to happen, investment in communities and programmes that support and protect children is essential.

On this point, it is important to consider who is present when initiatives and policy are constructed, as there is a need for a diverse range of voices to be involved in the co-creation of such initiatives. Of course, there is also a need for constant reflection and external evaluation to make sure the best approach is always being applied. This ensures initiatives are evidence-based, with the most successful models constantly being a 'work in progress' to produce the best service for the young people. Research is, therefore, crucial in supporting this process and providing independent evaluation to highlight best practice and challenges faced.

Overall, the response to child trafficking and exploitation needs to be:

- child-centred
- culturally competent
- contextual
- collaborative.

It is important that these are not seen as buzzwords or arbitrary concepts, but as core values that underpin how victims of,

and those vulnerable to, child trafficking and exploitation are supported. Key stakeholders and practitioners are already conducting inspiring work across the field of modern slavery, which needs to be harnessed and replicated to make sure each child receives a tailored response across the entirety of the UK.

Practical ways these values can be fostered across the child trafficking sector are highlighted in the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** for Government to recognise the structural harm and exclusion affecting Black, Asian and minority ethnic children in policy.

**Recommendation 2:** training in cultural competency should be introduced for all practitioners working on child trafficking and modern slavery.

- An external evaluation mechanism must be embedded within all training to monitor impact and continually improve future training.

**Recommendation 3:** Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships (England and Wales), Child Protection Committees (Scotland) and the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland should ensure new practice and policies across all sectors are co-produced, where appropriate, with the children and survivors who are most affected by their implementation.

- This involves working alongside young people and their families in the creation of both individual care plans and models of support.

- It is essential that victims and survivors are appropriately compensated for their time and energy.

- Further attention should also be given to skills training and development opportunities informed by survivors' experiences and wishes.

**Recommendation 4:** building on the early success of contextual safeguarding pilots, a contextual safeguarding approach to child trafficking cases should be widely encouraged.

- There is a need for the research team to be embedded within the projects to ensure progress is effectively monitored.

- Also, there is a pressing need for research briefings to inform the development of practical resources (for example, the safety maps tool) to share best practice across the sector.

**Recommendation 5:** the IASC should support the development of a child trafficking and modern slavery 'community of practice' which collates, shares and evaluates up-to-date practitioner evidence across the sector.

- This includes introducing a regular cross-sector conference to bring together key stakeholders. The conference should act as an accountability mechanism where practitioners can regularly review steps being taken within each sector, based on previous recommendations and discussions.

- Practitioners and academics should give further attention to a public health approach and harm perspective, in addition to a criminal justice response.

**Recommendation 6:** increased opportunities should be created for professionals to participate in job shadowing, joint training and joint investigative training.

- There is a need for regular visits to other agencies and organisations to learn from others working in the field, including hearing from more survivors and frontline practitioners.

**Recommendation 7:** serious case reviews to be considered as an opportunity for safeguarding partnerships to reflect on all cases, and in particular learning from, and sharing, good practice.

**Recommendation 8:** to ensure child trafficking is reflected in the existing cross-Government strategic activity on extra-familial harm led by the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care.

- It must be co-produced with survivors and stakeholders working closely with devolved agencies across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- Attention should be paid to the transition of child victims into adulthood, ensuring greater strategic focus.

**Recommendation 9:** the Home Office should provide data on the ethnic backgrounds of those referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

**Recommendation 10:** Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships and their equivalents in the Devolved Administrations should ensure training in delivering a consistent trauma-informed and empathetic response is implemented for all police officers and other front line practitioners dealing with victims of modern slavery.

- The focus in the training should include survivor experiences and the child's perspective.

This report addresses key themes that emerged from collaborative discussions at the conference, and presents recommendations for change. Appendix I provides an overview of submissions to our call for evidence. Appendix II summarises research and thinking about child trafficking and modern slavery, and was produced in advance of the conference, and shared with speakers and delegates.

# 1.
# Conference reflections and recommendations

# 1 Introduction

Despite considerable progress within the field of modern slavery, in particular since the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act by the then-Home Secretary Theresa May in 2015, the trafficking and exploitation of both migrant and British children continues to be an extensive problem across the UK. In response to this, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) and Cumberland Lodge held a cross-sector conference, *Practitioner Responses to Child Trafficking: Emerging Good Practice*, in October 2021. This report is based on the presentations and conversations at the conference, in addition to submissions from a call for evidence which focused on existing and emerging best practice responses to modern slavery in a number of different sectors, including government and policy, research, the police and civil society. The submissions related mainly to the prevention and protection of vulnerable young people and victims, which is why the pursuit of offenders is not covered in the material. With a view to brevity, not all initiatives and programmes are discussed in detail in the report (see Appendix I for a full list of contributors to the call for evidence). The conference operated under the Chatham House Rule in order to facilitate open and honest discussion, and therefore no speakers or delegates will be identified in this report, but their thoughtful and nuanced contributions are reflected in the following ideas and recommendations, highlighting their dedication to best support young people in their care.

The discussions that took place touched on the following seven key areas, which will be explored in greater depth throughout this report:

1. Structural factors
2. Racial equality, diversity and inclusion
3. A child-centred approach
4. Contextual safeguarding
5. A multi-agency approach

6. Sustainability and resourcing

7. Research and training

At the heart of the discussions was the observation that current practice is ahead of the current policy frameworks operating in the UK. There is, therefore, a pressing need for the voices of survivors and practitioners to shine a light on the weaknesses of these frameworks, as the impact on young people is a true indicator of an initiative's effectiveness. Examples of innovative practice across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be briefly highlighted throughout the report, with links to further information, where available.

# 2 Structural factors

Modern slavery is a symptom of systematic and structural harms, such as poverty and racism, operating within the UK and elsewhere. Practitioners have previously focused on the individual factors which leave children vulnerable to exploitation, rather than the structural frameworks embedded in our culture and institutions which impact and inform practitioner responses to child exploitation.

An example of this is the disproportionate rate of Black, Asian and minority ethnic children being permanently excluded from school[i], which suggests there is not enough due diligence being conducted by schools to provide early prevention to avert such escalation. Excluded children are left vulnerable to exploitation and can become entangled within a criminal justice system which is not always able to offer an empathetic or consistent response for young people, for example due to a high turnover of community police officers. This made it harder for trusting relationships to be fostered between ethnic minority communities and the authorities. The reason for the disproportionate rate at which Black, Asian and minority ethnic children are excluded is, in part, due to a lack of diversity amongst teaching staff, particularly headteachers. If teachers are not understanding of cultural nuances, or if unconscious bias and racism are at play, the outcome is often that young Black boys are being placed in risky and exploitative situations, away from the watchful eye of teachers and other 'safe' adults. Conference participants discussed that practitioners commonly look at the events post-exclusion, not taking into account that exclusion is a form of harm.

As was mentioned in the pre-conference briefing (Appendix II), young Black males often experience adultification by the authorities where there is a false assumption of deviance. Young people are viscerally aware of the structural inequalities they face, leading to a chronic distrust of institutions. This can produce racialised trauma, with childhood, and adverse childhood experiences, impacting on both their development

and transition into adulthood. The extensive waiting lists for children and adolescent mental health services and a lack of cultural competency in the therapeutic support provided to Black, Asian and minority ethnic youth are of particular concern, and will be discussed further in the 'Racial equality, diversity and inclusion' section below.

However, racism is not the only structural factor which impacts young people. When race intersects with other factors such as disability, it can leave children more vulnerable to exploitation and without appropriate support. The National Autistic Society highlighted the often failure to diagnose Black, Asian and minority ethnic children with additional needs.[2] It is widely understood that children with learning disabilities or additional needs are at a higher risk of exploitation, and, when these vulnerabilities are invisible, young people are more susceptible to abuse and less likely to be seen as a victim. Class, in particular, plays a role here; practitioners highlighted the discrimination many families face, as an affluent family may have their child supported for a learning disability, whereas a working-class child is more likely to be viewed as having behavioural problems by the authorities. To get to the root of this issue, the value of each child to the perpetrator, society and the State must be considered. A hierarchy still remains based on the intersection of a number of identity factors such as race, gender, class, disability etc., which results in not all children receiving the appropriate level of support.

> **Recommendation 1:** for Government to recognise the structural harm and exclusion affecting Black, Asian and minority ethnic children in policy.

# 3 Racial equality, diversity and inclusion

To better address the structural inequalities at play, there needs to be an explicit acknowledgement of race. The UK BME Anti-Slavery Network (BASNET), established by the charity AFRUCA in November 2019, is the first network in Europe dedicated to promoting race equality, inclusion and diversity in the anti-trafficking and anti-slavery space. BASNET launched its Action Plan in 2021[3], which draws attention to key areas in need of improvement, particularly the identification and subsequent provision of services for Black, Asian and minority ethnic survivors of modern slavery. Practitioners additionally highlighted the need for a more culturally competent response to all victims of child exploitation and trafficking.

Cultural competency, or cultural humility or sensitivity, is the ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from different cultures or belief systems. It is important that all professionals working within the sector are culturally competent to root out unconscious bias and prejudice within institutions. As part of a wider diversity and inclusion strategy, it is essential to offer training in cultural competency and ensure its values are embedded within the structure of the organisation and its processes. This involves forging partnerships with Black-led organisations and ensuring staff, particularly senior management, in institutions are more reflective of the population, and ultimately the victims. For example, BASNET has recommended introducing 'external quality monitoring' for anti-trafficking service providers to monitor their compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty.[4] The work of the charity Power The Fight[ii] offers a culturally competent approach to tackling youth violence at grassroots level in London, which includes offering training to individuals and organisations who work with young people to forge better relationships. There are often assumptions that two children from the same country will require the same response, however this fails to understand the nuances at play across

ii.  For more information see the 'Therapeutic Intervention for Peace (TIP): Culturally Competent Responses to Serious Youth Violence in London' report (Williams et al., 2020).

different jurisdictions and the individual needs of the child. In addition to this, the experiences of British nationals from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic background will ultimately differ from the experiences of migrant children. Both groups are in need of further consideration and will be discussed in this report.

## Case study: AFRUCA County Lines Child Trafficking Family Support Service

AFRUCA's County Lines Trafficking Family Support Programme, operating in Manchester, is an early intervention service offered to children and families from ethnic minority backgrounds. The service provides one-to-one, tailored, non-judgemental support for parents of children at risk of county lines trafficking and criminal exploitation, as victims of child criminal exploitation might experience trauma, frequently go missing from home, and might not disclose to their parents or siblings their experiences of abuse, coercion and exploitation. The Family Support Programme supports parents to identify the indicators of exploitation to which their children are exposed, and provides them with tools to access early help. In addition to this, the service offers assistance to young people and their families to navigate the complex legal, immigration, criminal justice and social service systems; something which is especially important when families have shared past experiences of condescending intervention, where they became disengaged and dispirited after not being listened to.

The programme fills a gap for Black, Asian and minority ethnic youth and their families who are not receiving support elsewhere, often due to the inaccessibility and mistrust of core organisations. AFRUCA offers a culturally sensitive provision which acknowledges and addresses gaps in equality, diversity and inclusion. Currently, the programme is working with 15 families and 45 children, as multiple children within a single family can be vulnerable to exploitation. The service was established in partnership with Manchester City Council and began operating in November 2020. It is being externally evaluated by the University of Sheffield, with the potential for scaling up the service in the future.

> **Recommendation 2:** training in cultural competency should be introduced for all practitioners working on child trafficking and modern slavery.
>
> • An external evaluation mechanism must be embedded within all training to monitor impact and continually improve future training.

# 4 A child-centred approach

Further discussion at the conference highlighted that a child-centred approach would work particularly effectively when combined with a public health response to modern slavery. For clarity, a public health response[iii] involves the use of collective action, for example, involving various organisations and agencies, to address a problem that can damage the health and wellbeing of society as a whole[iv]. The conference participants ultimately called for a move away from a solely criminal justice-focused approach to victims, although discussions noted that as long as the Home Office is leading on the NRM decision-making, it will never be child-centred.

Within a child-centred and public health approach, health care practitioners in particular are tasked with providing strong frameworks for trauma-informed advocacy and the development of safe healthcare spaces for all children and young people. Therefore, organisations such as VITA, that provide applied trauma-informed consultation skills training to health professionals, are essential in the response to modern slavery with the voice of the child at the centre. As well as developing new guidelines on child modern slavery and human trafficking for the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, VITA has also engaged with plans for new 'Generalism' training for doctors. This follows on from *The Future Doctor* report in 2020[5], which detailed a new vision for healthcare, including doctors having a greater understanding of health in the context of people's lives. VITA aims to bring rights-informed, trauma-informed, health justice training to these new cohorts, encouraging normalisation of survivor leadership and survivor-informed responses.

The starting point for any approach should be the child and their experience. Often, practitioners are challenged to make decisions with little information on a child's life or context. This lack of knowledge is compounded by the reality that social workers have to work within a rigorous safeguarding environment, whereas perpetrators continue to adapt and evolve their methods of grooming outside such a framework.

iii.
A public health approach is defined as the art and science of preventing disease, by understanding the problem at a population level, addressing this through multi-agency working and being prevention focused.

iv.
For more information see 'Refining a public health approach to modern slavery' (Such et al., 2021).

Perpetrators understand and manipulate adolescent dynamics, as young people in this formative stage are more likely to seek thrills, exhibit short-term thinking, and desire independent decision-making, whilst they experience going through puberty and respond to childhood trauma. In amongst the discussions about large-scale system changes at the conference, delegates shared small but highly impactful and tangible examples of ways to best support children across the sector. A simple example is caseworkers offering fizzy drinks or juice to children, instead of tea and coffee, which is surprisingly not widespread practice, and hints to a lack of understanding or experience of interacting with young people. The consensus amongst conference delegates was that social workers have the skillset and access to provide such care to young people, however they are often over-worked and under-resourced to allow for creativity in their response to each individual child.

Privileging victims' voices should go beyond individual cases and be extended to the creation of ethical frameworks and policies for young people. There is debate on the productivity of risk assessments as they can sometimes be used to 'tick a box', often starting with an assumption of a child and working backwards. Although risk assessments can be a useful tool, they should only support practitioners in identifying possible risks a child may be facing. By co-creating assessments with young people who are directly impacted by them, practitioners can move away from a pathologising approach, which has previously been relied upon when building assessments and procedures. Change needs to be directly informed by what the young people say. It should not be seen as an assessment, but a conversation, with practitioners investing time as well as resources into each young person. A young person will be more willing to provide information to the practitioner if a sense of trust has been developed. Additionally, when writing up the case notes, it is important for the practitioner to include positive comments about that young person, acknowledging them as a whole person, not just a victim of child trafficking or exploitation. Practitioners should equally

recognise the importance of non-verbal communication, for example, by providing them a blanket if they are visibly cold.

Central to the migrant survivors' experiences were the dehumanising immigration structures which were described by conference delegates as 'lengthy and traumatic'. Survivors spoke of feeling in a state of limbo during the long wait for the regularisation of their status. By listening to the impact of such policies on young people, we can better understand the effectiveness of the structure. For example, survivors at the conference shared the financial incentive which can lead to becoming trapped in exploitation, highlighting there should be opportunities available for asylum seekers, such as apprenticeship programmes. It is evident further attention is needed to build a sense of belonging and community for non-UK nationals, particularly as a lack of appropriate support and pathways to integration leaves both UK and non-UK nationals further vulnerable to re-trafficking and exploitation.[6]

Children ultimately need stability and security to ensure their wellbeing, therefore having multiple professionals in a child's life can be highly challenging and lead to a young person being forced to repeat their experience to a number of people. A lack of communication and join-up between different authorities means that this repetition is inevitable. This needs to be reduced to a single and consistent figure of trust. It is important that the families are supported and incorporated into decision-making as well, with the best interests of the child being better addressed when their family is supported.

Supporting children with the more practical challenges they face, such as debt bondage, is a key area of concern. Practical and therapeutic support needs to continue as children transition into adulthood, since this is when young people are particularly vulnerable to exploitation due to them losing access to the support structures and networks which once protected them. This attention needs to be reflected in Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships and Local Adult Safeguarding Partnerships, which tend to focus on older adults, and their equivalents in the

Devolved Administrations. A strong relationship needs to be fostered by support organisations with both a child and their family, with attention to what is causing a young person's distress, particularly the experience of lengthy waiting times such as for NRM decisions.

## Case study: Greater Manchester Complex Safeguarding Hub



The Greater Manchester Complex Safeguarding Hub,[v] launched in October 2018, is a multi-agency service which aims to identify and disrupt exploitation, to assess and understand risk both to individuals and across the city, and deliver interventions to those at risk and survivors of exploitation. To access the Complex Safeguarding Hub, a child must receive a referral from their allocated social worker. There were two particular areas of best practice highlighted in this initiative: the collaboration with young people and the self-reflective nature of the work. For example, the strength-based model of intervention, Achieving Change Together (ACT),[vi] was co-designed by young people. The ACT model enables young people to build a relationship with one social worker, working together to establish a young person's needs and what care they require. Due to the small caseload given to ACT workers, these practitioners have the time to invest in each young person. Furthermore, the Complex Safeguarding Hub conducted audits of young people's case files, which led to reflective conversations with caseworkers on decisions made and subsequent outcomes for the child. This was not intended as an inspection, but an opportunity to highlight challenges in the case, noting both good practice and areas of improvement to help foster development.

v.
For more information see: https://www. manch estersafe guarding partnership. co.uk/ resource/ complex- safeguarding-in- manchester/

vi.
For more information see https://www. itsnotokay. co.uk/ professionals/ act/

**Recommendation 3:** Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships (England and Wales), Child Protection Committees (Scotland) and the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland should ensure new practice and policies across all sectors are co-produced, where appropriate, with the children and survivors who are most affected by their implementation.

- This involves working alongside young people and their families in the creation of both individual care plans and models of support.

- It is essential that victims and survivors are appropriately compensated for their time and energy.

- Further attention should also be given to skills training and development opportunities informed by survivors' experiences and wishes.

# **5** **Contextual safeguarding**

A key approach which was integrated into a number of good practice interventions was contextual safeguarding,[7] also referred to as complex safeguarding. This approach recognises that a whole range of environmental factors influence young people, including people outside of their family and home. A contextual safeguarding approach focuses on the environments and spaces in which young people face risk. It acknowledges the need for two interlinked strategies, which respond to a young person's immediate harm and the systemic issues which present risk. Such an approach aims to create safety in the places and spaces where harm occurs, for example, by first introducing mapping to identify unsafe zones for young people. It should be noted that this does not necessarily mean young people cannot access such spaces, as they can often be where essential services lie, but it does, however, plan to change how young people are supported to safely spend time, and feel included, in the space. Targeted interventions were also implemented at these locations of harm, highlighted by the work of the Safer Options Integrated Response to Exploitation and Violence in Bristol. By linking geography and risk, profiles of risk can be produced for young people, which can crucially be focused on areas of safety. Innovative practices are currently operating in the Barking and Dagenham local authority area through pilots such as the Schools' Safety Summit, Peer Assessments and Contextual Conferencing. The Children's Society Disrupting Exploitation Programme[vii] is also a key example of building safety in peer, school and community contexts where exploitation occurs.

vii.
For more information see the 'Disrupting Exploitation Annual Report' (The Children's Society, 2019).

# 6  A multi-agency approach

Another core idea at the heart of conference discussions was the need for collaboration and multi-agency working between academics, civil society, the police, policymakers and the children themselves. The policy landscape in particular is a complex one involving Government actors across a range of departments including the Home Office, Department for Education, Ministry of Justice, Department for Health and Social Care, and Department for Work and Pensions. Key problems occur when sectors work in silos, as a joined-up approach is vital to tackle the nuances and complexities around modern slavery. The best practice examples cited throughout this report all demonstrate the effectiveness of strong multi-agency working. Yet it is important to consider which voices are being privileged in these partnerships; often authority figures listen to local knowledge and lived experience with the intent to reply or react, but these experiences do not inform top-level decisions. For policy to be effective and up-to-date with current practice, we need to situate systems into the real lives of young people to highlight the impact they may have. Practitioners called for institutions to humble themselves and work with 'on the ground' organisations.

Multi-agency working involves recognising different pathways and visions for responding to modern slavery. Collaboration requires hard conversations, with stakeholders needing to listen to one another and see opportunities for growth. For researchers and academics, there should be increased opportunities for collaboration via 'trespassing': when researchers explore different areas and disciplines to view the response to child trafficking through different lenses. For those in policy and government, partnerships with business, trade unions and commercial enterprises should be developed to provide guidance and to raise awareness of modern slavery and child trafficking. Through offering multi-agency training within such partnerships, an opportunity for two-way learning is available. This learning needs to be shared across Government departments to ensure better join-up in policy creation. This

can be challenging as modern slavery and trafficking can mean different things to different practitioners, therefore clearer definitions could contribute to better cohesion and understanding within the sector. For example, practitioners in Scotland use the term 'human trafficking' instead of 'modern slavery', reflecting Scottish legislation and policy, and such nuances need to be considered when operating across borders and sharing knowledge.

Often projects and interventions attempt to offer a 'unique contribution' which further reinforces a silo mentality. Practitioners called for the need to look to current good practice to replicate and evolve, rather than attempting to reinvent the wheel at every opportunity. An opportunity for this could be offered through further resourcing for serious case reviews, which should emphasise both successes and challenges to focus on opportunities for learning. A culture of self-reflection should be embedded, which includes articulating and celebrating good practice. It is important this learning is then shared, with interdisciplinary networks being crucial for the dissemination of best practice across the sector. For example, the Human Trafficking Foundation's National Network Co-ordinators' Forum brings together various regional anti-slavery networks and partnerships in the UK to promote inter-regional cooperation and sharing of best practice. Models of note which have embodied the multi-agency approach are Operation Innerste, led by Devon & Cornwall Police, and the Violence Reduction Unit at Thames Valley Police.

## Case study: Operation Innerste



Operation Innerste was developed in 2016 as a multi-agency response to the complex issues surrounding missing unaccompanied migrant children. This was led by Devon & Cornwall Police and Immigration Enforcement, working in partnership with police forces, non-governmental organisations, the Home Office Children's Champion, Border Force and the Association of Directors of Children's Services. The goal of the operation was to develop a process whereby first responders (usually the police) could build an early rapport with a child. This involves providing the child with a safe environment to express their needs and concerns, and the opportunity for authorities to explain the support, services and protection entitled to them. The first 72 hours following the initial contact with a child are highly significant in establishing a relationship. Through building trust between the professional and the child, it is intended to reduce the influence of traffickers and prevent the child from absconding and going missing. As part of the process, the first responder completes an initial welfare (or safeguarding) form, and obtains fingerprints and photographs from the child, which are passed on to the National Command and Control Unit for uploading on to immigration systems to ensure the identification and continuing safety of the child. This process offers a standardised, national operating response for all 43 police forces, Local Authorities' Children's Social Care, Immigration Enforcement and UK Visas and Immigration. Current data reveals 387 referrals have been made in the last six months, with cases rising.

**Recommendation 5:** the IASC should support development of a child trafficking and modern slavery 'community of practice' which collates, shares and evaluates up-to-date practitioner evidence across the sector.

• This includes introducing a regular cross-sector conference to bring together key stakeholders. The conference should act as an accountability mechanism where practitioners can regularly review steps being taken within each sector, based on previous recommendations and discussions.

• Practitioners and academics should give further attention to a public health approach and harm perspective, in addition to a criminal justice response.

**Recommendation 6:** increased opportunities should be created for professionals to participate in job shadowing, joint training and joint investigative training.

• There is a need for regular visits to other agencies and organisations to learn from others working in the field, including hearing from more survivors and frontline practitioners.

**Recommendation 7:** serious case reviews to be considered as an opportunity for safeguarding partnerships to reflect on all cases, and in particular learning from and sharing good practice.

# 7 Sustainability and resourcing

The reality is that such discussions are taking place after decades of austerity measures. The investment in youth services has been curtailed throughout the UK and remains inconsistent across different geographical areas. There is a need for a long-term welfare-based approach, as currently resourcing appears to just be responding to, or 'firefighting', the widespread and complex problems. There is a severe lack of early intervention and prevention responses that could better protect young people. Further resourcing should be made available for preventative programmes and youth clubs operating in local areas to help tackle structural issues, such as poverty and racism, which make children vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

At the heart of the issues within policy and governance is the reality that politics works on a short-term cycle. This approach fails to tackle the intergenerational and structural drivers of harm that impact individuals and communities. To create long-term structural change there needs to be a better formalised structure to link policy and practice. Whilst cost-benefit analyses may lack in qualitative insights, investing in a child earlier ultimately reduces the figures we are seeing for police responses to missing children (the current cost quoted at the conference being £18,000 per child). Programmes which work well are reliant on key individuals invoking change, yet when they leave, some organisations can lose the appetite and the learning is quickly forgotten. Change needs to be embedded institutionally, which requires long-term investment and attention.

**Recommendation 8:** to ensure child trafficking is reflected in the existing cross-Government strategic activity on extra-familial harm led by the Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care.

- It must be co-produced with survivors and stakeholders working closely with devolved agencies across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- Attention should be paid to the transition of child victims into adulthood, ensuring greater strategic focus.

# 8 Research and training

There are still a number of gaps in child trafficking data, notably the NRM statistics failing to include the ethnic background of referrals, despite persistent calls to do so (for recent example, see BASNET report[8]). This lack of information is undermining any chance of a culturally competent approach to tailoring responses to children. Although there is an increasing amount of research being conducted within the field of modern slavery and child exploitation, there is currently a lack of longitudinal studies being conducted due to the cost and logistical challenges of such projects. Collaboration is key for a project to attempt to measure generational change, yet knowledge can easily become siloed. There were also calls for developing a contextual safeguarding framework in modern slavery, exploring how such mechanisms could be incorporated across different sites across the UK.

It is important to note that monitoring and evaluation are intrinsic to good practice. Academics and researchers play a key role here, as they are perfectly positioned to conduct external evaluations. It is crucial that an evaluative framework is embedded into the models from the beginning, so academics can capture and analyse the full data available. Recently, the University of Bedfordshire and charity ECPAT UK have been announced as research partners, supported through the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre. Studies should centre the voices of children to determine how they experience the service, which requires the valuing of qualitative data within this research. If these findings are shared widely, at practitioner conferences and through accessible reports, then feedback can be implemented back into practice to improve organisational responses to exploitation.

Furthermore, training plays a crucial role in ensuring best practice is shared across the field but more research is required to explore whether or not training has an impact on professional behaviour. For children's social workers, modern slavery and child trafficking is not a core module, therefore it is important to

raise awareness of its pertinence across different sectors. The training should also cover the wellbeing of practitioners since the work is often challenging; vicarious trauma workshops should be mandatory to ensure practitioners are supporting victims while protecting their own wellbeing. Acknowledging the difficulties front line workers experience is paramount, as many experience emotional hardening to protect themselves from the challenging area of exploitation and trafficking. However, it is important to look beyond the victim's behaviour as this should not lead to the dehumanisation of service users. Therefore training in building resilience, while offering an empathetic and trauma-informed approach, is crucial.

> **Recommendation 9:** the Home Office should provide data on the ethnic backgrounds of those referred to the NRM.

> **Recommendation I0:** Local Child Safeguarding Partnerships and their equivalents in the Devolved Administrations should ensure training in delivering a consistent trauma-informed and empathetic response is implemented for all police officers and other front line practitioners dealing with victims of modern slavery.
>
> • The focus in the training should include survivor experiences and the child's perspective.

# 9 Conclusion

There was a clear consensus across conference delegates that the current response is failing those who are vulnerable to, and are victims of, child trafficking. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples and models of best practice operating throughout the UK, which have the potential to be scaled up and replicated across all local areas. Although many of these initiatives were a response to different areas of need, a number of core and cross-cutting values (child-centred, culturally competent, contextual and collaborative) linked these practices together. These values need to be entrenched into every sector that responds to victims of child trafficking, and to young people generally.

Practical ways in which these values can be fostered across the child trafficking sector have been suggested through I0 recommendations, working collaboratively to ensure accountability across sectors and that decisive action is taken against child trafficking.

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# Appendix I:
## A call for evidence

# Appendix I: A call for evidence

viii.
For more
information see
http://www.
antislavery
commissioner.
co.uk/news-
insights/
closed-call-
for-evidence-
practitioner-
responses-
to-child-
trafficking-
emerging-good-
practice/

In July 2021, the IASC launched a call for evidence[viii] inviting practitioners, academics and policymakers to share promising practice in the field of responding to child exploitation and trafficking (including domestic servitude, forced labour, sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation including county lines). Policymakers require a better understanding of the evidence practitioners have about what works, what looks promising, and how evidence is most effectively shared.

The call was seeking evidence in two areas: the sources of harm to children, and individual responses and support mechanisms for responding to harm.

'Evidence' includes:

- practitioner guides or toolkits, research and evaluations, and programmes
- community and civil society materials, research and programmes
- survivor-led and informed materials, research and programmes
- academic and non-governmental organisation (NGO) research outputs and programmes
- local safeguarding and multi-agency initiatives (including those at an early stage but demonstrating promising outcomes).

We are grateful to the following organisations which submitted evidence: University of Huddersfield; Changing Lives; Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Unit; University of Bedfordshire; County Lines Pathfinder team; Barnardo's Scotland; London Borough of Barking & Dagenham; North Lanarkshire Council; Unseen; Scottish Children's Reporter Administration; Vita Training; Bristol City Council; Hope for Justice; Stop the Traffik; The Children's Society; ECPAT UK; AFRUCA Safeguarding Children; and the Scottish Refugee Council.

To support the conference and the call for evidence, a steering committee was convened. The committee was facilitated by Dame Sara Thornton, Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, and Katherine Lawson, Research and Innovation Lead, Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's office. We would like to thank the following who provided insights and advice:

- Dr Craig Barlow, Criminologist and independent consultant in forensic social work
- Laura Durán, Senior Policy and Research Officer, ECPAT UK
- Dr Ruth van Dyke, Research Fellow, Bakhita Centre on Research in Slavery, Exploitation and Abuse, St Mary's University
- Professor Carlene Firmin, Professor of Social Work, Durham University
- Sarah Kerr, Policy and Evidence Professional
- Dr Paul Rigby, Lecturer in Social Work, University of Stirling
- Phillipa Roberts, Director of Legal Policy, Hope for Justice
- Detective Superintendent Sheon Sturland, Head, NPCC Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Unit

# Appendix II:
## Pre-conference briefing

# **1** Introduction

Men, women and children of any age can be victims of modern slavery and human trafficking but, in line with global trends, children are disproportionately affected within the UK. In response to this, and to coincide with the United Nations International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) and Cumberland Lodge are working in partnership to hold a cross-sector conference on the topic of Practitioner Responses to Child Trafficking: Emerging Good Practice, in October 2021. This conference brings together practitioners, academics, policymakers, and representatives from wider civil society and survivor organisations, for candid conversations about the role of practitioner[i] evidence in responding to child exploitation in the UK, with the goal of improving how evidence is shared to inform policy and improve survivor outcomes. The conference centres on the voices of survivors, to explore how best to protect and support victims of child trafficking in future.

The Cumberland Lodge and IASC conference aims to discuss:

1.  responses to the sources of harm to children (such as perpetrators of exploitation), the contexts in which exploitation occurs (such as neighbourhoods, groups or educational environments), and the structural drivers of harm (including poverty and racism).

2.  responses to support individuals, families and wider groups affected by harm (including trauma-informed practices, advocacy, guardianship, efforts towards non-criminalisation, and the development of culturally competent responses).

This briefing document presents some of the key themes in the current literature surrounding child trafficking and exploitation, and examines recent findings and ongoing research in the field. However, it is not an all-encompassing review of the broad and complex topic of child trafficking. Instead, it aims to help to contextualise discussions that will take place during the conference. The ideas and best-practice recommendations

i.
The term 'practitioner' refers to individuals working in the fields of child exploitation and safeguarding, or related fields (such as education, health, local authorities etc.), as well as modern slavery first responders, service providers and relevant Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and community and civil society organisations working with children and their families.

that emerge at the conference will be summarised in a post-conference report, to help inform policy and practice in the UK.

# 2 Defining the problem

## Overview of modern slavery

It is now five years since the then Prime Minister Theresa May described modern slavery as 'the great human rights issue of our time',[1] acknowledging that, despite the abolition of the slave trade in the 19th century, slavery has continued to adapt and evolve, to become a pressing contemporary issue in British society. A key challenge for practitioners is that modern slavery is a borderless crime, evolving across international, national and local borders,[2] in part as a result of globalisation, the proliferation of internet use and increased migration.

Civil and international conflicts around the world have caused the displacement of families and communities, rendering them more vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation by Organised Crime Groups (OCGs).[3] Non-UK nationals who are victims of modern slavery in the UK have often been exploited in their search for a better future.[4] Perpetrators often use coercion and deception to prey on victims[5], since, unlike in more historical notions of slavery, **'modern slaves are not held in chains – not literally.'**[6] Rather, they are held captive by fear.

As this is both a local and global issue, it requires a collaborative and multi-agency response. To raise awareness, Theresa May launched a Call to Action to end modern slavery and human trafficking in 2017,[7] which has now received endorsement from over 90 countries.[8] The UK has, therefore, exhibited significant global leadership on the issue,[9] although questions have been raised about the practical impact this Call for Action has had in countries that are committed to addressing modern slavery.[10]

Although the number of individuals involved in modern slavery is unknown, we can draw on various estimates to gain a better understanding of the scale of the issue. Statistics suggest that there are 40.3 million victims of modern slavery globally, with one in four being children.[11] The Walk Free Foundation, the international human rights organisation behind the Global

Slavery Index, has estimated that the total number of **modern slavery victims in the UK is roughly 136,000**,[12] although there is debate about how this data is collated and analysed.[13]

### Modern Slavery Act 2015[ii]

In the UK, 'modern slavery' is widely used as an umbrella term to refer to several types of exploitation.[14] These include forced labour, child exploitation, domestic servitude, criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation and removal of organs. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 was passed to **'give law enforcement the tools to fight modern slavery, ensure perpetrators can receive suitably severe punishments for these appalling crimes and enhance support and protection for victims.'**[15] It was this legislation that also led to the introduction of an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC).

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 has gone some way to addressing the multifaceted and widespread phenomenon of modern slavery, but a number of challenges remain, particularly with regards to trafficked children. In July 2018, the Government commissioned then MP (now Lord) Frank Field, Maria Miller MP and Baroness Butler-Sloss to undertake an independent review of the Act, and their final report was published in 2019, outlining 80 recommendations.[16] Yet, the review was unable to address the full range of child protection challenges that the UK currently faces.[17] In response, this briefing document focuses on the trafficking and exploitation of migrant and British children in the UK, to help guide and inform the cross-sector discussions taking place at Cumberland Lodge in October 2021.

## Nature and extent of child trafficking

The UK's understanding of child trafficking draws on the United Nations' Palermo Protocol definition, which covers the **'recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt'** of a child for the purpose of exploitation. Essentially, this acknowledges that a child[iii] cannot consent to their exploitation, regardless of whether they appear to accept any element of the abuse taking place.[18]

Child trafficking has been recognised as child abuse in international law, with Articles 31 and 35 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulating that children have the right to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking. Perpetrators may exploit or traffic children for the purposes of domestic servitude, forced labour, sexual exploitation and/or criminal exploitation (including county lines drug activity), all of which are explored in greater depth, below. Organised crime may drive exploitation, with financial gain as a strong incentive; one research report suggests that the sale of a child for the purpose of exploitation can attract profits of as much as $40,000 at the point of sale.[19]

There is not enough data to fully convey the scale of child trafficking in the UK. What we do know is that the number of potential victims identified is rising year on year, although this may reflect improvements in identification methods.[20] In the second quarter of 2020, for the first time there were more children than adults referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – the UK's system for identifying potential victims of trafficking and modern slavery.[21] Arguably this was due to the continued proliferation and identification of county lines drug dealing, despite the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020-21.[22]

Evidence suggests that these children rarely experience a single type of exploitation, but are typically subjected to multiple types of abuse whilst being trafficked.[23] **4,946 children** were identified as potential victims of exploitation in the UK, in 2020 (almost a **10% increase** on the previous year).

Since the NRM introduced Criminal Child Exploitation (CCE) as a distinct category of exploitation in October 2019,[iv] this has been the most prevalent exploitation type amongst children. In 2020, 2,544 children were identified as potential victims of CCE as a primary form of exploitation, of whom 93% were boys.[24] As the charity Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT) UK notes:

Increased understanding of child criminal exploitation is likely to be a significant driver of the higher number of UK-national boys identified, as professionals and institutions begin to recognise young males involved in drug supply and other criminal activity as victims rather than treating them as offenders.[25]

In 2020, the vast majority of potential child victims of exploitation were from the UK, with 2,874 identified. Non-UK national children were also identified, however, including children who were from Vietnam (246 children), Sudan (163 children), Albania (160 children), Romania (138 children) and Eritrea (132 children).[26]

In addition to these figures from 2020, the IASC's recent annual report includes figures from the 2020-21 financial year, reflected in the following graphs (see Figures 1 and 2).
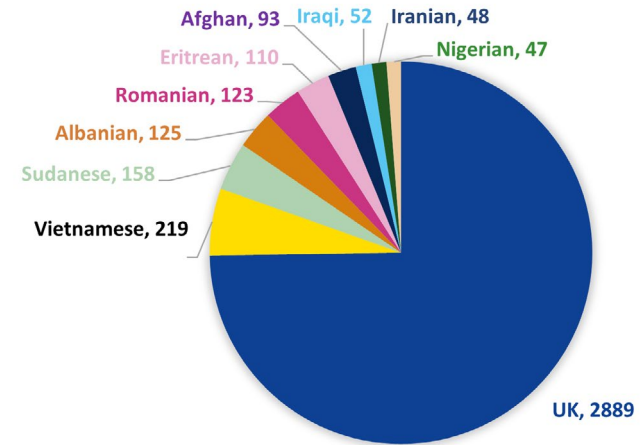
**2020/2021 CHILD NRM REFERRALS**



*Figure 1: 2020/21 Child NRM Referrals in the UK by country of origin (graph reproduced from the 2020/21 IASC annual report)[27]*

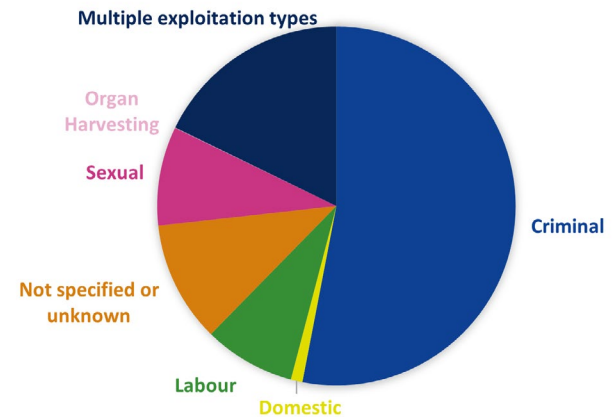**2020/2021 CHILD NRM REFERRALS**



*Figure 2: 2020/21 Child NRM Referrals in the UK by exploitation type (graph reproduced from the 2020/21 IASC annual report)[28]*

# Types of child trafficking

In order to understand the specific risks that children face, it is important to explore the different types of trafficking and exploitation. There are also often differences between the experiences of UK national and non-UK national children, as although both can encounter multiple forms of exploitation, migrant children may also face exploitation during their journeys to the UK.

## Trafficking of migrant children

Due to the lack of safe and legal routes by which to enter the UK, many migrant children face **traumatic and treacherous journeys,**[29] where vulnerability may be compounded by physical or sexual exploitation.[30] The UK's exit from the European Union has exacerbated challenges around the identification of both victims and perpetrators[31] and also means the UK no longer has access to information sharing via the Schengen Information System II,[v] which generates EU alerts for missing children. These have often been essential in finding and protecting children who have been trafficked across Europe.[32] The UK's post-Brexit communications system is slower and depends on EU member-states administering key information twice.[33]

The risk of exploitation further rises when a child is separated from a parent or carer.[34] Further evidence suggests that the UK Government's **immigration policies and continued securitisation of borders have left many undocumented children afraid to seek help,** due to the risk of being detained and sent back to the country they initially fled.[35] Despite having faced long journeys sometimes with no access to healthcare[36] – even while coping with pre-existing physical health conditions such as chronic disorders and disabilities – they do not identify themselves to the authorities. This means that children face the risk of continued exploitation and trafficking after entering the UK.

There is no accurate data available on the number of migrant children who are trafficked in the UK.[37] However, from the statistics available we can establish that more than 30,000 children went missing after their arrival to Europe between 2014 and 2017.[38] Children can go missing for a variety of reasons, although the act of going missing can be an indicator of trafficking and exploitation.[39] Factors which heighten a child's vulnerability and susceptibility to exploitation on their arrival into the UK include:

> *poor reception conditions, lack of access to information on their rights and the support available, and slow and complex procedures to regularise their immigration status, claim protection and reunite with family.[40]*

Many children have left situations of poverty, discrimination, persecution and civil war. Their needs are complex, and after being left traumatised by the cause of their fleeing, they then have to cope with a difficult journey whilst being **separated from their home, culture, family, friends and communities.**[41] Research has found that the level of manipulation and control traffickers have exerted on children often leaves them with a lack of trust in adults.[42] This, in turn, can lead children to suffer from anxiety, stress, isolation, loneliness, disturbed sleep, headaches, eating difficulties, panic attacks and depression.[43]

### Victim safeguarding and support

When a non-UK national child is identified as a potential victim of trafficking, there often is very little information known about them and data on education, healthcare or immigration records may be missing.[44] Children are often identified at a port of entry, a location where exploitation is known to take place, or when they present themselves to the authorities. The charity Unseen has found the evidence base for best practice is limited when considering both placing and supporting non-UK national children who have experienced trafficking.[45] This is compounded by budgetary constraints meaning this vulnerable population group is not always being placed in the best accommodation to support their needs.[46] These gaps in provision reflect the current

situation regarding the safeguarding of all trafficked children, yet there have also been arguments that institutional racism is causing some migrant children to receive inadequate support.[47]

Migrant children face numerous additional barriers in accessing help, including:

- a language barrier
- lack of support networks within the UK
- lack of trust in professionals as a result of corruption in their country of origin
- lack of knowledge about the support available in the UK.[48]

Migrant children also face the risk of being forced to return to their country of origin despite having grown up in the UK and not having any remaining contact with their birthplace. The reality of this situation can be seen in the case study of Kobe, which is reproduced from ECPAT UK's 2020 annual report on child trafficking in the UK.

### Kobe's story[49]

Kobe was brought to London by his parents at the age of five. The following year he was taken into the care of social services. The local authority took no steps to regularise Kobe's immigration status and he was effectively undocumented by the age of 10.

By the age of 11, he had been in seven different foster placements and had had so many social workers he had lost track of their names. He was struggling at school and was diagnosed with a learning disability.

During the final year of primary school, he was recruited into selling drugs. For years, he was horrifically abused by his exploiters. He would go missing weekly from his foster placement and was arrested for various offences he committed as a result of his exploitation. He was seen by professionals as a 'young offender' who was 'choosing' this 'lifestyle'.

Shortly before his 18th birthday, he was finally identified as a victim whilst serving a custodial sentence at a young offender institution. Shortly before his release, Kobe was served with removal directions to Ghana, a country he has no memory of. He had hoped to enrol in culinary school and become a chef after his release, but instead spent months mostly in his bedroom unable to access education and facing the prospect of removal. He was terrified and completely disengaged from the mental health services he was accessing.

One year on from his release, he was still in immigration limbo and all he could do was wait. As the months ticked by, Kobe felt his dreams slip away, and once again he felt completely failed by those whose duty it was to care for him.

A few days later, Kobe was reported missing from his placement. His support worker suspects he is being exploited again.

## Child criminal exploitation

An example of child trafficking which affects both non-UK and UK national children is child criminal exploitation. The sharp increase in figures of child trafficking in recent years has been attributed to criminal exploitation including county lines, now recorded as a separate category of exploitation within the NRM. The county lines model of criminal exploitation is now recognised more widely by professionals. Similarly to other types of trafficking, child criminal exploitation often occurs alongside other forms of exploitation[50] – including sexual exploitation, which will be explored in further depth in the next section of this briefing. The Children's Commissioner estimates that **at least 27,000 children are at high risk of criminal exploitation,**[51] with the Home Office's Serious Violence Strategy defining child criminal exploitation as:

> ...Where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to **coerce, control, manipulate** or **deceive** a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/ or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. **The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.** Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.[52]

However, there is **no statutory definition for CCE** despite calls for one from a number of organisations and stakeholders.[53] Such stakeholders note that a statutory definition would allow for 'a shared understanding and a better multi-agency response',[54] which may result in professionals both spotting the early signs of grooming and safeguarding those vulnerable to CCE. Proponents believe this could allow for a more preventative and consistent approach taken by statutory agencies across the country.[55]

Child criminal exploitation can take a variety of different forms and models, including:

- children being forced to work in cannabis factories
- being coerced into transporting and selling drugs around the country
- forced to shoplift or pickpocket
- forced into begging [56].

Practitioners and policymakers have determined that one prominent form of child criminal exploitation is the **county lines drugs model,** which has infiltrated communities across the UK. This involves 'vulnerable groups distributing drugs and money across the country through dedicated mobile phone lines (often from cities to counties – hence the term county lines)'.[57] This may involve having to 'plug' or 'stuff' packages within their own bodies.[58] The main driver of county lines is the demand and supply of controlled substances, such as heroin and crack cocaine, within the UK.[59]

Children are targeted through both face-to-face contact and social media for the purpose of exploitation. **Platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram are being readily used in the early grooming process.** However, a 'significant knowledge gap'[60] has been identified in terms of the language and content of this online communication, leaving practitioners with little understanding about how trust is garnered. The process of peer recruitment is of particular concern with entire friendship groups getting caught up in county lines networks.[61] Coercion and violence are at the heart of the targeting process, acting as a control mechanism to trap victims into a cycle of exploitation.[62] The **violence** the young people experience has been identified as both **physical and psychological,** ensuring they are compliant in the operation and respond to the demands of the gang.[63] However, the operations differ across regions,[64] adding to the challenge of identifying and dismantling county lines networks. This has likely contributed to the growth of this model of exploitation. The Children's Society report on county lines

described it as 'a systemic problem reported in almost every police force in the country.'[65]

'Children are being cynically exploited with the promise of money, drugs, status and affection. They're being controlled using threats, violence and sexual abuse, leaving them traumatised and living in fear.'

Nick Roseveare, former interim CEO of the Children's Society[66]

### COVID-19

Despite a series of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is understood that child criminal exploitation continued to take place.[67] Although lockdown restrictions did benefit the authorities in identifying ongoing CCE due to the reallocation of resources towards neighbourhood policing,[68] various county lines operations and perpetrators adapted their methods to avoid being identified. Furthermore, methods of recruitment moved increasingly online, with perpetrators targeting individuals they believed would not be as easily detected by the authorities.[69] These have included reports of using more **females, vulnerable drug users, children from more middle to upper class backgrounds and, in some instances, university students.**[70] This clearly outlines the adaptability of such operations, which has been noted throughout the literature on CCE and county lines:

> The criminal organisations and individuals who are exploiting children are perceptive to efforts to disrupt their business – as soon as a trend is identified by authorities, they shift the model.[71]

### Grooming process

Grooming is 'a process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of the child'.[72] It is a common feature in many forms of exploitation and trafficking, with the grooming of children for CCE often

occurring in a number of phases. The Children's Society diagram below (see Figure 3) provides insight into how perpetrators' methods typically go from **targeting to trapping** the victim into the operation. The targeting phase often includes identifying an unmet need or want in a young person's life,[73] which could include offering **money, status or even relational support,** for instance through the backing of a particular gang. As discussed above, perpetrators can utilise social media as a means of targeting, grooming and controlling their victims, alongside monetary incentives.[74]

After the criminal operation has invested both time and money into the target, young people are tested to see if they can be trusted to transport drugs and/or money, or do other tasks within the operation. These tests involve a number of tasks which escalate in risk and, consequentially, reward.[75] A familiar technique utilised by perpetrators to establish whether a young person can be trusted is to ask them to carry something of value. The young person will then be **mugged**, rendering them unable to give the item back – and thus ensuring that they are in debt to the group. The young person is left unaware that the robbery was organised by the very criminal group they are associated with, as a means of facilitating **debt bondage.**[76]

## A child's journey through child criminal exploitation

| | Target | Test | Trap |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Perpetrators** | | | |
| **Cycle of exploitation** | • Observing children<br>• Finding their vulnerabilities, their needs and wants<br>• Gaining and developing trust<br>• Sharing information with others in the group<br>• Manipulating to recruit them<br>• Marking them out as someone to watch | • Test out children's loyalty<br>• Offer them protection<br>• Give a sense of belonging<br>• Introduce them to more established members<br>• Might create a dependency<br>• Ask for favours<br>• Ask to recruit others | • Experiences of physical, psychological and sexual violence<br>• Trafficking<br>• Humiliation and control<br>• Reinforced dependency<br>• Blackmail – this can include 'fake' mugging organised by them to create a debt<br>• Isolation you from family, friends and society |

Continued vulnerability / Hospitalised / Imprisoned/youth justice

| | Prevent | Disrupt | Support |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Children** | | | |
| **Protective systems** | • Identifying those at risk<br>• Early help programmes for children and families<br>• Support for children in need<br>• Universal services to address vulnerabilities<br>• Increasing awareness of risks among professionals<br>• Educating families and children<br>• Community engagement<br>• Police disrupting grooming and coercion | • Robust child protection responses<br>• Support for children and families<br>• Information sharing between partner agencies<br>• Capturing and reporting victimisation statistics<br>• NRM referral<br>• Addressing the underlying unmet needs<br>• Police targeting perpetrators and criminal groups | • Prevention of re-victimisation<br>• Mental health and therapeutic provision for trauma<br>• Safe housing<br>• Support with educational attainment<br>• Transitional support into adulthood |
| **Professionals** | | | |

Employment / Education / Safe

*Figure 3: Diagram reproduced from the Children's Society 2019 report on child criminal exploitation[77]*

### Vulnerability indicators

Criminal exploitation affects children of various backgrounds, with all children ultimately being vulnerable to exploitation. Despite this, there are a number of risk factors that result in increased susceptibility to child criminal exploitation. This is no reflection on the child but instead reflects how perpetrators can prey on perceived vulnerabilities when targeting children.

> *Responsibility for abuse/exploitation therefore always lies with the perpetrators who abuse/exploit children and cause them harm; irrespective of the behaviour or circumstances of a child – if there is no perpetrator, there will be no abuse/exploitation of a child.[78]*

Factors such as living in **poverty, family breakdown, looked after status, learning disabilities,** frequently **going missing** or being **excluded from school** can all leave children more vulnerable to exploitation.[79] Factors such as living in poverty are not causes of criminal exploitation, but they are risk indicators for potential abuse.

One reported trend is of an increasing number of young people from comparatively affluent backgrounds being flagged as potential victims of CCE.[80] Going missing is another potential indicator that a child could be being criminally exploited and involved in county lines drugs trafficking.[81] Yet, research has highlighted that in many instances children were not being reported as missing, particularly in the case of older children. There are several reasons for this, spanning from neglect to parents or carers being scared to involve the police due to fears over possible repercussions from the perpetrators. These young people are referred to as 'hidden missing'.[82] Adding to this, research found that having a learning disability left a child more susceptible to exploitation. This is due to the perception that such individuals could be more easily controlled, resulting in the perpetrators exerting power over them.

Furthermore, identity characteristics, such as **race, gender, class** and **age**, also impact a child's vulnerability to abuse and their subsequent treatment by the authorities and professionals tasked with their care.[83] Some practitioners have expressed a concern that Black, Asian and minority ethnic children are disproportionately affected by county lines, and that such children are over-represented in the criminal justice system for crimes associated with CCE.[84] This draws attention to the fact that professionals may be less likely to see minority ethnic children as victims. Ultimately, 'are we seeing more minority ethnic children in services and the criminal justice system because they are more likely to have been targeted? Or is it that they are more likely to be picked up by the police and the statutory services?'[85]

The risk is compounded when considering gender, as statistics reveal that 90% of victims recorded as having associations with county lines CCE in 2020 were male.[86] In general across criminal justice responses, men and boys are more often viewed as

perpetrators[87] and therefore are not always identified as victims of exploitation. Despite reported increases in numbers of female victims of CCE,[88] the criminal exploitation they become involved in may be secondary, or a by-product of, other forms of trafficking or abuse – most commonly sexual exploitation.[89] In addition to this, the ages of victims exploited for abuse range from seven to 17 years old, with 15 to 17 year-olds most readily targeted.[90] Age can play a key role in the response from statutory agencies, as young people can experience adultification[vi] by the authorities. This is often racialised, with Black British teenagers being more likely to be treated as older than they are.[91] This is highly problematic and can lead to misconceptions that young people are somewhat culpable or complicit in their own exploitation.[92] Although this section just touches on the complexity of identity factors and exploitation, it is clear the intersection[93] of all of these characteristics and identities influences a child's vulnerability to exploitation.

Although there has been increasing attention to the county lines model of CCE in recent years, there are still concerns regarding the treatment and criminalisation of victims of CCE by statutory agencies.[94] The statutory defence under section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 prohibits prosecution of victims who committed certain criminal acts as a result of their exploitation. However, discrepancies remain as a result of safeguarding agencies holding different understandings of what constitutes criminal exploitation. This is a particularly pertinent issue for former victims of criminal exploitation who are non-UK nationals, where the nexus between exploitation and offending may be difficult to prove evidentially and who may face immigration detention or deportation. ECPAT UK[95] highlights the contradiction of the current Government guidance stating the need for a safeguarding approach to child victims of criminal exploitation, yet it does not consider the impact for migrant children and their long-term right to stay in the UK. These issues will be explored in greater depth in the 'Policing and prosecutions' section of this document.[96]

## Victim safeguarding and support

Unfortunately, there have been a number of failures to keep young people safe, as explored in the recent serious case reviews by the Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board[97] and the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board[98]. Research has revealed that children and young people experience a range of responses from statutory agencies, with this **postcode lottery** being a result of the lack of consistent national and local safeguarding strategies and procedures in place.[99] Although there are examples of best practice occurring throughout the UK, this is not being experienced by all children facing exploitation.[100] The IASC also noted in their most recent report **'the lack of adequate safeguarding interventions'**[101] for children facing CCE. This is in line with the Children's Commissioner's report in 2019 highlighting significant local level failings to identify children earlier who were at risk of exploitation, including monitoring young people's links to drug dealing networks.[102]

A reason behind such a failure is the struggle of professionals to keep up with the scale and evolving context of CCE.[103] The literature available highlights the need to focus on prevention, particularly providing a more geographically consistent response to all victims of CCE. The Children's Society identifies that the support needs to be trauma-informed, acknowledging the long-term impact of exploitation on a child's mental health and emotional wellbeing.[104] Yet for this to be consistent and comprehensive throughout the UK, there is a need for **increased funding and resources.**

Nevertheless, there were a number of innovative programmes launched to combat CCE during the COVID-19 pandemic such as, See, Hear, Respond[vii] led by Barnardo's and funded by the Department for Education. This managed to support over 27,000 children at risk of being criminally exploited between June 2020 and March 2021.[106] In total, the programme supported over 100,000 vulnerable children who were not receiving any statutory support and provided them with support for their mental health, along with educative resources on risk of harm at home, online and in the community.

## Child sexual exploitation

A further example of child trafficking is child sexual exploitation. The UK Government defines it as:

> A form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.[107]

This became a statutory definition in 2017. By clearly formalising sexual exploitation as abuse, it meant that children could no longer be viewed as 'prostitutes' or as 'making poor lifestyle choices', as had been the case by many authorities charged with the protection of children.[108] The definition highlighted that these individuals were victims of exploitation in need of support.[109]

However, there is not a legal or statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation with proponents highlighting that once an individual turns 18 they do not simply stop getting exploited.[110] This has resulted in calls for the expansion of the definition of sexual exploitation to include vulnerable adults[viii].

### Characteristics of CSE

Child sexual exploitation is widely hidden in our society, as it is rare for a child to disclose if they have been victim to a form of sexual abuse or exploitation. Barriers to disclosure include **threats** from their abusers, being **worried they will not be believed,** concern they will get into **trouble** (particularly if having committed a crime as a result of their exploitation) and a false sense of **shame** which is often cultivated by a perpetrator.[111] There can be added complexity when victims do not disclose due to a desire to protect their perpetrator, which is particularly common when victims are groomed through the boyfriend model.[ix] In addition to this, boys can face further concerns to disclosure, which will be explored below.[112]

From the data available, **child sexual exploitation is occurring across the entirety of the United Kingdom,** including urban and rural communities.[113] When referring to child sexual exploitation, this can include abuse through the:

- exchange of sexual activity for a form of payment, including food, shelter, protection and affection
- production of indecent images, films and/or any other indecent material involving children
- grooming of children via direct contact or the use of technologies (such as mobile phones and the internet)
- trafficking for sexual purposes.[114]

**Violence, coercion and intimidation** usually play a significant role in these cases.[115] In particular, alcohol and drugs are often used at parties to reduce a young person's resistance and leaving them with hazy memories of what happened at the hands of the abusers.[116]

The scale and growth of online child sexual exploitation are of particular concern,[117] often involving the coercion of a child to take part in the production of child sexual abuse material.[118] For example, technology now enables the livestreaming of sexual assaults of children.[119] Further complications arise when victims may not identify themselves as victims of sexual exploitation, due to the manipulative power the perpetrator may hold over them.[120]

## Sexual exploitation of boys

By focusing on abuse against girls, society fails to acknowledge sexual exploitation towards males.[121] Sexual abuse against boys or men goes against the hetero-normative perception of victimhood, particularly with regards to sexual abuse. **It is often viewed that the perpetrator will be male and the victim, female.**[122] This means **professionals can miss the warning signs** of sexual exploitation of boys.[123] Although there are many similarities between boys and girls in terms of vulnerabilities,[124] boys face additional barriers to disclose sexual exploitation or abuse. For example, in the literature exploring experiences of male victims of child sexual abuse, there were examples of boys experiencing unwanted sexual arousal and ejaculation during the abuse.[125] The inadvertent bodily responses strengthened the perpetrator's hold over an individual, leaving victims feeling complicit in the abuse.[126] Perpetrators can use this false idea of culpability to then silence the victims.

It has also been identified that boys facing sexual exploitation can exhibit differently to girls. For example, **boys are more likely to express anger and trauma externally,** meaning they are often labelled as 'aggressive' or 'violent'.[127] As a result of this, male victims are often processed through the criminal justice system, rather than statutory services.[128] In addition, research reveals **male victims are more likely to have a recorded disability than females.**[129] The lack of attention to male victims of exploitation expands beyond statutory services to academia, as there is limited research available on the sexual exploitation of boys.

## Vulnerability indicators

In the context of child abuse and exploitation, UNICEF helpfully draws attention to the drivers and risks which can make children more vulnerable to sexual exploitation (see Figure 4). However, it is important to clarify that vulnerability is not the cause of abuse. Furthermore, although research draws attention to some characteristics that are common to victims of CSE, not all victims share these characteristics.[130] Care must be taken to prevent these vulnerability indicators from reinforcing stereotypes and leading to victims who do not necessarily display these typical characteristics from being overlooked.[131]

| | DRIVERS | | RISKS | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Influence on:** | **Structural** | **Community & organisational** | **Relationships** | **Individual** |
| **Perpetrator & victims** | • Social norms and stigma that support child sexual exploitation and abuse<br>• Ideologies of male sexual entitlement<br>• Child marriage<br>• Armed conflict<br>• Humanitarian crisis | • General tolerance of sexual abuse and exploitation<br>• Normalisation of violence in the community or organisation<br>• Situational risks - organisation/setting provides unregulated private access to vulnerable child | • Gang membership<br>• Lack of parental involvement and family support | • Childhood experience of sexual, physical, emotional abuse or neglect, exposure to parental domestic violence<br>• Age, gender & developmental vulnerabilities<br>• Harmful use of alcohol or illicit drugs |
| **Victim** | • Lack of recognition and legal protection of boys as victims of sexual violence<br>• Poverty<br>• Unsafe migration<br>• Social inequalities and discrimination on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, religious belief | • Revictimisation risk due to lack of support from police and other services<br>• Criminalization, punishment or blaming and stigmatisation of the victim | • Separation from family<br>• Man other than biological father in family home | • Disability<br>• Mental health issues<br>• Internalizing and externalizing symptoms<br>• Sexual orientation & gender identity |
| **Perpetrator** | | • Weak community or organisational safeguarding policies & sanctions against perpetrators<br>• Family honour/norms of sexual 'purity' for girls and women | • Association with sexually aggressive peers<br>• Perpetrator is person in position of trust or authority/older than victim | • Learning disability<br>• Mental health issues<br>• Anti-social personality and conduct disorder<br>• Motivation, attitudes and beliefs that support child sexual exploitation and abuse |

*Figure 4: Drivers and risks table, reproduced from 2020 UNICEF report on child sexual abuse and exploitation[132]*

Similar to other types of exploitation, identity characteristics, such as **race, class** and **disability,** also impact a child's vulnerability to abuse. Sexual exploitation can impact girls and boys from all backgrounds. Following on from the vulnerability factors identified in the 'Child criminal exploitation' section of this document (see pages 54 - 57), research has found that children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to be recognised as victims.

Additionally, there is significant research available that children with learning disabilities[133] and/or those in **local authority care**[134] are more susceptible to exploitation. The Jay Report which looked at the child sexual exploitation cases in Rotherham revealed that many of the girls who were abused were in local

authority care, with perpetrators actively targeting residents' units and services.[135]

> *Perpetrators target [girls and] women according to real or perceived vulnerability and accessibility – they can also target women who they think will be less credible to services and in a court of law.[136]*

### Victim safeguarding and support

Risk assessments have provided frameworks for practitioners to identify if a child may be at-risk, or in fact already a victim, of child sexual exploitation. The lists below have been reproduced from part of the Newcastle Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB) and the Newcastle Safeguarding Adults Board's (NSAB) risk assessment to help frontline practitioners identify cases of sexual exploitation of children, young people and adults at risk.[137]

Such frameworks highlight an array of vulnerability indicators that can help identify children who are vulnerable to exploitation.[138]

*Vulnerability factors:*

- isolation, lack of strong social networks
- breakdown of family relationships
- lack of engagement/inconsistent engagement with support networks (i.e. often misses appointments)
- friends/peers are victims of sexual exploitation
- history of local authority care
- history of abuse (including as a child)
- low self-esteem
- susceptible to grooming
- bereavement or loss
- dependency on alleged perpetrator(s)
- substance misuse/dependency

- needs for care and support
- learning disability/difficulty
- unstable housing situation.

*At risk indicators:*
- forced or coerced into making decisions
- going missing for periods of time
- unexplained increase in goods or money
- reduced contact with family, friends and other support networks
- concerning use of internet, social media and mobile phone
- meeting adults/older peers through the internet
- evidence of risky/inappropriate sexual behaviour
- inconsistent use of contraception (risk of STIs)
- regular and/or concerning access of sexual health services
- self-harming.

*Critical risk indicators:*
- groomed or abused via internet or mobile technology
- physical injuries without plausible explanation
- controlling partner, e.g. preventing access to services
- fear of partner
- disclosure of domestic abuse
- exchanging sexual activity for accommodation
- being trafficked for the purpose of sex
- change in presentation or demeanour
- change in appearance and/or sexualised dressing
- involvement in petty crime

- funding use of drugs/alcohol/legal highs or tobacco through unknown sources
- unexplained contact with hotels/taxis/fast food outlets
- reported to have been in locations where there are known concerns relating to sexual exploitation
- associating with known perpetrators of sexual exploitation
- unexplained patterns of engagement, i.e. disappearing from support systems with no contact or explanation.

The presence of an indicator on the above list may not mean a child will face exploitation, but a combination of indicators, with consideration to the context, should result in concern for a child's welfare.[139] Barnardo's has used risk assessments to develop its Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF) and its new evidence- and practice-based Complex Abuse and Exploitation Risk Approach for working with children and young people at risk of or experiencing CSE. The development of these tools demonstrates the strength of **multi-agency collaboration** and evidences the importance of effective guidance to go alongside tools and essentially, a strong relationship with a young person.[140]

Ensuring a young person's agency throughout the support process is essential, as exploited children have previously expressed varying levels of disempowerment. Young people have recounted not feeling listened to or valued, highlighting the need for a more **child-centred process.**[141] A lack of collaboration with a child can lead to adverse impacts on their mental health; children shared examples of difficulties sleeping over concerns about the outcome of their cases and fear of repercussions from their abusers. It is particularly important that young people receive regular updates on the progress of their cases and have a consistent trusted case-worker to ensure that their views are both listened to and respected.[142] However, there is a need to look beyond the child, to who is associating with them (and why), in order to better identify and protect those who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.[143] Contextual safeguarding will be

explored in further depth later in this briefing. Nevertheless, the safeguarding response should acknowledge the local context of the abuse and intervene in situations or environments where the young person is likely to be targeted. One Home Office report highlights local multi-agency safeguarding partnerships are best placed to do this strategically.[144]

There are numerous barriers for young people accessing support and approaching services.[145] Some described experiences of feeling judged or not believed when they did reach out for help.[146] Victims often suffer with complex mental health issues as a result of being trafficked, and therefore are in need of **tailored support** to suit their individual needs. The support children and young people require as a result of exploitation can be vast. They may be in need of translators, be homeless, have drug and alcohol dependency, be single parents, have low self-esteem and/or poor employment options.[147] A **trauma-informed approach**[148] needs to be utilised, from first contact to administration of care, particularly when contact with services can be retraumatising for victims of sexual exploitation. Specialist support treatments available will be explored in the 'Supporting victims and survivors' section of this document (see page 75)

> Trauma-informed care approaches aim to create safety and trust in the relationship between the young person and the practitioner, to promote control, build resilience and empowerment and prioritise self-empathy and self-care.[149]

## Other forms of child trafficking

**Forced labour** is when children are forced to work against their will, often in poor working conditions, receiving little to no wages in return. Labour exploitation occurs across numerous industries, however it can be found more frequently in the entertainment, manufacturing, farming, travel, and construction sectors.[150]

**Domestic servitude** is when children work within private households carrying out forced domestic chores, including

housework, childcare and elder care. Exploited children are often trapped as their immigration status and accommodation is tied to their employer.[151]

**Organ trafficking** is when children are trafficked with the purpose of selling their body parts or internal organs (most common being kidneys) on the black market. This is mostly identified by finding victims in private hospitals or residences with unexplained or suspicious scars.[152] Identified cases in the UK are low, with two children referred to the NRM in 2020.[153]

# 4 The UK response to child trafficking

## UK policy and initiatives

The UK Government is still operating under the 2014 strategy of the 'Four Ps': Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare'[154] and reports annually on the situation, although the development of a new strategy is underway. In Scotland,[155] ECPAT UK has highlighted the 'significant effort' in response to modern slavery and child trafficking being conducted in the current strategy.[156] Northern Ireland's strategy (2019-2020) is particularly focused on improving the current care provision measures for child victims.[157]

There is no specific central fund for child victims of trafficking in the UK.[158] Resources for their care and protection sit within local authority children's service budgets (unless the child is an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child). Under the child protection framework, local authorities have a duty of care for victims of child trafficking. However, **funding to children's services has continued to decrease over the past few years.**[159] This has left children's services in England at **'breaking point'**, according to a report by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.[160] The cuts have also centred around preventative and early intervention services, which are essential for combatting child trafficking.[161]

Although there have been increases to funding in certain areas, such as the policing response,[162] there are still shortfalls in other sectors. For example, some child victims struggle to access quality legal advice as 78% of local authorities in England and Wales do not have a single community care legal aid provider.[163] This significantly hinders children's ability to obtain legal advice.[164]

Local authorities have differing levels of resources and understanding to identify and respond to child trafficking.[165] This can mean a child's experience of support differs depending on their location. There are still a number of significant areas in need

of attention, particularly surrounding: **'insufficient protection in social care, going missing, being criminalised and facing barriers to transitioning to adulthood in safety'**.[166]

### National Referral Mechanism (NRM)

The data on modern slavery in the UK largely come from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which is the Government's framework for **'identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support'**.[167] All potential child victims should be referred to the NRM, whereas consent is required from suspected adult victims. 4,946 child referrals were made into the NRM in 2020, which is 446 more than in 2019.[168] Some have noted the possible impact of the pandemic on these numbers, as businesses including hand car washes and nail bars were forced to close during the various lockdowns, which would have a knock-on effect on labour practices and victim identification.[169] A number of issues have been raised with the NRM, particularly surrounding the **transparency** and **speed** of the decision making.[170] This could play into the **concerns issued by a number of organisations into the effectiveness of the NRM for children.**[171]

### Devolving child decision-making pilot programme (2021-22)

The Home Office has addressed these concerns by launching a pilot to test if local safeguarding partners are better placed to conduct NRM decisions for children. The pilot is being conducted across 10 sites in England, Scotland and Wales.[172] By putting forward a devolved decision-making process, the hope is to provide a more joined up approach to the identification of children who are victims of trafficking and the subsequent care they receive.[173] Practitioners and experts widely agree that children's safeguarding partners should make NRM decisions at a local level.[174] The outcomes of the pilot should be seen over the next year. If successful, the devolved decision-making model will offer a more sustainable and long-term option for the NRM.[175] It will ensure that decision makers are involved in the victims'

care and that decisions are informed by the local, needs-based support available.[176]

### Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC)

Another part of the UK's response to modern slavery was the creation of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) role in Part Four of the Modern Slavery Act. The role of the Commissioner is: **'to encourage good practice in the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of slavery and human trafficking offences, as well as in the identification of victims'.**[177] The Commissioner has jurisdiction across the UK and their duties include creating a strategic plan and producing annual reports to be laid before Parliament by the Secretary of State. [178] Figure 5 below outlines the Commissioner's current strategic priorities:



*Figure 5: IASC strategic priorities reproduced from the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner Strategic Plan 2019-2021[179]*

## Supporting victims and survivors

To improve the safeguarding response to child trafficking, some practitioners have called for a **contextual safeguarding approach.**[x] This considers the wider context in which harms occur, looking at how extra-familial social contexts, such as peer groups and communities, can influence the young person's susceptibility to exploitation.[180] This is helpful in both protecting children who may be vulnerable to trafficking, and in safeguarding victims from further abuse and exploitation. This does not place blame on young people, but looks at the wider context in which trafficking occurs.[181] Risk assessments focusing attention on the behaviours of children often fail to acknowledge the people or places that present a risk to them.[182]

### Accommodation

Under Section 20 of The Children Act 1989, local authorities are given the responsibility for providing children who require it appropriate accommodation. After children have been supported and accommodated for 24 hours, they are considered 'looked after' and will be entitled to the same support as any other looked after child (LAC), irrespective of their immigration status.[183] Research suggests that many local authority and voluntary sector stakeholders consider foster care as the most effective placement type for trafficked children although many foster carers are not trained to deal with the complex needs of this group.[184]

There are doubts over whether the placement decisions are being made solely on the needs of the child or if budgets are influencing these decisions. The charity Unseen asks: **'are most trafficked children placed in foster care because it is cheaper than a provision specifically designed for trafficked children?'**[185] Placement decisions may not be being made with the best interests of the child at heart, whereas the support provided to trafficked children should be tailored, as some accommodation may not fit the diversity of needs a trafficked child may have.[186]

x.
This is a result of innovative ongoing work at Bedfordshire University. For more information, see https:// contextual safeguarding. org.uk/

### Barnardo's Safe Accommodation Project[xi]

There have been a number of specific accommodation options trialled for trafficked children in the UK. In 2011, Barnardo's received funding to run a two-year Safe Accommodation Project to pilot the use of specialist foster placements for young people at risk, or victims of exploitation and/or trafficking. Young people received one-to-one support from people who were all specially trained.[188] The project was successful for some children, however, a lack of carers being recruited to the project made further roll-out impractical.[189] Nevertheless, the project provided an opportunity for learning, showing the benefits of a model of specialist foster care.[190]

### Unseen's CSSW (specifically for non-UK nationals)[xii]

Another pilot which has been trialled in the UK care system is Children's Service South West (CSSW), which was supported by Ofsted and the Home Office in 2018. CSSW accommodated non-UK national children aged between 13-17 years old who had been victims of trafficking. Historically such children have received less individualised support in the care system[191], therefore the project aimed to offer tailored, specialist support, focusing on the child's developmental needs and providing them with a therapeutic family environment.[192] Unseen wished to test an affordable and scalable model which fitted well within the existing structures.[193]

In practice, when receiving referrals, Unseen observed an apparent lack of knowledge and awareness within local authority teams about trafficking.[194] Nevertheless, the project still supported four children between May and December 2018: three boys and one girl, all aged between 15 and 17 years old and whose

nationalities were Vietnamese, Iranian, Romanian and Afghan. The key success of the project was that none of the children experienced any episodes of going missing and no serious or notifiable incidents took place.[195] The accommodation closed due to lack of referrals, and Unseen highlights that there needs to be a fundamental shift in the approach to commissioning services to meet the needs of children. Local authorities, particularly social work teams, needed to be better trained and financially equipped to ensure the high-level protection and support of such children.[196]

### Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) and Regional Practice Coordinators

Another source of support for trafficked children are the Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs), who were provided for in England and Wales under the Modern Slavery Act in 2015[xiii]. ICTGs and Regional Practice Coordinators are available in two-thirds of local authority areas. The goal was for a trafficked child to have an 'additional, independent source of advice […] and somebody who can speak up on their behalf'.[197] The scheme has been championed by practitioners in the field, being described as an **'essential support measure'.**[198] Children are able to build mutual trust with someone who ensures their voice is heard and their best interests are represented in any immigration or criminal justice proceeding.[199] Both Scotland and Northern Ireland have similar systems; Scotland introduced the Scottish Guardianship Service pilot in 2010[xiv] and Northern Ireland introduced their Independent Guardians model in 2018. Both schemes are highly regarded as comprehensive systems, supporting all trafficked and unaccompanied children of any nationality.[200]

In a review set out of ICTGs in three early adopter sites (between February 2017 to January 2019), a total of 4,957 children were referred to the NRM across the UK. Across the three ICTG sites, a total of 445 children were referred to the ICTG service during the review period, 54% of whom were aged 16 or 17 years old and 64% were males. British children were the most common

nationality referred to the service (43%) and had been mainly subjected to criminal or sexual exploitation. Vietnamese children made up 15% and Sudanese 11%, after mainly being subjected to labour exploitation. In Wales, the majority of children referred were girls from across the UK who had been subjected to sexual exploitation. In the other two sites – Hampshire and the Isle of Wight – CCE cases involving males made up the largest proportion of referrals.[201]
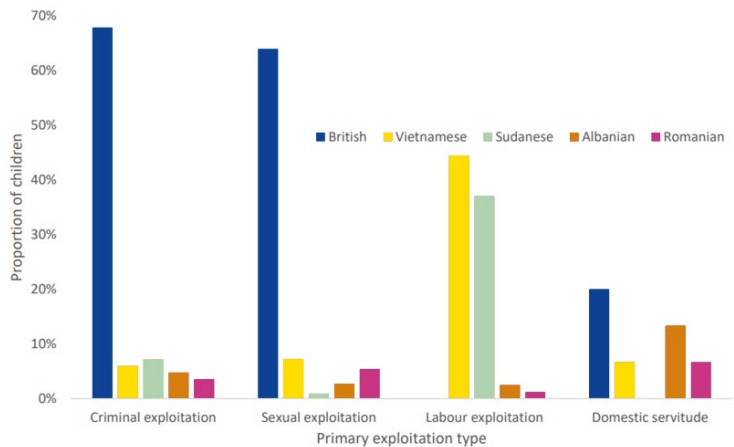


*Figure 6: Reproduced from Home Office 2019 report[202] reflecting the most common nationalities of children in the ICTG service by primary exploitation type, February 2017 to January 2019*

The review also highlighted the purpose of the approach and the outcomes for trafficked children accessing the service. Initial introductions usually involved a face-to-face meeting and the frequency of contact tended to decline over time. The purpose of the meetings was to build and foster relationships and to establish risk and safety plans for the child's protection.[203] With regards to social care, ICTGs and social workers reported a good relationship, as social workers valued the ICTGs' specialist knowledge of trafficking issues. ICTGs proved to be more consistent figures in the child's life, in comparison to social workers who have a high turnover rate.[204] The ICTG was in a strong position to foster trust with the young person, so

they could support them through the immigration, NRM and criminal justice processes. Children were said to have valued being kept informed of the progress of their case through the various systems. The ICTG was also able to facilitate the flow of information through a range of sectors involved in the young person's care. However, the system was not without fault; nearly a quarter of children being referred to the service were reported going missing, albeit mostly on a temporary basis. Furthermore, **the service is only offered to a young person until the age of 18, with practitioners expressing concern about the transition of young people into adult services.**[205]

Following the ICTG review, it was determined that children with a parent or carer in the UK should be offered a Regional Practice Co-ordinator to work with professionals who are already supporting the child.[206] This came about due to a reduced use of the service from children with a parental guardian in the UK. However, the change to the model has been criticised by some practitioners.[207] Some believe it creates 'a two-tier system' not based on individual needs, as children with a parent or carer may still benefit from independent support and advocacy.[208] Further criticism of the ICTG model is that it was rolled out very slowly across England. Wales has already enforced the service nationally,[209] alongside Scotland and Northern Ireland's systems being fully operational. This means that eligible trafficked children are not able to access this service in certain areas.

### Specialist support

Responding to the complex and individual needs of trafficked children is challenging. This has been highlighted by research calling for modern slavery to be understood as a public health issue.[210]

*Indeed, a public health approach offers the opportunity to think of modern slavery as not only an issue of law, order and policing, but as a problem that affects the whole of society and its wellbeing. In short, modern slavery is a public health issue.[211]*

A public health response hopes to offer a preventative approach to child trafficking before a criminal justice response is needed. Researchers have been exploring how best to respond to the mental and physical health of trafficked children, including launching the Vita Network[xv] to connect individuals and organisations working within the sector and to share knowledge, skills and resources. Practical guidelines are being developed by the Royal College of Paediatrics & Child Health to respond to child modern slavery, better equipping professionals to identify and respond to children who have faced trafficking. Examples of treatments currently being utilised include Cognitive Behavioural Therapies with a Trauma Focus (TF-CBT), Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) and talking therapies to help children facing the long-term impact of child trafficking, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

- **TF-CBT** is a copyrighted therapeutic approach specifically developed for the treatment of children who have experienced sexual abuse. It is based on more generalised CBT techniques[xvi], being recognised by the National Institute for Clinical Evidence (NICE) in the UK.[212] The World Health Organization (WHO) has also endorsed CBT with a trauma focus as a treatment for children who have faced sexual abuse or exploitation and are subsequently suffering with PTSD.[213]

- **EMDR**[xvii] is a treatment to reduce the symptoms of PTSD, which 'involves making side-to-side eye movements, usually by following the movement of your therapist's finger, while recalling the traumatic incident' (NHS, 2021b). By triggering traumatic events in a safe environment, it can help the brain to reprocess memories'.[214] EMDR is used to relieve the distress caused by trauma, including sexual violence.[215] Although much research has been aimed at adults, in the UK it is recommended by NICE on the basis of an extensive evidence assessment for the treatment of children with PTSD who do not respond to TF-CBT.[216]

## Survivors' voices

To fully understand the experience and needs of children who face exploitation and trafficking, we must ask the survivors themselves. Amplifying the voices of children not only provides essential learning opportunities for practitioners, but can offer a sense of empowerment to silenced young people. For those who make the personal choice to speak out, it can provide an opportunity to reclaim their story. Survivors' voices can also be heard through the many charities advocating for young people impacted by trafficking, including ECPAT UK and AFRUCA. ECPAT UK offers a network for survivors to connect with one another safely. There are important ethical considerations in collecting and hearing the voices of survivors, as it can cause re-traumatisation of the victim. The methods for doing this must be survivor-led[217], trauma-informed and the wellbeing of the victim should always be the priority. When considering the views of child victims, it is important to understand their wishes, thoughts and feelings in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 2.

## Policing and prosecutions

> 'Enforcement of the Modern Slavery Act is important as a deterrent and to bring justice and reparations for victims.'
>
> Dame Sara Thornton, in the 2020-21 annual IASC report[218]

When considering the criminal justice response to modern slavery, there is a clear disparity between the number of children who are trafficked and the number of perpetrators brought to justice in the courts.[219] Networks continue to proliferate and more and more children are exploited. Unfortunately, there is no published data on the number of cases, prosecutions and convictions under the Modern Slavery Act where the victim is a child.[220] However, we do know that prosecutions involving

modern slavery cases remain low.[221] In 2020, 10,700 victims of modern slavery and human trafficking were identified but only 331 offences prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act.[222] Yet, without official data of cases involving child victims, it is difficult to monitor how effective the Modern Slavery Act is for child victims in the criminal justice system.[223]

Over the last year or so, however, there has been an increase in the identification of victims of county lines trafficking.[224] Further attention has been given to the prosecution of modern slavery with the Sentencing Council launching updated guidelines[225] in an attempt to provide better consistency[226] across England and Wales for prosecuting cases of modern slavery. The impact of this will be seen after the guidelines come into effect in October 2021.

Due to perpetrators often operating in OCGs or networks,[227] a joined-up response is required at a national, regional and local level. Through a consultation between IASC Dame Sara Thornton and a number of police officers working in investigating cases of modern slavery, a number of barriers to prosecution were identified:

- **'Victim vulnerabilities made engagement as witnesses difficult**; support structures were not well aligned with helping victims through the criminal justice process. The victim journey to recovery was badly understood and victims were asked to give evidence too early.

- **Subject matter expertise** in investigators cuts investigation lengths significantly and results in better evidence gathering. Models which rely on single officers in busy general crime departments owning investigations are not able to service the **serious and complex nature of this offending.**

- Prosecution files are greatly **strengthened by including telecommunication and financial evidence** to prove exploitation without relying on victim evidence.

- Investigators **need access to specialist capabilities and assistance** from resources held at force and regional level, and prioritising modern slavery at strategic level assists with this.

- Investigator and First Responder **training** is effective, but requires application in practice to embed confidence and skill. MSHT[xviii] experts and single points of contact can bolster the level of expertise in a force, but the workload on a few experts can be overwhelming.'[228]

The experience for victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation going through the **criminal justice system is often long[229] and strenuous**, and victims can often be left **retraumatised** by the process itself. In fact, some have reported that the court process can be more traumatic than the exploitation.[230] Contrary to what some may assume, the UNICEF scoping report into child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking, found no evidence of the therapeutic benefit of prosecution of offenders for the recovery of child victims.[231] Although investigations are highly important, there is a common misconception that a criminal justice process will result in closure for the victim.

### Statutory defence under section 45

In modern slavery investigations, there can often be confusion over who is a perpetrator and who is a victim; particularly with regards to CCE, as victims may commit an offence as a result of their exploitation. The possession of drugs with intent to supply (PWITS) can carry serious ramifications if it leads to a conviction, and this is common practice in the county lines model of exploitation. A coordinated response is needed from children's services, the police, education, criminal justice, judiciary and youth services to prevent and recognise children who may be forced to commit such offences as a result of CCE.[232] The statutory defence under section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act protects individuals compelled to commit a crime as a consequence of their being trafficked, who will not be prosecuted for their actions. This does not apply to the most serious crimes, including sexual offences or offences involving

serious violence and indeed modern slavery offences as well.[233] The burden of proof is on the prosecution to prove an individual is not a victim of modern slavery once the individual raises the defence.[234] However, concerns have been raised over the lack of detail available for the prosecution to dispute.[235]

*(4) A person is not guilty of an offence if—*

*(a) the person **is under the age of 18** when the person does the act which constitutes the offence,*

*(b) the person **does that act as a direct consequence** of the person being, or having been, **a victim of slavery or a victim of relevant exploitation**, and*

*(c) **a reasonable person in the same situation** as the person and having the person's **relevant characteristics** would do that act.*

*Figure 7: Definition of statutory defence reproduced from the 2020 Bristow & Lomas report[236]*

Nevertheless, there is evidence that children are still being prosecuted for crimes committed while experiencing modern slavery.[237] An investigation by *The Guardian* found a series of examples of the CPS prosecuting British children for CCE despite them having been identified as victims of trafficking by the NRM.[238] The criminal justice system can be highly traumatic for children,[239] with ECPAT UK stating the prosecution 'effectively means that they are abused twice; once by their trafficker and once more by the criminal justice system'.[240]

Examples of this were found in cases of cannabis cultivation, as despite indicators of child trafficking being present, children were not identified as potential victims.[241] This has led to calls for increased awareness of the use of exploited and trafficked children in cannabis cultivation and their subsequent criminalisation.[242] Dame Sara Thornton has highlighted that there have been various examples demonstrating the lack of join-up between identification, referral and intervention,[243] meaning victims are being prosecuted for crimes committed while being exploited.

Despite this, the police and other professionals have expressed concern about the statutory defence being used as a 'loophole', allowing some offenders identified as victims to avoid prosecution.[244] Due to this, the IASC initiated a call for evidence which was collated in 2020. It revealed that the statutory defence under the Modern Slavery Act was predominantly used in drug trafficking cases.[245] Although there is cause for concern,[246] there is no concrete data on any misuse of the defence.[247] ECPAT UK fears that there will be attempts to weaken or remove the defence, which provides 'a valuable, if limited, safety net for children who have been trafficked'.[248] Previous concerns were noted in the Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act in 2019,[249] yet on examination they concluded there were sufficient checks and balances in place to avoid abuse.[250]

'The operation of the statutory defence is neither adequately protecting victims nor adequately protecting the public.'

Dame Sara Thornton, in the 2020-21 annual IASC report[251]

The call for evidence found that even when victims were correctly identified, this did not always lead to effective safeguarding measures. Non-prosecution alone will not protect a child or vulnerable adult from the threat posed by traffickers or help them navigate the harm which they have experienced.[252] As a result of this, there was a call for better training and clearer guidance for professionals to identify victims, with the additional encouragement of professional curiosity amongst police officers, lawyers and the judiciary.[253] The issues highlighted in the review are reproduced in Figure 8 on the following page.[254]
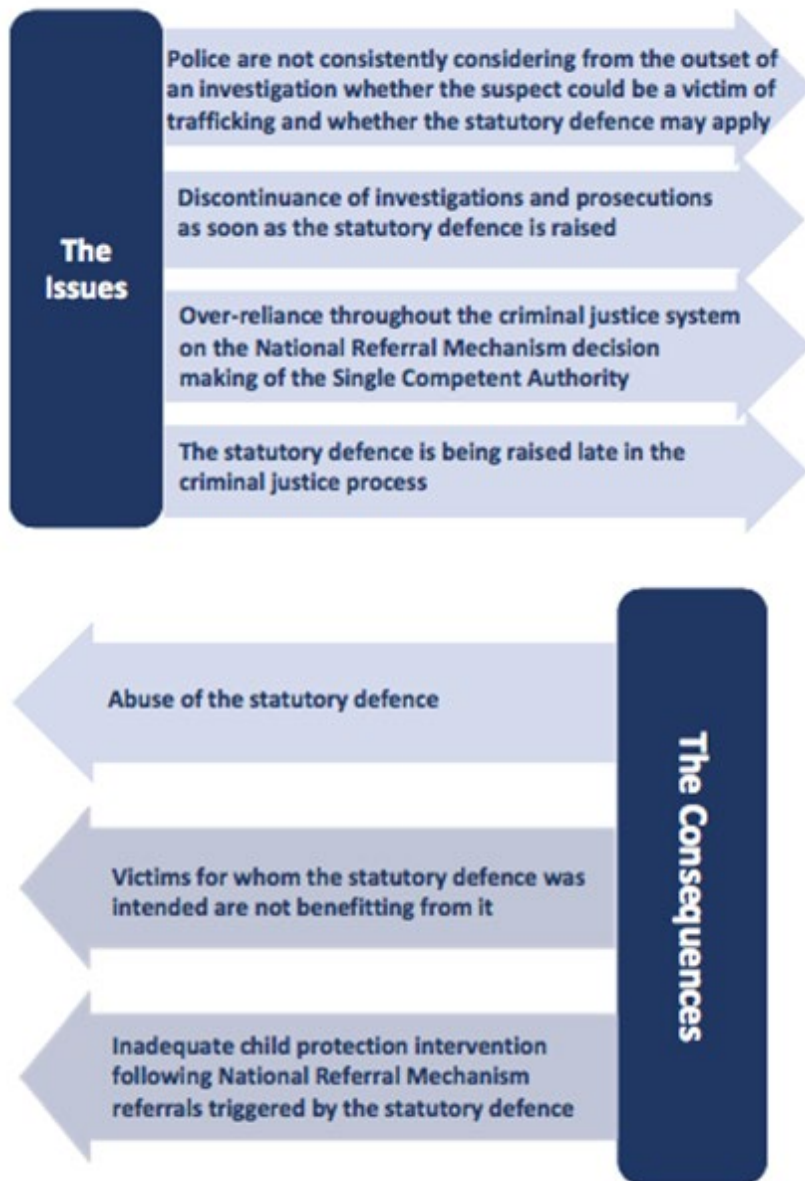
## The Issues

Police are not consistently considering from the outset of an investigation whether the suspect could be a victim of trafficking and whether the statutory defence may apply

Discontinuance of investigations and prosecutions as soon as the statutory defence is raised

Over-reliance throughout the criminal justice system on the National Referral Mechanism decision making of the Single Competent Authority

The statutory defence is being raised late in the criminal justice process

## The Consequences

Abuse of the statutory defence

Victims for whom the statutory defence was intended are not benefitting from it

Inadequate child protection intervention following National Referral Mechanism referrals triggered by the statutory defence

*Figure 8: Chart reproduced from Bristow & Lomas' 2020 report on statutory defence[255]*

## Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the work of charities and local authorities in identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery. Organisations have to significantly change the way in which they work, particularly in response to a loss of funding and strict limitations to in-person contact.[256] Europol reported a rise in the distribution of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) online,[257] and children's risk to online sexual exploitation increased.[258] Furthermore, county lines CCE did not stop despite travel restrictions; OCGs adapted their modes of engagement and operations to continue to distribute drugs, for example, using children and young people to pose as key workers to avoid detection by authorities.[259] Particular concern was expressed for children who have gone missing or who are no longer in contact with statutory services.[260]

The COVID-19 pandemic has ultimately exacerbated the situation and increased the risks many faced before March 2020, while thrusting many families into financial instability. ECPAT UK highlighted that existing structural inequalities affecting children were expected to worsen, with Black Asian and minority ethnic young people – including unaccompanied and looked after children – disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.[261] This is not to mention the long-term mental health impacts faced by young people as a result of the restrictions.[262] It is unknown what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be for trafficked children in the UK, or for modern slavery operations globally. However, those working alongside young people need to be aware of the long-term impact of disruption on services for children at risk of exploitation.

# 5 Conclusions and review

Crucial research has laid bare the issue of child trafficking and exploitation taking place across the UK. Although it is clear that considerable progress has been made since the Modern Slavery Act 2015 came into force, there are still significant concerns about the safeguarding response to child victims of trafficking. This is particularly an issue when local authorities are responsible for the care and protection of children, yet the resources and priorities differ between regions. Children and young people are left experiencing a range of responses from statutory agencies, as a result of the lack of consistent national and local safeguarding strategies and procedures in place.[263] It is important that in researching victims' experiences of child trafficking, the voices of survivors are central.

The intersection of race, class, gender, age, disability and other identity factors play a key role in both a victim's vulnerability and their access to support services. However, as the important work in contextual safeguarding highlights, there is a need to also look to the wider context in which harms occurs. Structural factors play a key role in a victim's experience, from being trafficked to receiving support from the local authority.

To understand the nuances at play, the expertise of practitioners working alongside young people needs to be utilised. The benefits of practitioner evidence are now more widely understood, as those working on the ground can offer their expertise to improve the identification and care of young people who have experienced trafficking or exploitation. This can offer crucial guidance for informing policy and research, with policy and research simultaneously offering suggestions and advice for best practice.

The Practitioner Responses to Child Trafficking: Emerging Good Practice conference hosted by Cumberland Lodge and the IASC offers an important opportunity and space for a wide range of voices to be heard. Key issues for discussion at the conference include:

- concerns about the safeguarding response for child victims of trafficking (including unsuitable accommodation, children going missing and not found)
- challenges in the role that discrimination, racism and other structural issues play in safeguarding responses to child trafficking
- the lack of awareness and training on the needs of trafficked children in the UK
- inconsistent practice when supporting trafficked children – best practice advice not always being followed
- gaps in the data on child trafficking
- lack of support for young people transitioning into adulthood – increased risks of being re-trafficked
- the future national rollout of ICTGs in England.

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