

Independent
Anti-Slavery
Commissioner



Every Child Protected
Against Trafficking



Child trafficking in the UK 2024: **a snapshot** Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Snapshot Report is a collaborative effort between the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and ECPAT UK following our previous joint report in 2021 and ECPAT UK's previous snapshots starting in 2010 to mark the UK's first Anti-Slavery Day. The report provides an overview of child trafficking in the UK between 2022 and 2024, including the latest legislative and policy developments in prevention, protection, and prosecution. The report makes a series of practical recommendations aimed at key decision-makers, including 5 priority recommendations for urgent consideration.¹

The report highlights our key concerns for children at risk of and affected by trafficking which are outlined in the report using the framework of prevent, protect and prosecute.² These concerns include the harmful impacts of significant legislative changes which have created new barriers to the identification and protection of child victims. In the UK we are continuing to see high numbers of children in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the system the UK Government uses to identify and support people who have been victims of exploitation. In 2023, those potentially exploited as children accounted for 44% of all NRM referrals, the highest ever recorded. Furthermore, it is notable that NRM positive Reasonable Grounds decisions for potential child victims, an initial assessment to



determine whether there are Reasonable Grounds to believe the person may be a potential victim of trafficking, declined significantly with 10% negative decisions issued in 2022 compared to 26% in 2023. This increase in negative decisions is the result of legislative and policy changes brought into force in the first quarter of 2023 following the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

The report considers the Government's efforts to prevent child trafficking in the UK. It highlights the Government's failure to meet its legal obligations under the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT) to reduce children's vulnerability by creating a protective environment for them. These failures also incur high public service costs, requiring substantial

¹ [See our five priority recommendations here.](#)

² [Prevent, protect and prosecute.](#)

resources to address the aftermath. It calls for consideration of targeted strategies in education, community engagement and multi-agency cooperation to tackle the root causes of child trafficking helping to reduce spending on reactive crisis interventions.

The report also considers the limited research available on the prevention methods currently being used in the UK and their effectiveness in protecting children from trafficking. This knowledge gap presents the new Government with a critical opportunity to increase its focus and financial investment in child-centred prevention work in the UK.

The UK Government's Safer Streets mission aims to reduce crime and create safer communities, providing a unique opportunity to break the cycle of exploitation early on and to disrupt those targeting the most vulnerable. We call on the Government to do this by integrating a proactive, prevention-focused approach to child trafficking into its Safer Streets programmes and in upcoming legislation including the Children's Wellbeing Bill.

The report details key steps that need to be made to improve the protection of child trafficking victims, including strengthening and expanding the Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship (ICTG) services across the UK and the need for confirmed child victims of trafficking to be granted immigration leave with a route to settlement in line with their best interests. Poor access to legal advice,

criminalisation and transition into adulthood also remain core protection challenges which we urge the Government to address urgently.

The report also considers prosecutions and convictions for child trafficking which are woefully low, with no improvement since the publication of our last report three years ago. Inconsistency in police support for victims, lack of awareness and prevention of exploitation remains. This means that child victims are falling through the gaps and are not being protected from harm. We call on the UK Government to review the barriers to bringing prosecutions for those who exploit children, including the provision of police training on identifying and investigating child trafficking.

Finally, this report highlights that while there has been a growth of research, data, and evidence into human trafficking in the UK in recent years, significant gaps remain in our knowledge and understanding of modern slavery in the UK including in the prevention of child trafficking. Some of these research gaps have been mapped to outline priority areas of focus which include child trafficking.³

The IASC and ECPAT UK urge the UK Government to consider the following priority recommendations and to ensure that the wider set of recommendations included in this report are implemented as part of a long-term approach to tackling child trafficking – ensuring that all children are protected from the devastating lifelong impacts of this abuse and crime.

³ Balch, A. et al. (2021). *Consultation on the Modern Slavery PEC's research priorities*; Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. (2021). *IASC Research Priorities*; Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. (2022). *Annual Report 2021/22*; University of Nottingham Rights Lab. (2018). *Researching Modern Slavery in the UK*.



Priority recommendations

1. The UK Government should invest in long-term prevention efforts with a cross-departmental UK-wide Child Exploitation Strategy that prioritises early prevention, protection, and care in the UK, to stop the exploitation of children.
2. The UK Government must urgently repeal the harmful provisions of recent legislation, particularly the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, to remove barriers to protection and ensure all child victims of trafficking are identified and protected.
3. The Home Office must provide confirmed child victims of trafficking a grant of immigration leave of at least five years with a route to settlement, if in line with their best interests in compliance with the UK's international obligations.
4. The Department for Education and equivalent devolved bodies must commit to providing specialist support for child victims including safe accommodation and adequate standards of care. The Government must increase ring-fenced funding for local authority children's services to meet the needs of all children, retain more social workers, and boost placement capacity, which is at a record low.
5. The Home Office should expand the National Referral Mechanism Devolving Child Decision-Making Pilot Programme across the UK and commit to making the Independent Child Trafficking Guardians available to all local authorities in England and Wales.