OVERLAPPING THREATS TO FREEDOM

UNDERSTANDING VULNERABILITY TO MODERN SLAVERY

INSIGHT BRIEFING

University of Nottingham Rights Lab

Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner

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Introduction

Modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) are complex, evolving crimes that affect individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances, each with their own vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are often exploited by traffickers, leading to increased risks of exploitation.

This briefing aims to understand what vulnerabilities can put someone at higher risk of exploitation. To analyse this the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) partnered with the Rights Lab who undertook this research using a mixed-methods approach—including a rapid literature review, data analysis, stakeholder interviews, and an exploration of current frameworks like the Slavery and Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference (SERAC) to look at how victims of modern slavery in the UK face interconnected vulnerabilities and increasingly having complex needs. The research references the need for a multi-agency approach, with effective identification, intervention, and support for victims requiring collaboration across various sectors.

The research found that victims of modern slavery often experience multiple overlapping vulnerabilities with the highest risk factors being a combination of having a mental ill-health, low-income status, alcohol or drug dependency and insecure housing. One of the most significant insights shows that being female is more frequently associated with multiple vulnerabilities than any other factor, with the combination of low-income status and being female emerging as the most common vulnerability pairing.

Drawing on these findings, the IASC has developed actionable recommendations to improve understanding that strengthens the systems in place to protect vulnerable individuals and ensure a more coordinated, effective response to modern slavery.

Key Findings

- **Modern slavery victims often experience multiple overlapping vulnerabilities**. This research found that individuals are more likely to be exploited when they face multiple, interrelated vulnerabilities. The finding that 80% of the written evidence submissions examined identified two or more vulnerabilities demonstrates that modern slavery is rarely the result of a single factor.

- **The research found that being female and low-income status can increase risk of exploitation.** The combination of low-income status and being female emerging as the most common vulnerability pairing. 59% of modern slavery victims had four or more overlapping vulnerabilities. These findings point to being female, and having the interrelated vulnerabilities of mental ill-health, low-income status, alcohol or drug dependency, and insecure housing as the highest risk combination of vulnerability to modern slavery.

- **Existing frameworks are often unsuitable for identifying those with complex needs that may be at risk of modern slavery.** Many existing frameworks may be too rigid or one-dimensional, focusing on single issues rather than recognising the complex and overlapping needs of victims. Existing systems need to be restructured to better support victims with complex, interrelated needs through collaborative, multi-agency strategies. This approach would significantly improve the identification, support, and rehabilitation of modern slavery victims.

- **Immigration status is the most prevalent singular vulnerability to modern slavery**. The findings suggests that there are a broad range of vulnerabilities that can increase an individual's risk of being trafficked or coerced into modern slavery with twenty-nine distinct vulnerabilities identified. Of these Immigration status stands out as the most common or significant singular risk factor.

Key recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations aim to enhance the understanding and response to tackling modern slavery by addressing multiple overlapping needs. They were co-designed with the Rights Lab and the Commissioner's team during an interactive workshop.

- **Make prevention a core pillar of the Government's Modern Slavery Strategy.** The Government must develop a Modern Slavery Strategy which was last updated over a decade ago. This Strategy should prioritise prevention, protection, and care, ensuring a cohesive response across all sectors. It should address factors such multiple-overlapping vulnerabilities that increase the risk of exploitation. All safeguarding partners must be resourced adequately to enable a proactive, timely and victim-centric response.

- **Strengthen multi-agency working across local authorities through the expansion of risk assessment frameworks.** The adoption of risk assessment frameworks such as the Slavery Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference (SERAC) model would facilitate multi-agency discussions, improving identification of suspected cases, facilitating coordinated and timely responses and in developing holistic support pathways to manage risk and provide better outcomes for vulnerable individuals.

- **Local authorities should appoint a Modern Slavery Coordinator.** Coordinators[1] are currently available in some local authority areas and should be rolled out across the country. Modern slavery remains underreported, and Coordinators can provide a central point working within existing data-sharing protocols and agreements between local authorities and relevant agencies such as law enforcement, health and social care services, NGOs, and housing providers. This ensures that vulnerability data can be securely shared across sectors and services to inform a unified response.

[1] The term Modern Slavery Coordinator (MSC) refers to a specialist role within local authorities dedicated to addressing modern slavery. This role may also be known as Modern Slavery Leads. Some local authorities have a Single Point of Contact (SPoC) for various forms of abuse, including modern slavery. However, SPoCs often have additional responsibilities, limiting their ability to focus exclusively on modern slavery.

- **Improve data collection and understanding**. The Home Office should assess the feasibility of updating the NRM First Responder referral form to capture factors such as mental-ill health, substance abuse, homelessness, and other socio-economic vulnerabilities, ensuring that all agencies use consistent and standardised methods of recording to better identify the vulnerabilities targeted by exploiters and how these intersect or may be compounded by other vulnerability factors. This will also allow for the best possible support to be given to every victim in need.

Methodology

The research methodology consisted of six stages:

1. Evidence Collation and Vulnerability Mapping

The first stage of this project involved a review and analysis of written evidence submitted to the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) Inquiry into Human Trafficking,[2] GRETA's ('Group of Experts on Action again Trafficking in Human Beings') fourth-round thematic evaluation questionnaire on addressing vulnerabilities to trafficking in human beings[3], and GRETA's third-round evaluation report of the UK.[4] These sources were chosen due to their relevance (they included a focus on vulnerabilities to slavery and trafficking) and recent time-frames (2024, 2023, 2021). A review of written evidence to the House of Lords Modern Slavery Act 2015 Inquiry[5] was considered for the analysis but was not used: the Inquiry questions did not explicitly focus on the vulnerabilities associated with modern slavery. The purpose of this analysis was to identify the vulnerabilities most frequently cited as being overlapping and interconnected in the context of modern slavery.

2. Data Categorisation

Data on vulnerabilities collected from approximately 100 documents of the sources listed above, was organised into a spreadsheet. Each mention of a specific vulnerability was coded based on the frequency it was mentioned in conjunction with other vulnerabilities.

Within this data categorisation the vulnerabilities that occurred most frequently alongside other vulnerability factors were:

- Gender (female)

[2] Home Affairs Committee (2023), Human Trafficking Inquiry. Further details and all evidence submissions here - https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7290/human-trafficking/publications/

[3] Council of Europe GRETA (2024) Fourth Round Questionnaire for the evaluation of the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by the Parties. Thematic focus: Addressing vulnerabilities to trafficking in human beings. https://rm.coe.int/questionnaire-for-the-evaluation-of-the-implementation-of-the-council-/1680abd8fa

[4] Council of Europe GRETA (2021) UK Third Round Evaluation, Access to justice and effective remedies for victims of trafficking in human beings. https://rm.coe.int/greta-third-evalution-report-on-the-united-kingdom/1680a43b36

[5] UK Parliament, House of Lords Modern Slavery Act 2015 Committee (2024). Further details on the Inquiry here - https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/700/modern-slavery-act-2015-committee/

- Mental ill-health
- Low-income status
- Alcohol or drug dependency
- Insecure Housing

3. Thematic Discussions

This initial analysis then informed the prioritisation of themes for the research going forward beginning with gender (female), as the factor with the most intersections followed by mental ill-health, low-income status, alcohol or drug dependency and insecure housing.

Consideration was also given to combining the vulnerabilities of alcohol or drug dependency with mental ill-health into one category due to the frequent nature of the overlaps between them. However, based on a review of written evidence, the researchers judged it more appropriate to analyse them as separate factors, because the impacts of each factor were often distinct.

4. Rapid Literature Review

A rapid literature review was employed, which involved revisiting the reports analysed in the initial data coding including those submitted to the HASC Inquiry into Human Trafficking and the two GRETA sources to interrogate where Gender (the factor with the most intersections overlapped) with each of the other four vulnerabilities.

A snowballing (citation chaining) was employed to search the references within the sources for other relevant material, and then an additional snowball search of the cited material in those references. At all three stages of the review (sources, cited sources, cited sources) evidence was sought of overlap between the identified vulnerabilities and Gender.

5. Interview with Nottingham's Slavery Exploitation Team

An interview was conducted with Nottingham's Slavery Exploitation Team (SET) based within Nottingham City Council. Using a semi-structured format, the conversation focused on the work of the SET in establishing a Slavery Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference (SERAC) to strengthen a

multiagency approach to the management, prevention, and identification of modern slavery cases. The discussion also explored the role of a SERAC style approach in addressing multiple overlapping vulnerabilities.

The SET interviewees also shared two internal reports: 1) 2022-23 Review of the SET and 2) 2023-2024 Review of the SET. These reports detailed the number of referrals into the SET in the reports' respective timeframes, the demographics and vulnerabilities of those referred, types of exploitation, housing status and risk assessment ratings across cases referred.

Detailed Findings

What do we mean by 'vulnerability' to modern slavery?

Analysis of the written evidence submitted to the HASC Inquiry into Human Trafficking and GRETA materials identified twenty-nine distinct vulnerabilities that could increase an individual's risk of exploitation.

Table 1: Vulnerability factors from review of evidence

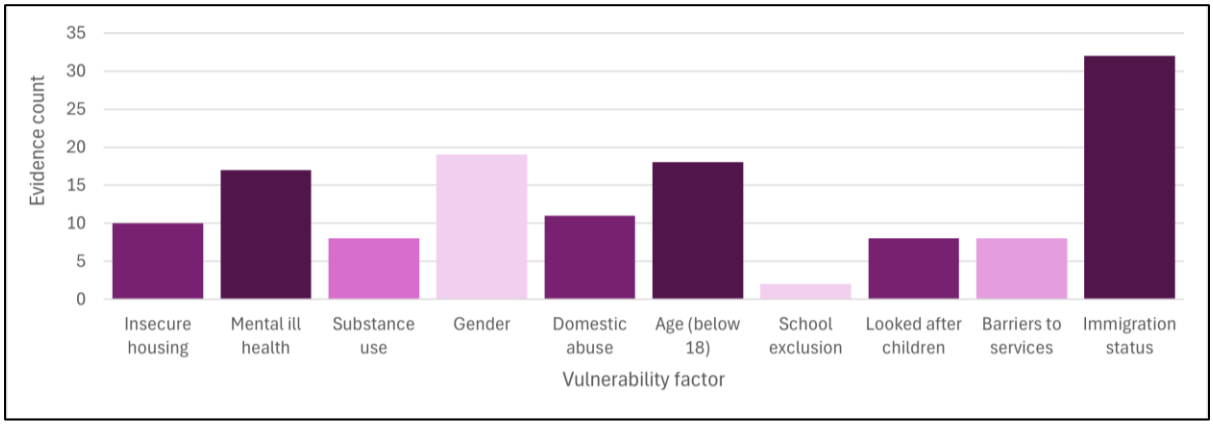
Need/Vulnerability Factor	Factor Code Number	Evidence Count	Multiple Overlapping With Factor Code Number:
Domestic abuse in household	1	11	11, 5, 13, 2, 26
Insecure housing	2	12	3, 11, 4, 1, 12, 27
Unaccompanied asylum-seeking (child)	3	5	2
Mental ill health	4	17	18, 2, 19, 7, 26, 12, 11
Low income status	5	20	14, 16, 1, 9, 13, 11, 25
Lack of education and technical skill training	6	18	9, 19, 7, 11
Gender (male)	7	12	8, 16, 4, 6, 15
Barriers to services	8	8	7,14, 16
Ethnicity (minorities)	9	12	11, 6, 28, 5
Cultural religious barriers	10	2	11
Gender (female)	11	19	10, 2, 9, 14, 12, 1, 6, 5, 4, 28
Alcohol or drug dependency	12	8	11, 5, 2, 23, 4, 16, 26
Immigration status	13	32	12, 5, 1, 26, 27
Lack of modern slavery awareness	14	9	5, 12, 22, 8, 11, 16, 27
Deprived living environment	15	1	7
Age (underage)	16	18	7, 8, 12, 14, 5
Children in care	17	4	
Physical disabilities	18	3	4
Insecure employment	19	4	6, 4
Family routes - being born out of slavery	20	1	
Age (retired)	21	1	
School exclusion	22	2	14
Cognitive impairment	23	2	13
Unemployment	24	1	
Covid 19 lockdown	25	2	5
Previous convictions/forced into criminality	26	3	1, 12, 4

Victim of modern slavery in past	27	3	14, 13, 2
LGBTQ+	28	3	9, 11
Policy changes	29	1	

Individual vulnerability factors

Immigration status was identified as a vulnerability thirty-two times (i.e. across thirty-two sources), more than any other individual characteristic. After immigration status, the vulnerabilities with the highest evidence count were Gender and Age (under 18), respectively.

Figure 1: Separate vulnerability factors coded from review of evidence



Overlapping vulnerability factors

After identifying the most prevalent individual vulnerabilities, analysis shifted to look at their intersection with other factors. Gender had the most overlaps with other vulnerabilities. For females this included nine, and for males five.

Although immigration status was the most referenced vulnerability in the written evidence, it had fewer intersections than other vulnerabilities (at five) compared to Gender (both male and female) at fourteen. Figures 2 and 3 show these overlaps and the strength of the evidence.

Figure 2: Overlapping vulnerability factors coded from review of evidence

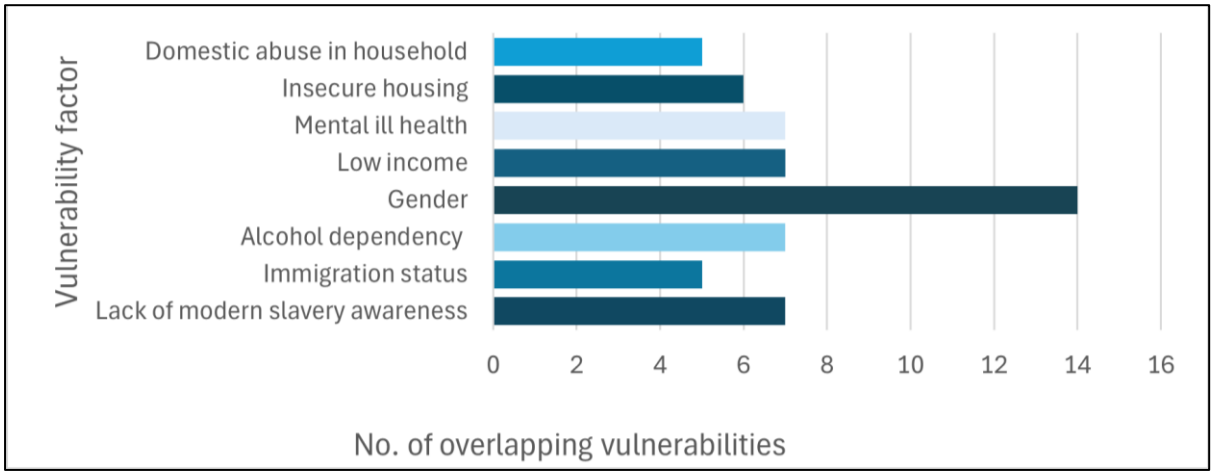
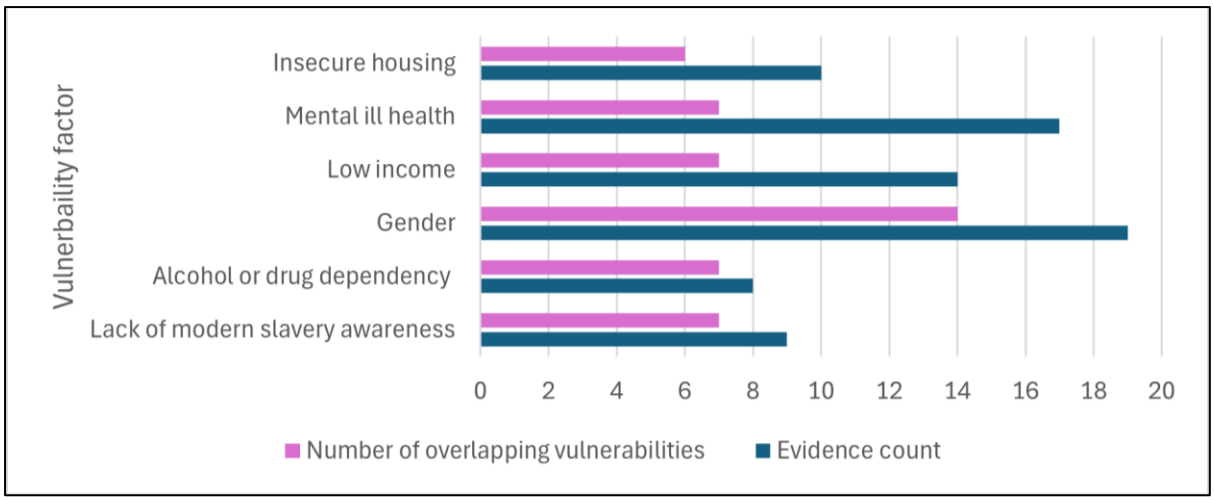


Figure 3: Overlapping vulnerability factors with evidence count



Understanding overlapping vulnerabilities

Based on these initial findings, the subsequent rapid literature review of 158 written submissions and reports found that twenty-four of the twenty-nine individual vulnerabilities identified in the initial coding of evidence overlapped with two or more vulnerabilities (Figure 4). However, when exploring the overlap between gender (as the most common intersecting vulnerability) and the vulnerabilities of mental ill health, alcohol and drug dependency, insecure housing and low-income status (as identified as high-risk factors in the coding of evidence) little available literature or data was found that explicitly referenced these all these factors, but interrelations were suggested.

Written evidence for the Human Trafficking Inquiry, submitted by Hestia[6], an organisation that provides support to victims of modern slavery, stated that 92% of the men who use their services suffer from mental ill health. However, only 40% receive mental health support. This statistic highlights the overlap between gender and mental ill health, but also suggests the presence of other vulnerabilities, such as barriers to accessing services. For example, victims are often provided with short stays in hotels. However, this is unsuitable accommodation for those with 'intersectional vulnerabilities and complex needs.'

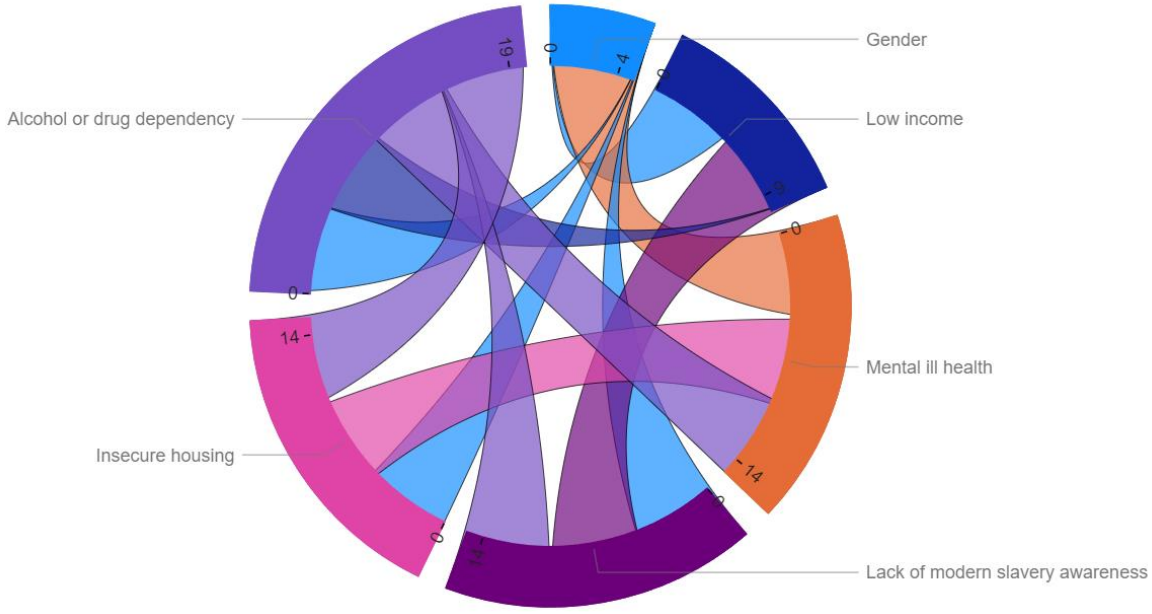
This finding underscores the critical need to approach vulnerabilities in a more holistic and integrated manner. By highlighting the ways in which one vulnerability might exacerbate or even be a direct consequence of another, it challenges the tendency to examine issues in isolation. For instance, a focus solely on gender without considering how other vulnerabilities might intersect, could result in missed opportunities for providing effective support and care to individuals who face multifaceted challenges.

It also suggests the importance of needing to further understand complex needs and overlapping vulnerabilities in their entirety and full range, without further isolating gender or other singular vulnerabilities. This would encourage a more inclusive approach that takes into account the full spectrum of overlapping vulnerabilities people experiences and would be

[6] Written evidence submitted by Hestia to Home Affairs Committee Inquiry into Human Trafficking, 2023. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/119850/pdf/

more effective in addressing the root causes of vulnerability and marginalisation, rather than treating symptoms of isolated problems.

Figure 4: Overlap between different vulnerabilities using coded evidence from the HASC Inquiry into Human Trafficking and GRETA materials



What this means for preventing modern slavery

The findings highlight the necessity of a multi-agency approach to preventing modern slavery, driven by an understanding of the interconnectedness of various vulnerabilities. The overlap of multiple vulnerabilities—such as gender, mental ill health, substance dependency, insecure housing, and low-income status—suggests that individuals at risk of modern slavery face complex, multifaceted challenges that cannot be addressed through siloed interventions.

To address this, a multi-agency approach is essential, where various sectors—such as mental health services, housing, law enforcement, and social support networks—work together to provide comprehensive care. This collaboration is crucial to avoid missed opportunities for intervention, ensuring that people with intersectional vulnerabilities receive the full range of support they need, rather than isolated or partial services.

Within Nottingham City Council, the SET has dedicated officers who work with partners to identify and tackle exploitation, modern slavery and trafficking, and offer support to survivors. To strengthen a multi-agency approach to identification, prevention and management of cases, the team established a Slavery Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference (SERAC). The SERAC unites statutory and non-statutory agencies to discuss suspected or known cases and plan a joint response to manage risk and intervene. Discussions also feed into NRM referrals and police investigations.

Outside of the SERAC arena, SET triages referrals, liaises with other agencies, conducts low-level investigations, offers specialist guidance to professionals and advocates for survivors. The team also delivers awareness-raising sessions and supports Police on pre-planned operations to provide a survivor-centred approach from first interventions in both business settings and dwellings.

The aim is to provide a robust holistic safeguarding approach for vulnerable individuals. Outcomes for survivors have included: referrals into the NRM; moving into areas identified as ‘safe’ by police colleagues; arrests of criminals under the Modern Slavery Act; implementing suitable support (finances managed by money carers, substance misuse support, mental health support, referrals to charities); advocacy; and increased security

(alarms, place of interest markers, safe and well visits from Community Protection Officers).

This coordinated approach provides wraparound support to potential victims with multiple overlapping needs. For example, some of the individuals supported by the SET would not meet the entry threshold required by statutory agencies, and therefore would potentially not be supported by any agency.

> **"There were 943 vulnerabilities identified over 242 referrals with over half (59%) of referrals having 4 or more identified vulnerabilities, and over a third (37%) having 5 or more."**

—Nottingham City Council's "Slavery Exploitation Team 2022-23 Review"

Despite the success of Nottingham City Council SERAC model in identifying potential victims and providing effective support to those with complex needs, similar multi-agency arrangements are not standard practice across the UK. However, the utility and effectiveness of the SERAC model is being recognised. The model has been replicated, or is in the process of being established, in other local authorities across the country, including Sandwell, Kent, Leeds, Coventry and the West Midlands. Nottingham City Council is currently supporting (with Jane Paling chairing) a Local Government Association initiative to support these councils, and wider local authority colleagues across the UK, to establish similar SERAC models.

This was echoed in fully anonymised data from a national stakeholder survey the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner conducted in early 2024 in the development of their three-year Strategic Plan. The survey asked stakeholders to list up to three priority areas for change with many respondents suggested recommendations related to the importance of, and need for, greater partnership working across agencies to improve the response to modern slavery including:

- Mandating that local authorities and shelter providers collaborate so that potential victims of modern slavery, with overlapping needs (such

as insecure housing and low income) have access to immediate accommodation while their National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referral is processed.

- Implementing a coordinated multi-agency approach to address the complex needs of victims.