

Child Exploitation: prevention, protection and support for children and young people

- **In the UK, children are being trafficked for sexual exploitation, to deal drugs, and carry out criminal activities. This exploitation causes children incredible harm. It is critical that those with safeguarding responsibilities know how to prevent and identify exploitation and that pathways to support are accessible. Only then can children and families be protected from the devastating lifelong impacts these crimes have.**
- **More must be done to prevent exploitation and protect child victims. A cross-Government strategy to tackle childhood exploitation, early intervention efforts, safe accommodation for all children, and clear guidance to professionals should be implemented. Every child should have access to an independent advocate and devolved decision-making pilots to local safeguarding partners should be rolled out. No child should be criminalised because of their exploitation.**
- **Preventing exploitation and protecting child victims of modern slavery is a priority of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) who, drawing on the voices of survivors, is working to improve the protection of child victims and ensure perpetrators are prosecuted.**

Child trafficking and exploitation in numbers:¹

- The number of children in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the UK system for identifying potential victims of modern slavery, has seen an 138% growth in 5 years reaching 7,432 in 2023. British children account for 78% (3,350) of all UK nationals referred in 2023, the majority are boys.
- The number of children in the NRM for criminal exploitation has grown by 22% in 3 years and accounted for 42% of all child referrals in 2023.

What must change to protect child victims of modern slavery and exploitation:

- **Invest in prevention efforts with a UK wide child exploitation strategy – to stop children being exploited by criminal gangs.** The Government must develop a strategy on how to tackle children falling victim to modern slavery, drawing on survivor voices. This strategy should prioritise prevention, protection, and care, ensuring a cohesive response across all sectors. It should address factors that enable child trafficking in and outside of the UK. All child safeguarding partners must be resourced adequately to enable a proactive, timely and victim-centric response to child trafficking.
- **Early intervention to reduce risk to exploitation is needed – to prevent children becoming susceptible to exploitation.** There are 1.8 million children persistently absent from school in England alone. Children not in school are less likely to be in the care of professionals who can identify exploitation and support them, and criminals target this vulnerability. The Children’s Wellbeing Bill is a chance for Government to ensure that those in the education sector are aware trafficking risks and can intervene early to protect against lower-level violations through to modern slavery. The Government must tighten prevention and protection measures for children’s safeguarding at school.
- **Provide clear guidance to professionals – to help them identify child victims of modern slavery.** The definitions of child criminal exploitation (CCE) and child sexual exploitation (CSE) are inaccurate and unclear. This means professionals lack clarity and there are local variations in how exploitation is understood and recognised. There should be clear statutory definitions of CSE and CCE introduced.

¹ National Referral Mechanism Statistics, Home Office, 2023, [link](#).

- Rollout the NRM devolved decision-making pilots across the UK – enabling local safeguarding partners to make timely decisions and wrap care around child victims.** The NRM is not appropriate for children. There is low awareness of the NRM among frontline professionals meaning many children are not referred; decisions are made by Home Office officials far removed from the child and often lacking child-specific knowledge; a positive decision does not lead to any additional or specialist support, unlike for adults; and there is a disconnect between the NRM and local safeguarding processes. The devolved decision-making pilots for children bring together local safeguarding teams who can identify child victims. The Government should rollout the pilot programme nationwide and provide specialised training on child trafficking to all First Responders.
- Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTG) should be made available across the UK – so that every child victim of modern slavery has an advocate supporting their needs.** The ICTG service plays a critical role in providing advocacy for child victims of modern slavery, explaining to children what is happening, and working closely with other partners to wrap care around the child. Many child victims are missing out on this vital support which is currently only available in two thirds of local authorities in England and Wales. The ICTG, a key commitment of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, should be placed on a statutory footing and rolled out across England and Wales.
- Children who have been trafficked should not face criminalisation for offences committed under duress - statutory defence needs to be applied effectively.** The non-punishment principle (section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015) introduces a defence for victims of modern slavery who are compelled to commit criminal offences during exploitation. However, there is a low level of awareness among prosecutors, police, and defence solicitors of the non-punishment provision for children.² There must be more training and awareness-raising provided to law enforcement and criminal justice practitioners on the protections from prosecution available for trafficked children.
- All children should be in safe accommodation – this is a critical protection mechanism against exploitation.** Vulnerable children such as unaccompanied children seeking asylum and children in care must be safely accommodated to prevent exploitation. Equally, identified child victims of modern slavery must be safeguarded to prevent re-exploitation. Without joined up statutory services tailored to children’s needs vulnerable children can become an open target to exploiters. Unaccompanied children were previously housed in hotels by the Home Office, contrary to the Children Act 1989, and between July 2021 to June 2023 there were 447 missing child episodes.³ This is unacceptable, and it remains unclear how children were able to disappear. The Government must prioritise cross-departmental collaboration establishing robust protections to ensure this never happens again.
- Child victims of modern slavery need to be supported in their transition to adulthood – their vulnerability does not end at 18.**⁴ Turning 18 is often a cliff edge for child victims where they may experience limited or no access to adult support services. Those who consent to remain in the NRM can access support, but referral rates are low. The Government should review the NRM consent process for child victims turning 18 and reflect this in the Modern Slavery Statutory Guidance.

² *Victim, not Criminal, Trafficked children and the non-punishment principle in the UK*, UNICEF, 2017, [link](#).

³ *Behind Closed Doors*, ECPAT UK and UCL, 2024, [link](#).

⁴ *Breaking Barriers: Supporting young victims of human trafficking transitioning to adulthood*, Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2024, [link](#).