

## **Safeguard survivors, punish perpetrators and prevent exploitation - the correct strategy to end human trafficking and modern slavery**

### **Joint response to the announcement of reforms to the modern slavery framework**

With the announcement today that the new Immigration and Asylum Bill will include reforms to the modern slavery legislative framework, leading organisations and experts warn the government that it cannot end human trafficking and modern slavery without a safeguarding-first response to survivors that shifts the balance of risk decisively onto traffickers.

While we welcome indications that the Bill may include some positive improvements for the identification and support of child trafficking victims, we are concerned that there remains no meaningful commitment to a comprehensive child exploitation strategy. Furthermore, minimal and selective commitments on children must not be used to justify wider reforms that will deny survivors' protection, embolden traffickers, and place more children at risk of exploitation and harm.

### **Misleading narratives used to dismantle protections for survivors**

Today's announcements repeat a hostile and unevidenced narrative of system misuse to 'justify' upcoming reform to modern slavery protections. Yet, the system already operates using a high threshold and has strong checks and balances against potential misuse, and in fact places an exceptionally high evidential burden on survivors.

According [to the Home Office's own figures](#), in 2025, of 23,411 potential victims of modern slavery were referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), only 6 of whom were disqualified on the grounds that their claims were made in 'bad faith'. Despite the persistent rhetoric, the system of support for survivors of modern slavery has not been overwhelmed with 'fraudulent claims' necessitating reform.

Misleading narratives about system misuse create distrust and scepticism about people who have suffered a serious crime. This can fuel division, which harms our communities and puts survivors, support organisations and legal representatives at risk.

### **Supporting survivors and punishing perpetrators**

Human trafficking and modern slavery are grave crimes and profound violations of human rights. For too long, immigration enforcement and rhetoric have dominated the response to human trafficking and modern slavery by successive governments. The outcome is a low-risk and high-reward environment for perpetrators, where survivors cannot access the support they need to recover and rebuild their lives, and exploitation flourishes.

Immigration enforcement must not be prioritised over the UK's response to modern slavery. Fear of detention, removal or disbelief is being used by traffickers as a tool of coercion, deepening harm and undermining efforts to disrupt criminal networks. Placing safeguarding

at the heart of the UK's anti-slavery response is vital if we are to strengthen prevention, identification, improve outcomes for survivors and accountability for traffickers, and prevent exploitation.

When victims are identified, protected, able to work with an independent advocate and a victim navigator to access the systems, support and services necessary for their recovery, and when they do not have to fear detention or removal, traffickers lose control. Supported survivors are more likely to engage with investigations, and law enforcement becomes more effective. Secure immigration status is critical for survivors of trafficking to provide the stability necessary to recover from exploitation, reduce the risk of re-exploitation, and ensure they are in a position to help in the prosecution of their traffickers. Establishing a civil remedy of human trafficking and modern slavery would help to ensure that offenders are compensating survivors out of their own pocket.

### **Time for a change in approach**

Over the past five years, the system of modern slavery identification and support in the UK, which politicians were once proud to declare 'world leading', has been weakened by a succession of regressive reforms. We urge the party which fought for the integrity of the NRM when in opposition, not to further diminish the protection and support that it offers now in government.

We strongly urge the Government to maintain a resolute commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights, ensuring that survivors of trafficking are treated with dignity and respect, and that their fundamental rights are protected, along with all those who make the UK their home.

An effective, evidence-based and survivor-centred approach is needed to prevent human trafficking and modern slavery. This means prioritising prevention, safety, recovery and access to long-term independent advocacy, support, safe accommodation, healthcare and legal advice. Safeguarding must come first, with *all* survivors supported to rebuild their lives and reduce risks of re-trafficking.

In April, [leading sector organisations united to present a strategic roadmap to eradicate modern slavery in the UK by 2036](#). Focused on four key interconnecting priorities, underpinned by ethical and meaningful inclusion of those with lived experience, we called for mandatory corporate accountability, a tougher criminal justice response, survivor-centred recovery, and a national strategy for child protection.

The evidence is clear: the system currently fails victims, empowers traffickers and must change.

### **This statement is endorsed by**

AFRUCA SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN

Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit (ATLEU)

Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (ATMG)

Anti-Slavery International

ECPAT UK

Ella's

Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX)

Justice & Care

Helen Bamber Foundation

HERA UK

Hestia

Hope at Home

Hope for Justice

ILPA

Kalayaan

Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)

Snowdrop Project

Sophie Hayes Foundation

UK BME Anti-Slavery Network (BASNET)

Unseen

Work Rights Centre