

Avoiding the cliff edge:

working with young
survivors of modern
slavery as they turn 18

Aim

Hope for Justice is person-centred in our response to modern slavery. We work for the best possible outcomes for our clients and beneficiaries, addressing the unique and sensitive needs of the individuals, families and communities affected by modern slavery. Our policy recommendations are also shaped by those who have lived experience of modern slavery.

Within our team of Independent Modern Slavery Advocates® (IMSAs®), our Child Trafficking Transition Specialist (CTTS) works alongside young survivors as they turn 18, helping them to access the systems and services they require to continue their recovery. To highlight the many difficulties and barriers that young people face during this period of transition, we have committed to provide learning from the insights and experiences of young people themselves.

We commissioned two independent consultants with lived experience of modern slavery:

- to conduct a desk-based literature review of the systems and services which young people must navigate, and
- to interview young people about their experiences of the support they received or would like to receive.

The resulting insights highlight what is also the conclusion of our team when working with young people: there are insufficient safeguards in place to ensure continuity of support for survivors as they move into adulthood.

With Thanks

We are extremely grateful to Fatmata Sesay and Sosa Henkoma for their work on this project. Their diligence and expertise were invaluable in documenting young people's experiences, and offering recommendations as to how the system of support might be improved. Fatmata is a lived experience consultant who has provided vital insight over recent years to Hope for Justice and our partners as we developed the National Framework for Independent Modern Slavery Advocates®. Sosa is Director of Unique Talent, who helped to facilitate the interviews for this report, and a member of the Human Trafficking Foundation's Lived Experience Advisory Panel.

We are also grateful to the young people who took part in the interviews for this paper and who provided crucial insights as to their priorities and experiences. We greatly appreciate the time they gave to this project.

Thank you to Nick Herbert, Projects and Partnerships Lead at the Human Trafficking Foundation, for his assistance in making the interviews with young people possible.

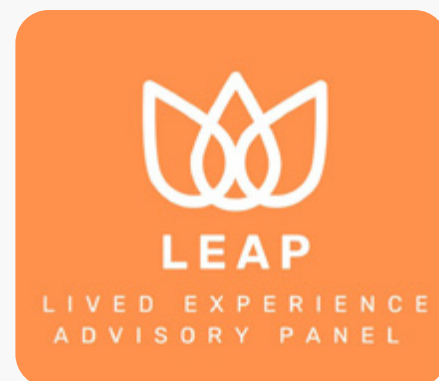
Hope for Justice's Child Trafficking Transition Specialist IMSA, Elle Williams, was critical in guiding this project, drawing upon her considerable experience of working in this area. She also conducted interviews with several clients, and ensured the insights gathered represent the experiences of survivors from diverse backgrounds.

Limitations

While every effort has been made to outline accurately the appropriate legal and policy framework, this is not intended to be a formal piece of academic research. Its focus is on the voices of young people who experience that framework in a variety of ways, and what we can learn from that lived experience.

This is a complex area and each young person is unique, with their own experience as they transition to adulthood and navigate systems and services. Interviews were conducted with 12 young people — some in receipt of support, some who were not. Several common themes emerged from these interviews, but it does not necessarily represent a comprehensive picture of every young person's experience.

Similarly, this paper does not attempt to provide a solution to every challenging aspect of law and policy impacting young survivors. Further study is required to identify those solutions.



Foreword

Turning 18 is a pivotal moment in any young person's life, but particularly so for young survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking. It has long been recognised that the transition to adulthood represents a significant point of vulnerability in a young person's journey of recovery.

As they turn 18, young people face multiple challenges in accessing ongoing support. Those who do not qualify as 'relevant children', meaning they have been in care for less than 13 weeks, often face a 'cliff edge' as assistance from their local authority comes to an end. Young people in parts of the country where the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) service operates, will also see this support come to a close. Therefore, my role as a Child Trafficking Transition Specialist (CTTS) is to provide independent advocacy support to young people to help them navigate the many complex systems and services they encounter, and bridge that gap in the transition to adulthood and adult services.

Hope for Justice's team of Independent Modern Slavery Advocates have been working with adult survivors for several years. However, we have seen the immense benefit of having a specialist to work with young people during this period of transition. At such a crucial period in their lives, it is incredibly important that they have an advocate, trauma-informed support and practical help, whether or not they are also receiving state-funded support or safe housing.

Recent years have seen an increase in recognition of child criminal exploitation in complex county lines cases. However, many professionals working with these young people who have just turned 18, often have limited understanding that this crime is a form of modern slavery. Even among those supporting the young person, they may be seen primarily as a perpetrator, not a survivor.

Our key partner in this work is children's charity Barnardo's, who are commissioned to deliver the ICTG Service in certain regions across England and Wales. This work is about building trusting relationships with trafficked children to help them build a positive future; helping them navigate the criminal justice, immigration, and social care systems; giving

practical support, such as help with housing, medical needs, and education; giving emotional and psychological support; and training professionals working with children so they know how to support trafficked children.

We welcome the commitment made in the UK government's 2025 Action Plan on Modern Slavery to improve the experience for young survivors turning 18. In order to achieve the Home Office's ambition of continuity of support for young people, Hope for Justice recommends that all children and young adults in the NRM should be automatically eligible for ongoing support from local authorities after they turn 18, regardless of care leaver status or immigration status.

We are extremely grateful to the consultants who have researched and written this report and conducted interviews with young people. At this pivotal moment, as the government considers the future of support for survivors of modern slavery, we must ensure our understanding of the problems is shaped by those who have lived experience. It is only by learning from their insights that we will truly respond to survivors needs.

Elle Williams

Child Trafficking Transition Specialist, IMSA, Hope for Justice





Exploring Available Support for Young Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking as they Transition from Child Protection to Adulthood

By Fatmata Bintu Sesay

Note on Quotes used throughout this report

Hope for Justice were delighted to work with a member of the Human Trafficking Foundation’s Lived Experience Advisory Panel, Sosa Henkoma, to conduct interviews with young people about their experience as they turned 18. The interviews explored young people’s priorities and the support they have received or would like to receive as they transition to adulthood.

“I was exploited. I felt like an outsider and found safety with other people and was involved in gangs. My focus now is to change the path for the younger generation and make sure their voices are heard. That’s why this research is important for me.”
Sosa Henkoma, LEAP Consultant

Hope for Justice’s Child Trafficking Transition Specialist, Elle Williams, also conducted interviews with some of the young people with whom she works.

The quotations interspersed throughout this report are taken from these interviews.

Acronyms

- ATMG: Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group
- CTTS: Child Trafficking Transition Specialist
- ECPAT: Every Child Protected Against Trafficking
- ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages
- ICTG: Independent Child Trafficking Guardian
- IMSA: Independent Modern Slavery Advocate
- MSVCC: Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract
- NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation
- NHS: National Health Service
- NRM: National Referral Mechanism
- SOHTIS: Survivors of Human Trafficking In Scotland

Contents

1. Introduction	8
2. Statutory Services	9
3. Non-Statutory Services	12
4. Gaps in Provision of Support	15
5. Strengths and Weaknesses of Transitional Safeguarding Approaches	16
6. Consent to ongoing support	17
7. Recommendations	18
8. Conclusion	19
9. References	20
Annex 1: Interviews with young people	21



1. Introduction

A review of services and support for young survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking shows the urgent necessity for an integrated system that responds to this incredibly complex set of circumstances experienced by some of the most vulnerable people. Although necessary, statutory services fail to offer a smooth transition from children's services and into adult care (ECPAT UK, 2018).

Children who are referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) are supported by local authority children's services. When they turn 18, young people need to consent to a referral to remain in the NRM and receive support from the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC). This support is designed for adults and is not tailored to the needs of young people during this transition period. Unfortunately, survivors are often left in a precarious position due to gaps between housing, healthcare and legal protection policies especially those with insecure immigration status.

Non-statutory services delivered by NGOs and charities are critical in responding to unmet needs, providing specialist services

(e.g. counselling or advocacy) that respond more flexibly to the demands of service users than statutory interventions can accommodate. The problem is that access to these services varies across regions, leaving some survivors with only part of the care they need (Flex, 2016). This absence of trauma-informed care and the countless obstacles encountered in seeking assistance make it clear that systemic reform is necessary to ensure an equal support system for all young survivors, no matter where they happen to live or their particular legal circumstances.

Standardisation of service provision, training in trauma-informed care and the availability of legal protections are crucial to improve support systems that work for young survivors. In this review, the recommendations provide a framework that is inclusive and dynamic allowing young survivors to be nurtured whilst empowered. Some of the measures that we need to take include encouraging more collaboration between statutory and non-statutory agencies, providing adequate resources for essential services as well training professionals so they understand trauma-informed child protection practices.

2. Statutory Services

Statutory services are those that the government provide because it is required by law. These services are vital in ensuring that the youngest survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking continue to receive protection and support as they become adults.

Transition from Children's Services to Adult Care: As young survivors approach their 18th birthday, they may need support transitioning between children's services and adult social care services. This can be a difficult and fraught transition, largely because of variances in eligibility criteria, service provision practices/philosophy or level of support. Adult services may not always be able to serve the particular needs of young survivors.

"I think it's unfair, I think everyone should get it, even if they've spent less than 13 weeks in care because there's some people that are thrown back on the street and left to suffer."

Legal Duties of Local Authorities: In the UK, there are legal responsibilities imposed on local authorities in relation to young people under the Children Act 1989 and the Care Act 2014, particularly in the period before and after age 18.

Prior to 18 years: Local authorities have a responsibility to care for young people in their area who are at risk of harm, including survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking. There is a duty to refer young people suspected of being trafficked to the NRM. If they are in an area where there is an Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) they will also be appointed a guardian.

If a child has been in the care of a local authority for at least 13 weeks in a row (after reaching their 16th birthday), a person is deemed to be a 'care leaver' who has access to leaving care services (including personal advisers, pathway planning and accommodation support).

"The most difficult thing about turning 18 is we are bombarded with information and responsibilities we were kind of aware of but not fully. You aren't really prepared for the moment when you are now at the age when you do one little thing and you are out."

"You aren't really taught what the real world is like. We're being babied until we're 18 and then there are all these things bombarding you, and you're like 'wait, I wasn't prepared for this'. We need to be educated about finances — taxes, how to invest, how to survive financially - emotional intelligence and history."

Once they are over 18 years, local authorities have continuing duties of care towards young care leavers up until the age of 25; but they must also assess whether or not an individual is in receipt of adult social care services under the Care Act 2014. In reality, this assessment process is a complex one with each local authority applying different eligibility criteria (Children's Society, 2015). This can lead to uncertainty as to what services a person is entitled to, with inconsistent service provision as a result. For example, if the survivor involved is not a care leaver or does not meet the assessed thresholds for adult social care they can be left bereft of the right to housing, financial support and other services.

"Now I'm no longer 18, when I ask for advice, it takes months for someone to answer me so I don't think I will get the same support I'm used to...It makes it very difficult because sometimes I only ask for help when I really, really need it. But when I ask for help and I don't get it, it makes me feel like I shouldn't even be asking."

Local authorities are in charge of providing housing for care leavers, but those with insecure immigration status might not qualify. As a result, a significant number of young survivors are at risk of homelessness, particularly when they turn 18 (Barnardo's, 2020). The NRM then becomes a critical option for survivors who are ineligible for ongoing support and accommodation from the local authority.



“Pushing it bit by bit would have helped, like they should have told me okay you’re moving in soon so try to go shopping by yourself so you know what this is, go to the GP office by yourself so you know how to get there and what to do. It would have helped me.”

National Referral Mechanism (NRM): The NRM is the UK framework for identifying and supporting adult and child victims of human trafficking, including modern slavery. Adults who consent to a referral can access tailored support through the government-led MSVCC, offering specialist support for at least 30 days which includes safe accommodation, medical treatment and legal aid. Children referred to the NRM will be supported by local authority children’s services until they turn 18. To ensure young people continue to receive protection and assistance they must be informed of their rights and supported to make an informed decision about remaining in the NRM.

After they turn 18, some will be eligible for continuing support from the local authority up to age 25; those survivors who consent to remain in the NRM will be referred to the MSVCC for support as an adult. The transition to different services can create a vulnerable gap as survivors are forced to navigate adult services that are often ill-equipped to deal with the long-term trauma these young people experience, unless they are re-referred as an adult, putting young survivors at risk.

“I moved out of foster care, I wasn’t told about bills and how to sign up for certain stuff. If I had to get the bus I wasn’t told which ticket to buy... I was just thrown out and it was like ‘you need to figure this out on your own, that’s not our problem anymore’”

Housing and Accommodation: This is the duty of local authorities to provide accommodation for care leavers, including young victims of trafficking. But adequate housing is not assured, especially for those either not eligible as care leavers or refused access due to having insecure immigration status.

Safe accommodation provides a crucial foundation for young people in their recovery from trafficking. However, many are housed in inappropriate or unsafe environments, such as asylum accommodation and hotels, and face risks of further harm including homelessness and re-trafficking.

If you didn’t have support, what difference do you think this would have made?

“I would have been homeless.”

“Independent living is a completely different thing from shared living. So [we need] a more detailed thing about how to get your own yard, what you need to do with your income, your finances... It just needs to be more detailed because right now when young people are in homes that aren’t their family homes and they are going straight to shared homes — at some point they will want to move out and become their own person and need to know where to go.”

“They told me two weeks before my 18th birthday I was going to move to independent living...I didn’t feel prepared.”

Healthcare Services: Young survivors are entitled to healthcare services, including mental health support, through the National Health Service (NHS). However, access to specialised trauma-informed care is often limited, there are often long waiting lists, and the transition from child to adult mental health services can lead to disruptions in care. Additionally, survivors with uncertain immigration status may face barriers to accessing healthcare. In this context, support from specialist NGOs is critical in filling the gaps in statutory services.

Legal Rights and Entitlements: Survivors in the NRM are entitled to legal aid advice to assist with securing immigration status, claiming compensation, housing and protection orders. In practice, it can be very difficult for survivors to find legal aid lawyers with capacity to take their cases, particularly for immigration cases, given funding restrictions and the fact that survivors may not know all of their legal rights. The transition also brings all the difficulties and intricacies of immigration laws into play, with possible legal challenges for survivors adding additional stress to their situation.



“When I turn 18, I would like to be guided to the right path. When you turn 18, it’s like what are the legal things that I can do and can’t do? Like taxes and being educated properly. I don’t feel prepared for that.”

Even now do you feel like you understand the asylum system?

“Some parts of it... they ask some questions I have no idea how to answer.”

The Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) scheme in the UK is a statutory service designed to support children who are victims or suspected victims of trafficking and modern slavery. Independent guardians are assigned to child survivors to act on their behalf so that the child is fairly represented. The guardian ensures the child is heard, navigates complex systems, and advocates for the child in legal and care proceedings. The scheme was created in response to the wide-ranging vulnerabilities trafficked children often experience exacerbated by language, culture and trauma.

Available in limited areas around England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the ICTG’s operational areas include Greater Manchester, North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Lancashire, Merseyside, Wales, East Midlands, West Midlands, Bedfordshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, London,

Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Kent, Surrey, and Essex. It is not yet nationwide.

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 created the role of Independent Child Trafficking Advocate which has since changed to a Guardian scheme. The purpose of the scheme is to establish a single point of contact for all trafficked children where they can be supported in interacting with local authority services, healthcare, immigration and legal aid. Guardians involve local agencies to ensure that children are fully protected and have access to services.

The ICTG scheme provides independent advocacy, legal advice and practical support for trafficked children to help them rebuild their lives. Guardians provide an important layer of risk-identification and safety-planning for clients, working alongside social workers and law enforcement to chart vulnerable routes out of exploitative labour practices and into safety. In some instances, guardians coordinate access to school, mental health care and, in extreme cases, foster care or other housing, helping to ensure that support stays focused on the child and remains accessible through scaffolding up to adulthood.

“If I didn’t have any support I feel like I could have gone down a bad route. As a young person sometimes a bad route is a bit easier than the straight and narrow. As a young person you still need guidance.”

3. Non-Statutory Services

Non-statutory services are those available from NGOs, charities or community groups. Such services often fill the gaps left by statutory services and provide bespoke needs-led support for survivors.

NGOs and charities providing support for young survivors exist all over the UK. Services include advocacy, legal advice and counselling, or reintegration programmes. Hope for Justice UK, The Children's Society, ECPAT UK and the Snowdrop Project are just some of the organisations offering continued support, particularly in cases where statutory services may be limited or unavailable. However, NGO services are restricted geographically meaning that some survivors will not be able to access support.

“The best thing about having someone to support you is knowing that they have your back even if something goes wrong there is someone there for you to lean on and who can help you. Like having a safety net.”

Hope for Justice: In the UK, Independent Modern Slavery Advocates® (IMSA®) offer specialist ‘specialist socio-legal independent advocacy to survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking’. IMSAs work with survivors to navigate the complex and confusing systems and services they encounter. Hope for Justice is working in partnership with the British Red Cross, the Snowdrop Project, the Bakhita Centre for Research on Slavery, Exploitation and Abuse, SOHTIS and consultants with lived experience to establish a national, accredited model of independent advocacy.

Additionally, within the Hope for Justice team there is a **Child Trafficking Transition Specialist** (CTTS) who specialises in working with young people as they turn 18. Young people transitioning to adult services require specialist advocacy to realise their rights and entitlements, including secure immigration status, housing, compensation, access to education, and navigating the criminal justice system. Hope for Justice works with young people and within their existing support networks, including facilitating access to solicitors for legal advice and representation. Working with young people in these areas is critical to establishing the foundations for a secure and productive future.

“When you guys [Hope for Justice] explained it to me, it helped a little bit because I knew what to expect and how long things were going to take.”

The Children's Society: a long-established UK-based charity delivering specialist, trauma-informed services to children and young people who are at risk of or being exploited, including those affected by trafficking and modern slavery. They provide support through trained professionals who work with and alongside young people. The Children's Society also delivers a number of local and national programmes that support children and young people with their emotional wellbeing and mental health.



ECPAT UK (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking): a leading child-rights organisation operating in the UK. Through their child-centred, child-rights, participatory and trauma-informed approaches, they undertake policy, research and advocacy work, engaging with government bodies, local authorities and other organisations to influence laws, policies and practices relating to young survivors of trafficking. By advocating for stronger legal frameworks and scrutiny, they provide a platform to close the gaps in existing systems support for young survivors of trafficking, so that services and protections are provided to them. This work includes campaigning for the extension of child protection policies, calling for rights-based approaches in the handling of child trafficking cases, as well as delivering training to professionals who work with trafficking survivors through trauma-informed approaches.

Aside from external influencing and education, there are continued services for young survivors provided by ECPAT UK, delivered to children and young people up to the age of 25. These services are the bread and butter of their recovery and forward into a stable and hopeful future. Services include youth mentoring and advocacy, therapy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and group activities, with youth mentors advocating daily for the needs and rights of young victims of trafficking to be met. They support young people to navigate complex legal systems, such as immigration and asylum, leaving care systems and housing support, and in making claims for compensation. They build trusting relationships, with a trauma-informed approach embedded into their practice. ECPAT UK also offers case consultancy, expert trafficking reports and social work assessments. The support provided by ECPAT UK seeks to offer a reduction in mental distress and risk of homelessness, and seeks to promote access to vital services. ECPAT's Youth Advisory Group members are involved in many aspects of the organisation's work, feeding into work such as training, research, campaigns and recruitment.

Snowdrop Project: a South Yorkshire based charity that helps survivors of modern slavery and exploitation to rebuild their lives. In response to this critical need, a **Child Trafficking Transition Lead** position was established in October 2023 to provide services for 16–25-year-old survivors. Previously, the organisation primarily assisted those over 18, but the lack of an operational Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship service in the region highlighted the need to bridge the gap or “cliff edge” of support that child survivors face when transitioning into adulthood. The Snowdrop Project provides individualised casework, counselling and community activities in this capacity, assisting youth in navigating intricate administrative processes, achieving their individual objectives, and standing up for their rights in a variety of settings.

In addition to providing direct casework, the Snowdrop Project actively promotes best practices and builds regional support networks as well as providing training and policy work. The creation of the **Children and Young People Exploitation Working Group**, a multi-agency partnership aimed at enhancing responses to separated migrant children who have been the victims of trafficking or exploitation, is an important step. The organisation hopes to guarantee more unified and efficient support for young survivors by establishing strategic alliances and unambiguous referral pathways. The Snowdrop Project's dedication to offering complete treatment and promoting systemic change to safeguard and empower is demonstrated by this combination of direct intervention and systemic development.



Although each of these services is critical, they are of course subject to funding and geographic reach leading to variation in services across the country. There is a need for greater standardisation and consistency so that services are available to all survivors.

What is the best thing about having someone to support you?

“You feel more comfortable because you have someone to rely on”

Counselling and Mental Health Support:

Many NGOs offer critical mental health support and specialised counselling for survivors to help them in their recovery. Counselling, whether in one-to-one sessions or in peer-support groups, provides an opportunity for young people to not only process their experience and trauma, but also to discover their identity and confidence as an individual as they enter adulthood. However, it can be very difficult for survivors to access such specialist support due to lack of availability. Whilst more general mental health services are available, long waiting lists and costs often make it difficult for survivors to access help.

What is the best thing about having someone to support you?

“The increase in mental health. The fact you know that you have someone there by your side supporting you, so you know you’re doing good. You feel good. Your mental health is good. Your wellbeing is good. The problems aren’t there by yourself, you have someone to share it with.”

Education and Employment Support:

NGOs and colleges often provide education and employment support to assist young survivors in gaining skills, entering into further education or finding work. This is critical in order to empower the individual, provide community and purpose, and decrease vulnerability, including risk of re-trafficking. However, insecure immigration status and not having the right to work create barriers to accessing employment and education, which can be frustrating and demoralising for many young survivors.

Advocacy and Case Management: NGOs can fill in the gaps in services with advocacy and case management services, empower survivors to speak for themselves and advocate for their needs. An advocate is essential in supporting the individual to navigate the welfare system, find somewhere safe and stable to call home or simply having someone official in your corner. However, trained advocates are in short supply and that means many survivors are left without such services.

“The best thing about having someone to support you is they always know the scenario you are in. They know all about you — everything you have done, how you are, what you’re like and what you are capable of.”

4. Gaps in Provision of Support

There are significant gaps in the services provided to young survivors, despite a range of statutory (mandatory) and non-statutory child protection systems involved; and notably in how support is offered for a proportion of those who are transitioning to adulthood.

“It feels like it just wasn’t enough. It wasn’t like the support that was given was bad, I just wish there was more of it.”

Variation in Service Provision: According to The Children’s Society, Still in Harm’s Way: An Update Report on Young People at Risk of Exploitation (2018), there are a large number of variations in the service provision from one area to another. In some areas, support networks are already well-established; in others there may be little or no specialist services for survivors available. This lack of consistency creates a postcode lottery, where the extent to which a young survivor gets assistance depends on where they live.

Do you feel like the support you got was enough?

“I think it was enough, but I think the only thing I needed was someone to show me how to do things and what to do. I wasn’t shown anything. So I think it’s the most important thing because if you explain something they won’t get it straight away. So showing is important.”

Lack of Trauma-Informed Care: The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (ATMG) (2020) posited that while there is much more knowledge around the importance of a trauma-informed approach, many services particularly statutory sector services are lagging behind when it comes to meeting the needs of exploited people. Moving to adult services rarely follows trauma-informed principles, which can aggravate survivors’ mental health needs.

Barriers to Accessing Services: Survivors typically face major hurdles in accessing services such as language, knowledge of the support available and mistrust of authorities from past encounters (Refugee Council, 2019). And those with insecure legal immigration status are often faced with two more barriers: they often face ineligibility for certain services, and the fear of deportation or an unstable immigration status can leave them feeling trapped in limbo, uncertain about their future and unable to move forward.

Gaps in Legal Protection: The fragmented approach to support for survivors of modern slavery hinders survivors’ recovery from exploitation. (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2018). Narrow eligibility criteria, for example to be considered a ‘relevant child’ as a care leaver or to secure immigration status, mean that many young people may not receive the help they require. This is made even more challenging by the lack of available legal aid advice.

“When there is no support you’ve got to push yourself. Being in children’s services there is a lot of support that you don’t realise, so when you come out of that and you have to push yourself it is more difficult because there is no one telling you right from wrong. It’s on you. The consequences are on you.”



5. Strengths and Weaknesses of Transitional Safeguarding Approaches

Transitional safeguarding approaches are developed to aid the transitional process of young survivors from child protection services to adulthood. However, these standardised approaches have both strengths and weaknesses.¹

Strengths:

Continuity of Care: Transitional safeguarding approaches understand that young people need support to keep them linked with services as they move from child to adulthood. If practiced properly, these methods can help stop young survivors from slipping through the system.

Integrated Approach: This collective working often requires different agencies to come together and give people holistic support which reflects the complex needs of survivors.

Young Person Empowerment: Young survivors can be empowered through transitional safeguarding approaches which includes young people in care planning and decision-making, supporting them to develop independence and resilience.

Weaknesses:

Inconsistent Implementation: The effectiveness of transitional safeguarding is highly dependent upon the implementing region and the specific service that is involved. In most cases, its effectiveness varies between regions. And so, in far too many instances, the implementation is poorly executed which consequently leads gaps or disruptions in care.

Resource Constraints: A key factor in the effective delivery of transitional safeguarding is having resources (trained professionals and financing). As noted throughout this report, critical services suffer from a lack of resources which therefore presents a barrier to successful implementation.

Lack of Awareness and Training: Professionals working in the period of transition need more awareness and training in order to fully grasp the concept transitional safeguarding and fully understand the perspective of young adult survivors.

“ I would have benefited from a little bit more time ”

When you turned 18 did you actually feel like an adult?

“ No ”

How far away did you feel?

“ Really far. I still felt like a child. ”

6. Consent to Ongoing Support

This period between childhood and adulthood is particularly precarious for young survivors of slavery and trafficking, many of whom turn 18 years old in a state of legal limbo. At 18, many statutory protections fall away or are shifted to adult services and, as a result, survivors are left unable to access vital services such as housing, financial support and mental health support. This sudden change leaves many young adults particularly vulnerable and, for survivors without official care leaver status or secure immigration status, the eligibility criteria of adult services may present additional hurdles they are unable to meet. For example, when a young person is referred into the NRM as a child, when they turn 18, they have to sign a consent form to remain in the NRM as an adult. Without appropriate support to help make an informed decision and to consent to ongoing NRM support they

risk falling through the gaps between the systems of protection. According to a freedom of information request from the Snowdrop Project: out of 2,643 cases only 772 young people consented to continue in the NRM, 539 withdrew from the NRM, and 1,332 had their cases suspended because they did not consent to a referral. These gaps put young survivors at risk of homelessness, poor health, and re-trafficking as they enter into adult life.²

Moreover, this period is psychologically and emotionally complex. A large number of young survivors grapple with unresolved trauma resulting from their trafficking experiences. The lack of specialty, trauma-informed mental health services in adult care can create further emotional vulnerability for trafficking survivors who can feel isolated as they seek to navigate adult systems without adequate resources, stability and guidance.



¹ For more on Transitional Safeguarding see: [Transitional Safeguarding | The Innovate Project](#)

² For more information, see: [New data reveals alarming numbers of child victims of modern slavery turning 18 are excluded from support | ECPAT UK](#)

7. Recommendations

Based on the researcher's review of services and support for young survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking, several recommendations can be made to improve the current system:

Standardising Service Provision across Regions: Efforts should be made to ensure that all young survivors receive the same level of care regardless their location within the UK and further develop a standardised system to ensure equality. This might require implementing minimum standards for service provision and, importantly, provide more resources in areas with limited resources.

Access to Trauma-Informed Care: Improving access to trauma informed care is essential to ensure survivors have the needed professional services and further increase the capacity of professionals in their dispensation of services. Capacity building for service providers in both statutory and non-statutory settings and the provision of specialised mental health care for survivors will further increase access.

Reduce Barriers to Services: In order for every young survivor to obtain the needed support, obstacles such as language barrier, lack of awareness and fear of authorities should be alleviated. That could mean, for example, providing resources in different languages and engaging more with communities while also improving relationships between survivors and service providers.

Strengthen Legal Protections: The legal framework to help survivor should be strengthened so that all young survivors are guaranteed proper protection and assistance. This might mean widening the parameters for someone's care leaver status, better legal aid provision and consequently simplifying the complex legal system to make sure no victim is left unsupported irrespective of their localities.

Improve Transitional Safeguarding Practice: More resources should be allocated to transitional safeguarding and proper training of professionals should be conducted regularly in order to better understand the struggles of survivors and to further cater to their needs. Moreover, greater collaboration between agencies involved in the transition process should be encouraged to increase efficiency and better service delivery.

Guarantee Access to Ongoing Support for all Child Victims of Modern Slavery or Human Trafficking: Regardless of care leaver status or immigration status all children and young adults in the NRM should be automatically eligible for ongoing support from local authorities after they turn 18. This should include eligibility for appropriate housing, specialist support, advocacy and other critical assistance as they transition to adulthood and begin to access adult support services, including but not limited to the MSVCC. The purpose being to ensure a durable solution is found for each child to reduce risk of further harm.

8. Conclusion:

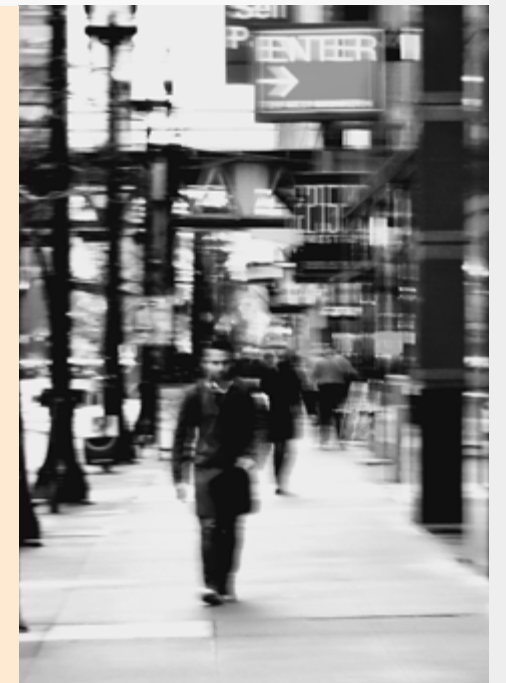
The review of services and support for young survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking overall shows the necessity, urgently so, for an integrated system that responds to this incredibly complex set of circumstances experienced by some very vulnerable survivors. Although necessary, statutory services fail to offer a smooth transition from children's services and into adult care. Young people referred to the NRM receive support from their local authority, but only until they turn 18. At which point, if they are not eligible for ongoing local authority support, they must consent to entering the NRM as an adult and receive assistance under the MSVCC. Moreover, survivors are left in a precarious position due to gaps between housing, healthcare and legal protection policies, especially those with insecure immigration status.

Non-statutory services delivered by NGOs and charities are critical in responding to unmet needs, providing specialist services (e.g. counselling or advocacy) that respond more flexibly to the demands of service users than statutory interventions can accommodate. The problem is that access to these services varies

across regions, leaving some survivors without access to the care they need. This absence of trauma-informed care and the countless obstacles encountered in seeking assistance make it clear that systemic reform is necessary to ensure an equal support system for all young survivors, no matter where they happen to live or their particular legal circumstances.

Standardisation of service provision, training in trauma-informed care and the availability of legal protections are crucial to improve support systems that work for young survivors. In this review, the recommendations provide a roadmap for a framework that is inclusive and dynamic allowing young survivors to be nurtured whilst empowered. Some of the measures that we need to take include encouraging more collaboration between statutory and non-statutory agencies, providing adequate resources for essential services as well training professionals so they understand trauma-informed child protection practices in order to ensure that young survivors are not only protected but also supported in their journey toward healing and independence.

*“I felt pushed out...
it's how I felt
for a long time,
there's no worse
feeling than that.”*



9. References

- ECPAT UK and Missing People, Still in Harm's Way: An update report on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK, 2018, and 'When Harm Remains, 2022. Retrieved from www.ecpat.org.uk
- FLEX Working Paper: ACCESS TO COMPENSATION FOR VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING, 2016. Retrieved from <https://humantraffickingsearch.org>
- Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group. (2013). Hidden in Plain Sight: A Report on the National Referral Mechanism and Young Adult Survivors of Trafficking. Anti-Slavery International. Retrieved from <https://www.antislavery.org/>
- United Kingdom. (1989). Children Act 1989. Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>
- United Kingdom. (2014). Care Act 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk>
- United Kingdom Home Office. (2024). National Referral Mechanism guidance: adult (England and Wales). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms>
- Care Leavers' Transition to Adulthood Report by the Children's Society (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Care-leavers-transition-to-adulthood.pdf>
- Department for Education Guidance (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-children>
- "The Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework" (Barnardo's, 2020). Retrieved https://stbasils.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Finalframework2_CareLeavers_A4.pdf
- National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Retrieved from [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales#:~:text=The%20National%20Referral%20Mechanism%20\(%20NRM,human%20trafficking](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales#:~:text=The%20National%20Referral%20Mechanism%20(%20NRM,human%20trafficking)
- The Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG). Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-child-trafficking-guardian-ictg-msa-evaluation/independent-child-trafficking-guardian-ictg-msa-evaluation>
- Modern Slavery Act 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents>
- Hope for Justice. Retrieved from <https://hopeforjustice.org/>
- The Children's Society. <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/>
- ECPAT UK (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking). Retrieved from <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/>
- Still in Harm's Way: An Update Report on Young People at Risk of Exploitation, The Children's Society, (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/still-in-harms-way>
- Care Leavers' Transition to Adulthood and the Human Trafficking System (Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, (2020).
- From Care to Where? Refugee Council, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/children-in-the-asylum-system-may-2019/>
- Trafficking Survivor Care Standards, Human Trafficking Foundation, (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.humantraffickingfoundation.org/reports>

Annex 1: Interviews with Young People

As mentioned above, Hope for Justice were delighted to work with a member of the Human Trafficking Foundation's Lived Experience Advisory Panel, Sosa Henkoma, to conduct interviews with young people about their experience as they turned 18.

The following extracts from the interviews summarise the recurring themes which arose in the discussion.

Many of the young people spoke of the need for ongoing support to assist them with practical matters including housing, personal finance and mental health. There was a sense for several participants that they felt ill-prepared to navigate these issues on their own.

Interviewer: If you didn't have support, what difference do you think this would have made?

Participant: *I would have been homeless. I would like to be more educated on things like housing. Even as a 24 year old I have no idea on housing. Even though I have been supported by my family I have no idea about the next steps. When I need to move out, I have no idea whether to go left or right because there has been no one supporting. Regardless of if I was in the system or out of the system there should be education on housing and finance.*

Independent living is a completely different thing from shared living. So a more detailed thing about how to get your own yard, what you need to do with your income, your finances. I feel like there should be a structured booklet or something to explain — this is what you should be making a month in order for you to move in by yourself comfortably. It just needs to be more detailed because right now when young people are in homes that aren't their family homes and they are going straight to shared homes — at some point they will want to move out and become their own person and need to know where to go.

They aren't teaching us about real life.

Interviewer: What is the best thing about having someone to support you?

Participant: *The increase in mental health. The fact you know that you have someone*

there by your side supporting you, so you know you're doing good. You feel good. Your mental health is good. Your wellbeing is good. The problems aren't there by yourself, you have someone to share it with.

Interviewer: What do you think young people need when they turn 18 and need to leave children services?

Participant: *Help with things they want to do in the future, like jobs. The basic things everyone needs to be an adult.*

Interviewer: What is the best thing about having someone to support you?

Participant: *You feel more comfortable because you have someone to rely on.*

Interviewer: If you didn't have support, what difference do you think this would have made?

Participant: *If I didn't have any support I feel like I could have gone down a bad route. As a young person sometimes a bad route is a bit easier than the straight and narrow. As a young person you still need guidance.*

Interviewer: What is the most difficult thing about being an adult?

Participant: *Going through things yourself and people just expecting you to suck it up and keep going because you're that age. The way people behave when an adult complains about something or doesn't understand something — you are expected to know what you're supposed to do. I feel like that's kind of bad, because I don't always want to expect to know everything.*

Interviewer: Can you tell me when you turn 18 what you would like to happen? What type of support would you like to receive when you turn 18?

Participant: *Mental support. I get really stressed with school stuff. I'm going to apply for apprenticeships so advice on how to be ready for that.*

If I did get that support I would be ready and very grateful that I got the help so I know what I need to do, how I need to be and how to present myself.

Interviewer: If you didn't have support, what difference do you think this would make?

Participant: *If I didn't get any support I would just make sure I'm doing the most thoughtful thing and the most loving thing. Even if I don't get the support I just need to use common sense and apply logic to my decisions.*

Interviewer: What is the best thing about having someone to support you?

Participant: *The best thing about having someone to support you is they always know the scenario you are in. They know all about you — everything you have done, how you are, what you're like and what you are capable of. If they know your potential, then they know the standards that you can give your best at. It's like when you're doing your driving test — they tell you what you need to know, and so after they tell you this stuff you will understand it and remember it when you are doing the test.*

Interviewer: Can you tell me when you turn 18 what you would like to happen? What type of support would you like to receive when you turn 18?

Participant: *When I turn 18, I would like to be guided to the right path. When you turn 18, it's like what are the legal things that I can do and can't do? Like taxes and being educated properly. I don't feel prepared for that.*

Interviewer: What is the best thing about having someone to support you?

Participant: *The best thing about having someone to support you is knowing that they have your back even if something goes wrong there is someone there for you to lean on and who can help you. Like having a safety net.*

Interviewer: What is the best thing about having someone to support you?

Participant: *I can call you and get help if I need it.*

Those who were interviewed also spoke about the pressure they feel about having to take on responsibilities as they turn 18.

Interviewer: What is the most difficult thing about leaving child services?

Participant: *The independence you have. When there is no support, you've got to push yourself. Being in children's services there is a lot of support that you don't realise, so when you come out of that and you have to push yourself it is more difficult because there is no one telling you right from wrong. It's on you. The consequences are on you.*

Interviewer: What is the most difficult thing about being an adult?

Participant: *The pressure. My family will want me to get a job and I don't know what's expected.*

Interviewer: What is the most difficult thing about being an adult?

Participant: *Keeping your job. You know if you slip up once you could lose your job and that will be bad for your reputation — people will see you are unprepared.*

Interviewer: What do you think young people need when they turn 18?

Participant: *When they turn 18 they need to be able to grow up. You have to be responsible for anything you need. You need to think: what is the best thing I can do right now? If you slip up, you need to know there are consequences. If you hang out with a bad group, they do something bad, you're involved, they see you as a criminal.*

Interviewer: What is the most difficult thing about being an adult?

Participant: *The most difficult thing about turning 18 is we are bombarded with information and responsibilities we were kind of aware of but not fully. You aren't really prepared for the moment when you are now at the age when you do one little thing and you are out.*

You aren't really taught what the real world is like. We're being babied until we're 18 and then there are all these things bombarding you, and you're like 'wait, I wasn't prepared for this'. We need to be educated about finances — taxes, how to invest, how to survive financially - emotional intelligence and history.

A recurring theme was a desire for more to be done to help equip young people for adulthood.

Participant: *There just needs to be a bit more. I know that the support that they currently give is the best that they can do.*

Interviewer: Do you think that there should be some form of curriculum teaching young people about society when they turn 18?

Participant: *Yeah. To teach them about the dangers of the world.*

Interviewer: Is there anything you wish was different about the support you received?

Participant: *It feels like it just wasn't enough. It wasn't like the support that was given was bad, I just wish there was more of it.*

Interviewer: What do you think young people need when they turn 18 and need to leave children services?

Participant: *At least a plan. At 16 or 17 there is maybe a plan to try to follow, then at 18 everything hits you. It's a lot.*

Learning on your own is a bit hard sometimes. If you don't have the support of adults or certain people you bounce off each other, you never know whether that guidance is the correct guidance. So you need to let people know at least what they are doing and what they are in for.

Interviewer: Is there anything you wish was different about the support you received?

Participant: *I wish the support I received was more in quantity and quality, that it was more clear and given to me in a way that I can understand and remember. Sometimes I forget most of the stuff that I'm told. It's complicated, so if they gave it to me more simply I would be able to understand it.*

Interviewer: If you could improve social services right now, how would you improve it?

Participant: *Maybe the child should meet the social worker before they become their social worker so that you know what they are like and they don't get pressed on you because that does stress me out. I've gone through mental health stuff and the social worker didn't really do anything, they just put me in hospital.*

Interviewer: You don't have an advocate or mentor able to speak on your behalf? Would that be helpful?

Participant: *Yeah*

Avoiding the cliff edge:

working with young
survivors of modern
slavery as they turn 18

