

Victim Support 2025 (VS25) Consultation with Survivors of Modern Slavery

Introduction

The Human Trafficking Foundation was commissioned by the Home Office to provide a consultation with adults with lived experience of modern slavery to inform the design of the new Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract 'Victim Support 2025 (VS25)'. The consultation was held in March 2024 with 35 survivors of modern slavery across England and Wales who have received support under the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract since January 2021. The purpose of the consultation was to give survivors an opportunity to have their say on the future of victim support and for the Home Office to understand what support is working well and what would be helpful to provide in the future. At each session participants were asked the same questions on the type and level of support provided to survivors of modern slavery to support future policy development of a new victims' support contract. This briefing outlines the consultation and its findings.

A trauma-informed consultation

The Human Trafficking Foundation commissioned a consultant from the Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP) to be specialist advisor on the consultation. As facilitators, the team took steps to ensure that checks and procedures were in place for participating survivors to engage in a trauma-informed environment and developed a specific safeguarding procedure for the project.

Prior to the consultation

When putting a call out to participants through frontline NGOs and Survivor Alliance members, in-depth information was provided to all prospective participants before they decided whether or not to take part. Information included detail on who would be in the meeting, how to remain anonymous, a section on disclosure and safeguarding, and practical ways of managing distress, such as grounding techniques and a list of helpline numbers for additional support. When arranging group sessions, consideration was given to gender and power dynamics.

Participants were invited to an optional drop-in session ahead of the consultation. This provided an opportunity for participants to talk through what the consultation would entail, and an opportunity to meet the Human Trafficking Foundation and ask any questions without the Home Office in attendance.

For participants not offered this session due to later recruitment or language barriers, the information provided in the drop in-session was communicated during the first 10 minutes of their consultation.

The Human Trafficking Foundation and LEAP consultant worked with the Home Office to advise on the questions asked to participants and ensured these were in the third-person and did not require disclosure of personal experience. Participants were given the questions in advance to have time to prepare if they wished.

During the consultation

The consultations were held in small groups of no more than six participants, with four online group sessions, three in-person group sessions, and two 1-1 sessions. The Human Trafficking Foundation and LEAP consultant facilitated the sessions and asked the questions, with always a minimum of two members of staff in attendance. Two members of the Home Office also attended the sessions and introduced themselves at the start before explaining they were in listening and note-writing mode and would not be speaking during the session. It was made clear that no participants' details would be shared with the Home Office, nor would anything they say affect their NRM or asylum decision.

Participants were reminded at the beginning of the session that if at any point they felt themselves getting overwhelmed, their self-care is most important. In-person, there was a separate room where participants could take a break. Online, participants were asked to write in the chat or put their hand up to say that they need to take a break and HTF then invited them into an online private room for a 1-1 debrief.

Clear Voice interpreters were used for participants that required an interpreter.

A short poll was launched to gather feedback from participants in the online sessions in order to improve the future sessions. Results from these polls showed that 100% of participants felt safe, and 88% agreed they were able to communicate everything they wanted to when answering the consultation questions.

After the consultation

Each session left 5 minutes at the end when the Home Office would leave and the participants could debrief and discuss their plans for how to decompress from the session if needed. All participants were reminded they can contact HTF afterwards if there's anything they would like to discuss.

Following the completion of each consultation, the Human Trafficking Foundation shared with all participants helplines for additional support if required and encouraged self-care. If anyone appeared to be struggling in the session or raised anything of concern, an additional message or call was sent to check in and offer signposting to support.

All participants were provided with a £50 gift card to thank them for their time.

Consultation questions

Survivor participants were asked:

1. What information and support do survivors need when they first enter the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)?
2. As survivors progress through their recovery journey, what support activities do you think would be particularly helpful to survivors in their recovery and why?
3. What do you think would help survivors in the NRM to feel independent and in control of their lives?
4. To provide feedback on different ideas the Home Office is considering for the future support model.

Question 1: What information and support do survivors need when they first enter the NRM?

The question sought to develop an understanding of what a good entry into support would look like for a survivor. Participants were asked to consider the level and format of the information provided, what support is most useful and aspects that could feel unhelpful or overwhelming. Key feedback identified at the sessions was:

Survivors need a safe environment to fully process information.

- Participants reported that they needed to feel safe, which included coming to terms with their situation before deciding whether to enter the NRM. This was also viewed as key to allowing survivors to absorb the information they were provided with and consider the options available to them.
- Participants suggested needing to feel safe included:
 - Being provided with appropriate accommodation that is conducive to their recovery such as being housed in same sex accommodation
 - Basic necessities and allowing them to settle a little - all of which will help to create a sense of stability and safety

- Providing an overview of the safety measures in safehouses
- One participant suggested for survivors to be given panic alarm to help them feel safer in public spaces

All staff involved in the referral and support process should consistently receive trauma informed training.

- Consistent training on trauma for support workers and first responders was suggested as a means of assisting survivors to engage with the information they are provided.
- A trauma informed approach to support victims, which includes being culturally sensitive and avoiding the use of triggering language when discussing support needs with victims.
- For support workers to have a better understanding of immediate support needs and the entitlements for UK and non-UK nationals especially regarding medical entitlements.

There can be an overload of information provided to survivors following referral.

- Participants wanted information that allowed them to feel in control and empowered to make informed decisions on entering the NRM and the support process. However, too much information can feel draining.
- Participants expressed that some people might not know what modern slavery is, which can make the process of being identified even more overwhelming. It was suggested that survivors should be provided with the definition of modern slavery, a list of typology, and indicators for each type of modern slavery that should be written in a trauma informed way. This is important so that the survivor can understand the crime that they have been victim to and to be able to identify and understand what has happened to them.
- There is a lack of clarity around the role of the Home Office in the NRM and support processes. This, along with the differences in the asylum processes, can lead to survivors feeling pressured and uneasy when deciding whether to enter the NRM and support process.
- Information should be clear and concise. This should be kept to essential details at first contact covering: support entitlements, a timeline of support, the agencies and professionals' survivors would encounter at each part of the process and what the support worker's role and responsibilities are.
- It was suggested that information should be provided in a series of short in-person meetings, to ensure there is no overload of information and space is given for survivors to ask questions.

Survivors felt they are not always advised accurately on how long decisions may take.

- Information on the NRM process was not consistently provided at the initial referral stage, which could leave survivors uncertain about what to expect from the NRM and the support process.
- Information on the NRM is needed at the initial stage, including an explanation of the NRM process, the number of decisions individuals will receive, and how the NRM and its decision points interplay with the asylum system. This would help survivors understand their choices and feel consulted.
- Participants emphasised the importance of setting realistic expectations. Although the NRM process may state that it would take a minimum of 30 days to get a conclusive grounds decision, and if the current environment reflects that it is taking many more days than this, survivors should be communicated this.
- Entry into support is daunting for some survivors. An explanation of the support journey, including how they get to a safehouse and why a safehouse is necessary and the material assistance that can be provided, would help to put survivors at ease and inform the level of engagement they have in the process.

Creating trust is important to help survivors absorb information.

- A consistent theme at the sessions was the importance of building trust and having the reassurance that the information survivors were disclosing would remain confidential from the outset of the survivor's interaction with the NRM.
- Participants expressed that it could be difficult to engage and work with the agencies involved in the support and NRM process, without building trust.
- Participants noted the importance of explaining how their data would be stored, suggesting that when being provided with what they would be consenting to when entering the NRM, it should also be explicitly explained what will happen to any personal information they may provide during the NRM process.
- Given misconceptions of the Home Office's level of involvement in the support process and the lack of clarity on how their personal data would be handled, participants suggested a personal approach and a two-part induction is needed on how information is communicated. Participants suggested:
 - Being provided with named contacts including the name of the support worker they would be allocated
 - Having an initial meeting with a support worker to cover the role and responsibility of the support worker
 - Following up the initial meeting with a more detailed session around support needs

Suggested communication methods

Participants were asked what they felt the best communication method for information is when first entering the NRM. The following feedback was given:

- Information should be provided in a clear, concise, and accessible way in as many formats as possible to maximise understanding and engagement from survivors.
- Participants suggested a guidance booklet, or videos should be used to communicate information. These should be made available in different languages that contain information on the NRM and explain the steps involved.
- Utilising digital methods such as providing common online links with information and translations, online drop box/ Cloud or SharePoint to store key documents and utilising existing technological devices at Home Office locations to display information (e.g. TV).
- There is a need to involve those with lived experience and who have experience of the support process in the induction process. It was felt that they would be better placed to inform how key information and advice should be communicated to new entrants entering the NRM and support processes. This could be in the form of video presentations or peer to peer mentoring.

Barrier to access

Participants were asked about the challenges faced that could prevent information from being fully understood at the initial contact stage. The following barriers were raised by participants:

1. Language barriers

- The main barrier was the ability to fully understand rights and entitlements and how misunderstandings can delay entry into support.
- Participants felt that translation services could be inconsistent and delay or lengthen simple support meetings.
- Examples of misunderstandings include terminology used by professionals such as the term 'trafficking' could cause confusion about whether this referred to modern slavery or road traffic offences.

2. Mental health, learning difficulties and disabilities

- Such conditions could act as a barrier to understanding the information survivors are provided.

- Consideration is needed on how information can be tailored and made accessible (including sign language) to meet the needs of survivors, to ensure information can be understood by those with additional needs.

3. First responder knowledge

- There is a need for consistent knowledge of the NRM process across first responder organisations, which includes first responders having access to information that can be handed to survivors. This would help first responders communicate key information during the initial stages.

What support should be provided?

- When asked what support types should be made available following NRM referral, participants suggested that receiving support from the earliest possible stage would lead to better outcomes and build stability from the start of the process. Examples of support that participants felt should be made available upon referral include:
 - Safe accommodation and earlier referral to community-based support services.
 - Essential items, such as food and clothing.
 - Medical assistance, including earlier access to mental health care for emotional support.
 - Access and signposting to legal advice.

Question 2: As survivors progress through their recovery journey, what support activities do you think would be particularly helpful to survivors in their recovery and why?

The question sought to draw out feedback on the type of support that should be prioritised, that would be most helpful or unhelpful to recovery, the role of a support worker and the information survivors proposed having access to throughout the recovery journey. The key feedback identified at the sessions included:

The support worker role is essential to survivor recovery.

- The experiences shared by survivors indicate a need to provide consistency in the delivery of support and establish a minimum standard of care within the support worker role.
- Support workers are compassionate and sensitive with a clear desire to help.
- An empathetic approach is needed to ensure survivors at no point feel like a burden on their support workers.
- Support workers should be provided with trauma-based training to ensure sensitive and safe interactions that could aid recovery and reduce the risk of re-trauma, such as improving support worker understanding around the use of language to prevent re-triggering.
- Support workers should be provided with their own support network, especially around their wellbeing due to the nature of the role and to ensure their stresses are not passed onto the survivor.
- Support workers should encourage and 'push' survivors at the right time to keep busy and take ownership of their recovery journey and support individuals to do this by explaining why it is important and helping to build their confidence.

Mental health support is one of the most important aspects of support to assist with recovery.

- Access to counselling and sessions on coping strategies/ mental resilience is one of the most important support types to assist survivors to make progress with their recovery. Earlier access to mental health support would give them a safe space to express emotions, process trauma and develop coping strategies.
- At some sessions, participants expressed that support workers and the Home Office should not determine who is able to access mental health support through contracted support. Instead, this

should be done by medical professionals qualified to complete mental health assessments. Easier and earlier access to private counselling as part of the support offered through the contract given the delays some survivors experienced trying to access NHS services.

- Signposting to different wellbeing activities and community support groups would be beneficial as this would promote wellbeing and allow survivors to keep busy and develop social networks and friendship groups.

The wider policies of the Home Office can impact survivor recovery.

- The impact of wider Home Office policies can have a negative impact on survivor recovery.
- Recent changes to the UK's legislation (Illegal Migration Act and Nationality and Borders Act) linked to the current rhetoric around illegal migration, has contributed to the feeling that survivors who were non-UK nationals were being targeted based on their nationality.
- Home Office immigration policies have also contributed to this feeling, as participants felt this prevented access to educational opportunities, the right to work and access to suitable accommodation.
- Decision making delays in the NRM and immigration processes can also act as barriers to recovery and independence, particularly for survivors who are non-UK nationals. Waiting for decisions that would change their entitlements and the support services survivors can access, can increase their dependency on the support provided by the Home Office and make transitioning to alternative support services more difficult.

There should be an independent centralised complaints process and that can be used by survivors to complain about any part of their support journey.

- There was uncertainty around the complaint's procedure, especially around who and how to raise a complaint.
- Concerns were also expressed around the independence of the process with the potential for complaints raised being handled by those involved.
- Participants said they would like:
 - A complaints process where survivors can raise concerns without fear of consequences and for the complaint to be appropriately dealt with
 - The process to include a follow up provision by those handling the complaints, keeping survivors involved and updated
 - The inclusion of a whistleblowing line or referral method as survivors can feel uneasy raising complaints to their support workers and providers about the support they are receiving.

Support elements that would be most helpful to survivors

Participants were asked to provide views and feedback on support that would be most helpful to support their recovery. The following examples were provided:

1. Personal Development (Educational, employment, skill development)

- Support that would help prepare survivors for the workplace and help those who have either been out of employment for extended periods or were unfamiliar with how to seek employment in the UK would be beneficial. Suggestions included: Work preparation (CV's and cover letter writing) including what to expect within the UK workforce.
- Increased signposting to educational opportunities, courses and funding options, including scholarships and volunteering opportunities aligned to survivors' interests; and
- Programmes to develop computer and digital skills.

- When referring to the existing Journey Planning exercise in the Recovery Needs Assessment, it was suggested that it is unhelpful to have a monthly check in, as this does not allow enough time for progress to be made. Instead, a 6 weekly check in could be more beneficial and less of a tick box exercise.

2. Skills to build independence

Activities that develop skills and independence as survivors prepare for life outside of the contracted support system. Suggestions included:

- Assistance navigating the benefit system
- Including advice on how to budget, such as information on what bills to expect and how to pay these
- How to safely access community-based support, including religious spaces and meeting new people
- Improved signposting to legal services
- Assistance seeking private accommodation, including support and information on how to obtain references and guarantors

3. Integration

- Participants who were non-UK nationals indicated an additional preference for targeted support that would assist with their community integration. This included:
 - English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses and English classes
 - Information/ courses on life and culture in the UK

4. Physical and wellbeing activities

- Participants indicated that a wider range of both physical and wellbeing activities would be beneficial to recovery and increase engagement.
- Activities to be offered in both groups and individually. Some can find group sessions beneficial for social interactions while others find group sessions increased their anxiety. Suggestions included a choice of exercise classes including sports-based activities, such as football and gym memberships as part of the support offer.
- A variety of wellbeing activities including but not limited to, art classes and workshops, floristry, food preparation classes and how to safely prepare and store food, pilates and light yoga, dance classes, trips to external locations, lived experience mentoring programmes.

Question 3. What do you think would help survivors in the NRM to feel independent and in control of their lives?

The question sought to understand what support/ activities survivors need to reduce reliance on their support worker and start re-building their independence and resilience. Also, to build their confidence to make decisions about their life and help them move forward, looking to the future. Participants were also asked about support to exit the service, what would be most helpful and what concerns they had at this point. Key feedback identified at the sessions included:

The need for suitable and secure accommodation following departure from the service

- Stable accommodation and greater assistance in transitioning between accommodation types to maintain independence would be beneficial.
- Participants suggested that they should be better informed of the differences between accommodation types offered under Home Office funded support systems and local authorities along with information on the accommodation choices available.
- Participants suggest that support with local authority housing applications and with the process of renting private accommodation should also be provided.

- Some participants expressed that they should be allowed to remain within contracted support until longer-term accommodation becomes available.
- Participants expressed that positive conclusive grounds decisions contributed to a feeling of fear and uncertainty as they felt this placed a requirement on them to find alternative accommodation straight away. This could result in survivors being moved away from the communities they had integrated into, which meant starting the re-integration process again, without support.

Continuation of mental health support to encourage independence.

- Participants highlighted the importance of mental health support and the overall impact this had on their feeling of control and in maintaining independence.
- Participants expressed a preference for either any mental health support received while in contracted support to continue following a survivor's exit from support if there were delays accessing NHS services or for their exit from support to be postponed until similar support was in place. This was due to survivors experiencing excessive NHS waiting times.
- Participants expressed the importance of still having someone to share and discuss problems and issues with while transitioning out of contracted support and into alternative support to help reduce their anxiety and ensure they maintain self-help methods.
- Suggestions also included providing trauma-based counselling access to all and for an in-house psychologist to be placed at every safehouse location.

A greater focusing on developing skills to allow successful re-integration following exiting support.

- Assistance with re-integration and the ability to navigate external support systems were both important to allow survivors to build confidence and independence. To do this, practical guidance and skill development was suggested.
- Suggestions made included:
 - Skill building, focusing on self-advocacy, improving communication, assertiveness training, confidence building
 - Navigating and applying for different benefits, applying for housing including furnishing a house, how to deal with taxes
 - Practical life skills development, including financial skills (paying bills, budgeting, opening bank accounts) health needs (registering for GP in new areas)
 - Employment preparation (applying for ID, or a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, CV, references)
 - English language support
 - Improved access to legal advice
- The following methods to deliver the support outlined above were suggested by participants:
 - Specific support programmes focussing on exiting contracted support once a positive conclusive grounds decision has been returned to ease the transitioning process
 - Events with representatives from wider support services, job centres and Local Council
 - Classes, particularly to focus on job skills and English language
 - Practical guidance and information booklets provided when exiting support, available in different languages and containing contacts information of external support networks.
- Participants again expressed the need for tailored support, and to offer relevant skills programmes in line with survivors' interests and talents

Support with employment and work opportunities

- The opportunity to engage in legal employment was mentioned by participants as the most impactful thing to assist survivors with long term independence.
- Having the right to work and access to support that builds on existing skills would allow survivors to develop work experience, have financial independence and make contributions back to society.
- Workshops and job fair styled events involving external agencies (e.g. Job centre, local authorities, and charities) to provide survivors with information on job seeking, wider state benefits and information on community resources.
- Participants indicated that a flexible and staggered approach to employment while being supported is needed, with some concerns expressed that engaging in employment could result in their support being ceased or removed.

Move-on support following a conclusive grounds decision needed to focus on long term planning

- Participants questioned the purpose of the conclusive ground decision. They expressed that a positive conclusive grounds decision did not impact on the type of support received or change the entitlements of non-UK nationals.
- Participants felt that the Recovery Needs Assessment (RNA) meant they had to now start to justify their support needs with accessing support becoming more difficult, instead of being intensified upon receipt of a positive Conclusive Grounds decision. Participants felt they were pushed to immediately be on the pathway to independence and there was no staggered approach.
- The fear of losing access to their support worker left some survivors feeling apprehensive about exiting the support services, as they would lose access to assistance with applications and more informal support, such as having someone to talk to about their experiences.
- While reach-in support was available following exit from the main service, this did not cater to all their needs and participants felt that support should continue to be available for as long as it was needed.
- Some participants indicated that the current move-on support period did not provide sufficient time or long-term planning and could end abruptly, leaving them to navigate their lives independently.
- It was suggested that support with a greater focus on developing lifelong skills should be provided during the move-on period as listed above.
- Earlier efforts should be taken to help survivors integrate into the community.
- A buddy system or support group comprised of those who have already exited the system, would be greatly beneficial to help independence and a continuation of support.

Question 4. Feedback on the different ideas The Home Office are exploring for the future support model

The question sought to test some potential elements of support that are being considered by the Home Office for the future adult victim's support contract. Participants were asked for their views and any new ideas around the type of support they would like to see be offered.

These included:

- The introduction of a skills programme.
- Access to a variety of wellbeing activities.
- Assistance to access voluntary and work opportunities; and
- A one-off payment to help transition from support services.

All elements suggested by the Home Office would be helpful to recovery

- Overall, the feedback received suggested that all the elements being considered by the Home Office would be helpful, and participants wanted them to be made available to all survivors (in safehouses and in outreach).
- Participants acknowledged that some suggestions, particularly the skills programme, were like existing programmes run by external charitable organisations which has proved to be beneficial in improving self-esteem and confidence in survivors.

- Participants also indicated a preference for the inclusion of a one-off transitional payment, highlighting how it could prevent destitution and re-exploitation following exit, which should be made available shortly before exiting the support process.
- It was emphasised that the need for personalised support is essential. For example, some survivors might be at a stage in their recovery journey where a concentration on offering skills programmes would be more beneficial, whereas others might benefit from focussing more on wellbeing activities.
- Participants indicated that it would not be possible to rank the support options in order of importance, as they would all be needed to contribute to the well-being of survivors.

Suggested ideas for additional support

When asked for other ideas for support or aspects participants felt were missing from the suggestions, the main suggestions focused on accommodation, employment, social skills, and wellbeing activities, which have been listed under other questions. The following is a list of support not already recorded within the document:

- The transitional payment suggestion to include one off payment to help buy furniture.
- Yearly survivor support grant payments to all survivors within the support services.
- Additional support with travel expenses as a way of allowing more choice and access to activities and improving regional travel options.
- Opportunities for survivors to directly input expertise, experience, and advice on a regular basis.
- The opportunity to work with educational institutions, such as Universities, and be actively involved in their Modern Slavery research.
- Digital devices for survivors to allow access to online services.

Future of Victim Support

The feedback gathered at the sessions has been collated and is being considered in the Government's policy development for the future contract. The Home Office are in the early stages of policy development for the new victim support contract and have stated that they cannot make any assurances at this stage, and that all or specific areas of feedback will be taken forward as all ideas have to be considered against a range of factors.

The Human Trafficking Foundation appreciate the Home Office holding this consultation and look forward to continued engagement from the Government with people with lived experience of modern slavery when considering future policy in this area.