

Anticipating Exploitation

A Futures Based Analysis



Foreword by Eleanor Lyons, Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner



Ten years ago, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was hailed as world-leading - a moment of political unity in the face of a profound injustice. It signalled the United Kingdom's determination to confront exploitation in all its forms. It has made a difference: over the past decade, frontline organisations have supported thousands of victims to escape abuse and begin rebuilding their lives.

But the uncomfortable truth is this: modern slavery has not receded, it has grown. A decade on, the scale of the problem is greater than ever. Referrals into the National Referral Mechanism reached 23,411 in 2025 - the highest number on record, and a 22% increase in a single year. This is not simply better detection. It reflects a crime that is expanding, adapting, and embedding itself more deeply into the fabric of everyday life.

Modern slavery is happening in homes, businesses, and communities across the country. It appears in shocking cases that briefly make headlines but then fade quickly from collective consciousness. But the harm continues. Children are exploited in county lines drug networks, workers are trapped in brutal conditions across supply chains, and vulnerable people coerced into lives of fear, debt, and control.

Despite it happening on our shores too many people still see modern slavery as something that happens elsewhere to someone else. That misconception allows exploitation to continue in plain sight. Without widespread public awareness, even the strongest laws will struggle to deliver real-world impact.

The forces driving this crime remain, and in some ways intensifying. Poverty, global instability, conflict, displacement of people, and the breakdown of safe migration routes are creating a growing pipeline of vulnerability that traffickers are quick to exploit. Where governance collapses and the rule of law weakens it means

exploitation can flourish and without sustained investment in stabilisation and protection these conditions endure.

Our response has also struggled to keep pace with the rapid evolution of technology. Artificial intelligence and digital platforms are transforming how traffickers identify, recruit, and control victims at scale. The rise of AI-enabled scams, deepfakes, synthetic identities, and new forms of digital labour exploitation are lowering barriers to entry for criminals, expanding the pool of victims, and making exploitation harder to detect. These tools have become a force multiplier for criminal networks, while the systems designed to stop them lag.

This is clear in online-enabled sexual exploitation. Recruitment, grooming, and control has shifted onto digital platforms, offenders are operating with greater anonymity, scale, and reach. Social media, encrypted services, and commercial platforms are being used to traffic and exploit victims, alongside emerging patterns such as online grooming, the use of short-term accommodation as pop-up brothels, and coercion facilitated by drugs. Sexual exploitation of UK girls has risen 54% in the last five years. As exploitation moves into less visible digital spaces, detection and enforcement is more difficult.

At home, economic pressures are reshaping the risk. Modern slavery is no longer predominantly a crime affecting people trafficked from overseas. UK nationals are now the highest proportion of victims of modern slavery. Rising living costs, debt, and insecure work are creating conditions in which exploitation can take hold within daily life across sectors that millions rely on every day.

These trends point to a stark conclusion: the current response is no longer sufficient. What is required now is not incremental change, but a step change, a whole-system response that matches the scale of the threat: coordinated across government and rooted in prevention as much as prosecution of perpetrators.

The UK still can lead if it acts now. Ten years on, the question is no longer whether we recognise modern slavery as a serious crime. It is whether we are prepared to act with the urgency and ambition that the scale of the problem now demands.

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Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
Modern slavery	An umbrella term encompassing, but not limited to slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking. Its victims are unable to leave their situation of exploitation, often controlled by threats, punishment, violence, coercion, grooming and deception.
Exploitation	The act of controlling or coercing a person into forced labour, servitude, or other abusive situations.
Human trafficking	Involves three key components: act (recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring, or receipt), means (threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability), and purpose (exploitation). Exploitation includes sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude, forced criminality, and organ removal.
A threat	Any emerging or existing condition, trend, actor, or practice that increases the likelihood, scale, or severity of exploitation and harms vulnerable individuals or groups, directly or indirectly.
A 'new' threat	A threat that is novel in nature and have not previously been recognised, monitored, or conceptualised within the existing risk landscape.
An 'existing' threat	A threat that is already recognised and understood within the current modern slavery and human trafficking landscape, with established patterns of occurrence and impact, which may increase over the next 10 years.
An 'emerging' threat	A threat that exists in some form today at a low level but is increasing in likelihood, impact, visibility, or systemic relevance, and is progressing towards becoming significant future risk.
A scenario	A plausible but extreme narrative describing how the future could develop.
Backcasting	Backcasting is a method that starts with a defined preferred future and works backwards to identify the steps required to reach it from the present.
A mitigation	Any control, measure, or action that reduces the likelihood or impact of a threat.

Executive Summary

This report presents a futures-based assessment of the critical threats likely to shape the prevalence and nature of MSHT through to 2036. Drawing on participatory futures methods and insights from over 50 stakeholders, including individuals with lived experience, the analysis identifies emerging drivers and forms of exploitation and assesses how the threat may evolve over the next decade.¹ While the future cannot be predicted with certainty, the scenarios developed through this work reveal clear and consistent patterns that warrant strategic attention now.

To support this work, we used a recognised government approach for thinking ahead and planning for uncertainty, developed by the Government Office for Science. We gathered evidence through surveys and a series of workshops where people from different backgrounds worked through risks together, compared different views, and challenged assumptions. This helped make sure the findings were based on evidence, were openly tested, and reflected shared judgement rather than the views of any one organisation or data source.

- **MSHT is likely to become increasingly adaptive, transnational, and embedded within legitimate systems unless preventative action is taken globally.** Structural global pressures, including conflict, climate change, economic instability, and migration pressures, are expected to expand the pool of vulnerable individuals while simultaneously creating new opportunities for exploitation. In particular, global conflict and displacement will remain among the most significant long-term drivers of exploitation, increasing exposure to trafficking through weakened institutions, irregular migration pathways, and informal labour markets.
- **Technological change is expected to significantly reshape the exploitation landscape.** Artificial intelligence, digital platforms,

¹ "Drivers" are the underlying forces that increase risk or enable exploitation such as global conflict, artificial intelligence and lack of safeguarding and enforcement capacity. "Forms of exploitation" refer to how exploitation occurs in practice such as online enabled sexual exploitation.

cryptocurrencies, and encrypted communications are enabling traffickers to recruit, groom, control, and profit from victims with greater scale, speed, anonymity, and sophistication. These developments are creating new and increasingly concealed forms of exploitation, including AI-enabled fraud, online sexual exploitation and digitally mediated coercion, while also reducing barriers to entry for offenders.

- **Safeguarding and enforcement systems remain a critical strategic vulnerability in the UK.** Persistent resource constraints, fragmented multi-agency coordination, inconsistent victim identification, declining specialist expertise, and low prosecution rates continue to weaken the UK's ability to identify victims, support survivors, and disrupt offenders effectively. Without sustained investment and reform, these pressures risk creating a more permissive environment in which exploitation can persist, adapt, and become further embedded.
- **Beyond the highest impact threats, the analysis highlights an increasingly diverse and complex exploitation landscape.** Emerging risks include: immigration and visa-based exploitation, gig and hidden economy exploitation, reproductive exploitation, organ harvesting, state-enabled exploitation, and the exploitation of cognitively vulnerable adults. Collectively, these trends indicate that exploitation is becoming more varied, less visible, and increasingly integrated across labour markets, migration systems, digital ecosystems, and transnational criminal networks.
- **Listening to survivors shows where systems are failing.** People with lived experience of modern slavery often see risks and problems long before institutions do. Their experiences highlight gaps in prevention, trust, access to help and long-term support that organisations frequently miss. Many survivors said that the risks now being described as “new” were raised years ago but not acted on. This points to a failure to learn from experience, not a lack of warning. Bringing lived experience more consistently into policy and decision-making helps spot early warning signs, challenge assumptions, and stop harm from becoming routine or normalised.

- **Stopping exploitation in the long run means changing how we respond.** Lasting progress will not come from enforcement alone, especially when it focuses on responding after harm has already occurred. What is needed is a shift towards prevention and building stronger systems overall. This includes reducing the conditions that make people vulnerable, creating support systems that victims trust and can access easily, keeping law enforcement tools and intelligence up to date as criminals change their methods, and holding organisations and sectors accountable where exploitation is allowed to happen. Without this shift, there is a real risk that exploitation will not disappear, but instead become harder to detect, more digital, and more deeply embedded in everyday economic and social activity.

[A five-point action plan for anticipating exploitation and acting now.](#)

In response to the research findings, including survivor insights, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner has set out a five-point action plan for the Government to implement with the urgency and ambition that modern slavery demands:

1. **Put survivors at the centre: embed lived experience in policymaking and oversight.** Survivors expertise can help to understand and anticipate the new novel ways perpetrators are exploiting people. That's why the Government should form a National Survivor Council to inform strategy with a formal role in developing policy, strategy, training and providing system oversight.
2. **Publish and maintain a Modern Slavery Strategy that stays ahead of evolving threats.** In the international sphere – conflict, geopolitical and demographic shifts are making people more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. In the domestic sphere – inequality and poor governance coupled with emerging tech, AI and connectivity have increasingly made UK nationals vulnerable to exploitation. The Government must have a clear response to this and publish a Modern Slavery Strategy.
3. **Ending modern slavery and exploitation must be a whole-of-Government priority backed by visible political will.** New complex threats

require a joined-up approach across Government. This should be a policy area owned by a Minister attending Cabinet and accompanied by an Inter-Ministerial Group that will co-ordinate domestic and international policy to tackle modern slavery. The Government should adopt the IASC's proposals on forced labour regulations which would hold businesses to account in preventing forced labour in their supply chains.

4. **Protect survivors of exploitation and provide specialist care for child victims.** Build trusted, accessible systems that survivors actively use by ensuring survivors are not criminalised for offences committed as a result of their exploitation. Expand and fund independent advocacy including Independent Modern Slavery Advocates and Independent Child Trafficking Guardianships so survivors are supported in their recovery journey and to reduce risks of re-trafficking.

5. **Strengthen law enforcement capability to disrupt modern slavery, including technology-enabled exploitation and illicit finance.** Reverse the Government's funding cuts to modern slavery policing teams and invest in specialist investigative skills and tools, strengthen financial investigation and asset recovery, and improve data and intelligence-sharing so enforcement keeps pace with increasingly hidden and transnational offending.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) are rapidly evolving and increasingly complex crimes, shaped by digital platforms, global instability, and changing socio-economic conditions. Global estimates suggest around 50 million people were living in modern slavery in 2021². In the UK in 2025, there were 23,411 referrals of potential victims of MSHT into the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This represents a 22% increase from 2024 and is the highest annual total recorded since the NRM began in 2009.³

Preventing these crimes, protecting victims, and increasing prosecutions depend on stronger understanding, sustained awareness, and timely responses to emerging threats, supported by clear foresight in an increasingly complex and fast-changing MSHT landscape.

In response, the IASC has commissioned an independent, evidence-based strategic foresight initiative to better understand emerging MSHT risks and future scenarios. Using horizon scanning, scenario planning, and extensive expert engagement, the initiative provides a robust view of future threats. Its insights are designed to inform action today by preventing exploitation, improving identification and protection of vulnerable groups, and strengthening policy and investment decisions. This approach highlights the need for anticipatory, system-level responses that keep pace with rapidly evolving criminal methods.

This report presents a futures-based analysis of the critical threats associated with the occurrence of MSHT looking ahead 10 years to 2036. A participatory futures approach was adopted throughout this research, bringing together perspectives covering the public and third sector, alongside organisations representing survivors of MSHT and people with lived experience, ensuring that the insights reflect both institutional knowledge and the realities faced by people who have experienced exploitation.

² IOM UN Migration. (2022). Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage. United Nations. [Link](#).

³ Home Office. (2026, February 19). Modern slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2025.Gov.uk [Link](#).

The project draws on a threat identification exercise that identified 21 drivers and forms of exploitation that would contribute to the future prevalence and form of MSHT. The identified threats were then used as the basis for a futures scenario generation exercise. The scenarios are not predictions; they are plausible alternative futures that can be used to develop more resilient strategies.

The plan sets out practical, coordinated actions to reduce vulnerability, strengthen safeguarding, disrupt adaptive exploitation, shift accountability onto enabling systems and build long-term resilience, showing how action taken now can prevent higher-risk futures from taking hold.

Methodology

This study used a structured, evidence-based futures methodology to explore new and emerging threats associated with MSHT in the UK over the next ten years, and to identify implications and potential mitigations.

Futures is a structured method for exploring complex, evolving threats to improve decisions today. As outlined in the UK Government Futures Toolkit⁴, it focuses not on predicting a single outcome but on examining plausible developments, uncertainties, and drivers of change. This helps organisations challenge assumptions, broaden perspectives, and build resilience, supporting more adaptable and forward-looking policy and strategy.

The approach combined horizon scanning, expert elicitation, scenario development and backcasting, supported by extensive stakeholder and lived experience engagement. The work was delivered independently by Decision Analysis Services (DAS) to ensure analytical rigour, confidentiality and space for open discussion of sensitive issues.

Key question

The research was structured around a single focal question which defined the scope and boundaries of the futures exercise:

What are the new and emerging threats, and their potential mitigations, associated with modern slavery, exploitation and human trafficking?

The following methodology was designed to be participatory and inclusive, incorporating perspectives from across 50 organisations including statutory agencies, civil society, subject-matter experts and people with lived experience of exploitation.

⁴. UK Government Office for Science (2023) Futures toolkit for policymakers and analysts. London: GOV.UK. [Link](#)

Horizon scanning and evidence review

An initial horizon scanning phase identified existing, emerging and weak-signal drivers shaping the MSHT threat landscape. This combined desk-based review of academic literature, policy and intelligence reports, and open-source media with AI-enabled scanning using DAS' Intelligent Futures toolset. Evidence was analysed using a PESTLE framework to ensure systematic coverage of political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental drivers. This phase produced an evidence base to inform stakeholder engagement and subsequent analysis.

Delphi questionnaire

A two-stage Delphi questionnaire was used to gather expert judgement on new and emerging drivers and forms of MSHT. Participants were drawn from across government, law enforcement, civil society, frontline services, academia and lived experience advisory networks. In Stage One, participants identified drivers and types of exploitation and assessed their perceived impact, likelihood and urgency. In Stage Two, participants reviewed aggregated results and refined assessments, enabling convergence of views while preserving anonymity. Outputs were consolidated into 21 threats grouped across five thematic areas.

Workshops

A five-stage workshop programme was used to translate the identified threats into structured futures insights. The process began by bringing experts and stakeholders together to identify the most impactful and uncertain drivers and forms of change, which formed the basis for the future scenarios.

Scenarios are evidence-based narratives describing how the future might unfold. Rather than forecasts, they are built around key uncertainties to help decision-makers test strategies, identify risks and opportunities, and strengthen preparedness. Considering multiple plausible futures enables policies that remain effective under a range of conditions.

These scenarios were then validated and elaborated to ensure they were plausible, internally consistent and relevant to the UK context. Participants subsequently worked backwards from a preferred future to identify the system, policy and

Five stage workshop programme

practice changes needed to achieve it. The implications, barriers and enablers associated with each scenario were then explored, including how future risks may affect different population groups.

The process concluded with a review by representatives from 13 Lived Experience Advisory Panels, ensuring that emerging themes and potential drivers and forms of exploitation were grounded in lived realities and tested against real-world experience.

Analysis and Synthesis

Findings from all stages were triangulated and synthesised to produce a consolidated threat framework, five future scenarios, a backcasting pathway and cross-cutting insights for policy and practice. Ethical considerations, safeguarding principles and survivor-informed perspectives were embedded throughout to ensure responsible and meaningful analysis.



Chapter 2: Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking in the UK: Current Status

Modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) in the UK are the product of interacting pressures that shape who is vulnerable, where harm occurs, and how effectively it is addressed. Rather than being driven by isolated factors, exploitation develops through the interaction of global events, domestic conditions, and system capacity.

Armed conflict is a persistent feature of the international landscape. Ongoing wars across the world are driving large-scale displacement and putting pressure on international protection systems.⁵ For many people, journeys to safety are long, fragmented, and uncertain. By the time individuals reach the UK, they may already be carrying debt, lacking legal clarity, and disconnected from support networks. These conditions do not cause exploitation on their own, but they significantly increase exposure to it.

Alongside this, climate and environmental pressures are reinforcing patterns of displacement. Record-breaking extreme weather events are affecting already fragile regions, contributing to the movement of people who may then enter similar pathways of risk.⁶ While the UK is less directly affected, domestic events such as the extreme heat and drought conditions seen in 2025 highlight how environmental stress can also place pressure on infrastructure and the cost of living, indirectly shaping vulnerability.

Within the UK, economic pressure is a key part of the picture. Many households continue to struggle with the cost of essentials, and young people in particular are facing rising unemployment.⁷ Although wages have increased in nominal terms, this has not always translated into real improvements, for example, due to inflation. In this environment, people may accept insecure or informal work arrangements,

⁵ World Economic Forum (2026) *The Global Risks Report 2026*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. Available at: [Global Risks Report 2026](#) (Accessed: 24 April 2026).

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2025) *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024*. Geneva: UNHCR. Available at: [UNHCR Global Trends Report](#)

⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) *UK Poverty Report 2025*. York: JRF. Office for National Statistics (2026) *Labour market overview, UK*. London: ONS.

sometimes without full awareness of the risks. Exploitation often develops gradually in these contexts, where poor conditions escalate into coercion, debt, or control. This makes modern slavery less visible and harder to distinguish from other forms of labour market abuse.

At the same time, the UK's response systems are becoming more active, but also more stretched. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which identifies and supports potential victims, has seen record numbers of referrals in recent years.⁸ However, increased demand has created pressure within the system, including delays and inconsistent decision-making.⁹ While coordination between agencies is improving, gaps remain, particularly in prevention and data.

Technology is also changing how exploitation operates. Recruitment increasingly happens online, while financial flows linked to exploitation can be harder to trace due to the use of digital payment systems and cryptocurrencies. This does not replace traditional forms of trafficking but adds another layer, making some forms of exploitation more dispersed and less visible.

Public awareness of MSHT is improving, but understanding remains uneven. Exploitation is often hidden in everyday sectors and may not match common perceptions of trafficking. This can affect both identification and reporting, particularly where exploitation overlaps with informal or low-paid work. A further challenge lies in victim engagement. Not everyone identified as a potential victim chooses to enter or remain within formal support systems, and some may not be recognised at early stages.¹⁰

The picture in the UK today is of a system shaped by the convergence of multiple pressures. Global conflict and climate pressures influence vulnerability, domestic economic conditions shape risk, and institutional capacity determines outcomes. While there has been progress in awareness and coordination, underlying drivers remain, meaning MSHT continues to evolve.

⁸ Home Office (2026) *Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK*. Available at: [NRM statistics collection](#)

⁹ Refugee Council (2025) *The National Referral Mechanism: Policy and practice review*. London: Refugee Council.

¹⁰ Hope for Justice (2025) *Victim identification and support review*. Manchester: Hope for Justice

Chapter 3: Future Trends

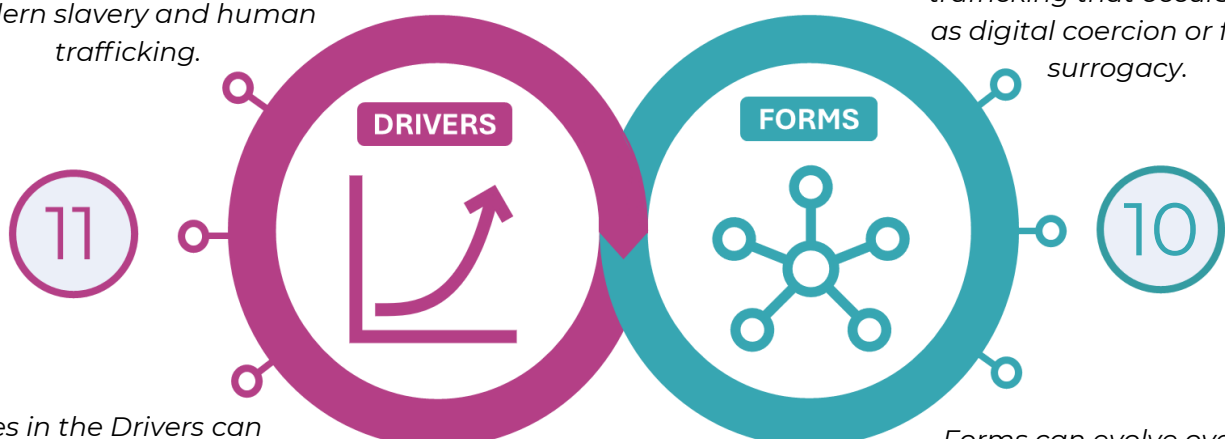
A Threat is any emerging or existing condition, trend, actor, or practice that increases the likelihood, scale, or severity of exploitation and harms vulnerable individuals or groups, directly or indirectly, if left unmitigated.

New threats are entirely novel and not previously recognised within the MSHT risk landscape, emerging threats already exist at low levels but are increasing in likelihood, impact, or visibility, and existing threats are well understood but may intensify over the next 10 years. The 21 threats in this section were identified through a two-stage Delphi process, in which experts iteratively refined their views to build consensus. The threats outlined reflect the views and professional judgements of questionnaire respondents. They do not necessarily represent established fact or the formal position of any organisation. Many of these threats are already present but are growing because they are not being effectively prevented with their evolution driven by insufficient resulting in increasingly adaptive and complex forms of exploitation. Some threats are well-evidenced, while others represent early-stage or emerging risks that warrant further monitoring.

An **underlying force** or condition that shapes, influences, or increases the likelihood of modern slavery and human trafficking.

CATEGORY

A **specific type** of modern slavery and human trafficking that occurs, such as digital coercion or forced surrogacy.



Changes in the Drivers can lead to changes to the Forms. Drivers may overlap in how they impact upon a form, and a single driver may impact several forms

Forms can evolve over time widening the scope of victims affected and the mitigations required.

The Threats

The identified threats have been grouped into five themes to reflect the systems and conditions that shape exploitation, rather than treating risks as isolated issues. It reflects stakeholder insight that effective responses must address not only individual forms of exploitation, but the wider environments that allow them to develop, adapt and persist.



Global Context – Social, environmental, and geopolitical conditions outside the UK that influence the risk of exploitation.



Technology and Finance – Use of digital tools, online platforms, and financial mechanisms in recruitment, control, or exploitation.



Labour and Livelihoods – Economic pressures, market shocks, and demand/supply conditions that increase the risk of exploitation.



Exploitation and Control – Organised systems of exploitation and methods used to dominate, manipulate, or trap victims.



Governance and Safeguards – Legal frameworks, institutional capacity, enforcement systems, and societal norms that shape the risk landscape.

Global Context

VH	Global Conflict
H	Climate Induced Displacement
H	Immigration & Status-based Exploitation
H	Geopolitical/Changes in Attitudes

Technology & Finance

VH	AI-enabled Recruitment of Victims
VH	Growing Online-enabled Sexual Exploitation
H	Cybercrime & Digital Coercion
M	Cryptocurrencies to Facilitate MSHT
M	Gig Economy & Delivery Platforms

Governance & Safeguards

VH	Safeguarding & Enforcement Capacity Constraints
H	Legislative & Regulatory Gaps
H	Institutional Trust Deficits & Safeguarding Risk



Impact Score

VH	Very High
H	High
M	Moderate

Labour & Livelihoods

H	Demographic Change
H	Economic Pressures & Exploitation
H	Demand Shock-induced Labour Exploitation

Exploitation & Control

VH	International State-enabled Exploitation & Illicit Systems
H	Hidden-economy Labour Exploitation
H	Exploitation of Those with Cognitive Vulnerabilities
H	Evolution & Entrenchment of "County Lines" Strategies
M	Forced Surrogacy & Egg Harvesting
M	Organ Harvesting

Very High Impact Threats

Global conflict

Global conflict will remain a high impact driver of MSHT. As conflict intensifies and displacement accelerates, protective systems are likely to weaken further, increasing vulnerability to exploitation both during movement and in destination countries, including the UK. Emerging threats include the embedding of MSHT within conflict economies, the expansion of exploitation along migration routes, and the growing use of technology to obscure and scale trafficking activities. These developments mean exploitation becomes more adaptive, transnational, and less visible. As a result, risks are no longer confined to conflict zones but increasingly manifest in destination countries, including the UK.

Armed conflict and high-intensity warfare create conditions in which exploitation becomes concealable and difficult to prevent. The Russia-Ukraine war for example illustrates how contemporary war intensifies these dynamics by augmenting conventional fighting with AI-assisted tools, drones and cyberattacks which blur the line between strictly civilian and military spaces, in doing so exposing wider populations to displacement and subsequent harm.

Previous conflicts in similar environments highlight how this trend coincides with modern slavery practices. Analysis of the Contemporary Slavery in Armed Conflict (CSAC) dataset shows that between 1989 and 2016, 87% of armed conflicts involved the use of child soldiers, with other forms of slavery such as forced labour, sexual exploitation, and trafficking also commonly present.¹¹ Those who flee from the violence often travel through unfamiliar regions unprotected and with few resources. Some seek refuge in countries like the UK which, much like the warring nations themselves, has pressure placed on its state and humanitarian institutions which weakens the mechanisms used to identify victims and respond to examples of slavery and trafficking.

¹¹ Bales, K., Datta, M.N. and Smith, A. (2022) 'Slavery and war are tightly connected – but we had no idea just how much until we crunched the data', The Conversation, 22 August. [Link](#)

The specific nature of reported exploitation in these settings varies but recurring trends have emerged. Sexual violence is deployed as a deliberate warfare tactic, and children may be coerced into support or outright combat roles. Civilian households lose income and access to necessities while the prevalence of practices including debt-bondage and forced labour is highly likely to increase.^{12 13}

Victims' lack of formal identification and official documentation is another structural factor that a 2024 report by Freedom Fund estimated impacts 850 million people globally. Legal protections, including those protecting employment, and public services become inaccessible without identity papers. Many who are trafficked therefore end up working in informal or unregulated sectors with little oversight and exploitative practices that are easily concealed from authorities.¹⁴

Taking the long-term view, global conflict is likely to become more complex, persistent, and ambiguous, with blurred boundaries between war and peace and greater use of hybrid methods across cyber, space, economic, and information domains. It will be increasingly driven by systemic pressures, such as climate change, resource competition, and technological change, raising the risk of escalation and miscalculation in a more uncertain world.¹⁵

The Use of Artificial Intelligence

The use of artificial intelligence by traffickers and organised criminals is expected to be a significantly high impact driver of the scale and sophistication of MSHT. As AI tools become more accessible, offenders may increasingly exploit them to identify, target, and deceive vulnerable individuals at scale, lowering barriers to recruitment and accelerating the speed at which exploitation occurs. Emerging threats include the use of AI to scale and professionalise exploitation, enabling traffickers to recruit, groom, and control victims with greater speed, precision, and believability. This includes the rise of AI-enabled scam operations, the use of deepfakes and synthetic identities, and the emergence of new forms of digital labour exploitation such as data

¹² Anti-Slavery International. (2025, August 21). *Anti-Slavery International is drawing a red line for Gaza*. [Link](#)

¹³ Samaritan's Purse. (2025, June 20). *World Refugee Day 2025 - Standing Against Trafficking*. [Link](#)

¹⁴ Freedom Fund. (2024, September 9). *No identity, no protection: How lack of identity documents drives exploitation and modern slavery*. [Link](#)

¹⁵ MOD. (2024). *Global Strategic Trends: Out to 2055*. London: UK Ministry of Defence. [Link](#)

labelling and online scamming. These developments are lowering barriers to entry, expanding the pool of potential victims, and creating more complex and less detectable forms of modern slavery.

International reporting increasingly indicates that the growing availability of generative AI tools is reshaping the landscape of exploitation and abuse. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime identify generative AI as a significant enabler of human trafficking, fraud and forced scam operations. Evidence documents victims trafficked into scam compounds across Southeast Asia, as well as UK victims targeted through AI-generated romance scams, phishing campaigns and deepfake-enabled impersonation used for intimidation and financial fraud.¹⁶ The Global Anti-Scam Alliance estimated UK scam losses at £11.4 billion in 2024, with AI tools used to produce realistic job adverts and fraudulent communications.¹⁷ Frontline agencies report cases involving AI-generated documentation and convincing messaging used in exploitation.¹⁸

Parallel concerns have emerged in the context of labour. The backbone of the development process behind many AI tools is linked to exploitative conditions. Reports from AI data-labelling hubs, many in Kenya, describe severe working conditions characterised by observers as an example of “modern-day slavery”.¹⁹ Algorithmic management and automation can also increase worker vulnerability while reducing transparency and accountability. Gig-economy platforms have been shown to use AI to allocate tasks, monitor performance and determine pay. These are, in some cases, accompanied by constant surveillance and automated penalty systems. Further cases involving the manipulation of data, sometimes for forged documentation and automated communications, demonstrate the potential for the use of AI tools in tactics to obscure labour exploitation, particularly in the UK care sector. Law enforcement and academic reports note the growing

¹⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe & Bali Process RSO (2024), *New Frontiers: The Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence to Facilitate Trafficking in Persons* Vienna: OSCE. Published 1 November 202

¹⁷ Rogers, S. (2024, November 25). *Scammers Steal £11.4 Billion from Britons in 1 Year as 71% Fail to Report Scams - State of Scams in the United Kingdom 2024*. [Link](#). Global Anti-Scam Alliance.

¹⁸ Global Anti-Scam Alliance and Cifas (2024) *The State of Scams in the United Kingdom 2024*. [Link](#) United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud, Underground Banking, and Technological Innovation*. Bangkok: UNODC.

¹⁹ Business and Human Rights Centre. (2025, June 16). *Australia: Kenyan data labellers make modern slavery allegations against AI company Appen*. [Link](#).

use of social media, encrypted messaging, and AI-generated profiles to recruit and control victims.

This technology has simultaneous potential for harm via the generation of imagery, audio and video footage depicting individuals, including children, in explicit situations.^{20 21} The rapid development of, and ease of access to, generative content platforms has caused an extreme rise in the production of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The Deputy Assistant Director of the USA Homeland Security Investigations Cyber Crimes reported that in the first 6 months of 2025, reports of child exploitation using generative AI rose by 600% compared to the previous two years. This constitutes roughly 500,000 reports in 6 months, the sheer volume making substantial investigations and arrests practically impossible.²²

Despite the efforts of tech developers, many apps and platforms use open-source models and lack sufficient moderation to prevent the production of CSAM. While some generative models do not produce images of known victims, in many cases users are able to create abusive sexual content depicting real people.²³

In 2026, American social media platform X faced widespread scrutiny after attention was brought to its AI chatbot service “Grok” which allowed users to generate sexualised images of children. It has been argued that the system was structurally designed with weaker guardrails than other similar products, making the process to produce exploitative material easy and difficult to enforce against.²⁴

AI capabilities are advancing rapidly, driven by a small number of powerful technology companies, with significant uncertainty around what the most advanced models will be capable of by 2030 including who will own them, how safe they will be. While faster development promises greater benefits in productivity and scientific breakthroughs, the pace of change risks outstripping regulatory

²⁰ Internet Watch Foundation. (2026). *AI-Generated Child Sexual Abuse: 2026 Report on Trends, Data & Human Impact*. Internet Watch Foundation. [Link](#).

²¹ NSPCC. (2025, January). *Viewing Generative AI and children’s safety in the round*. [Link](#)

²² NBC News, “*The AI child exploitation crisis is here*”, published 28 February 2026 [Link](#)

²³ Horvath, B. (2026, February 26). *The AI child exploitation crisis is here*. [Link](#). NBC News.

²⁴ Dedorczyk, D. F. (2026, January 14). *Expert Comment: Chatbot-driven sexual abuse? The Grok case is just the tip of the iceberg*. [Link](#). University of Oxford.

mechanisms, and the interactions between these uncertainties could play out in ways that are simply impossible to predict.

Online-enabled Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation enabled by digital platforms and online technologies also scored very high on the impact scoring. As recruitment, advertising, and control continue to move online, exploiters are expected to benefit from greater anonymity, scalability, and reach, while weak regulation and sustained demand for sexual services continue to lower barriers to abuse. Emerging threats include the rapid digitisation of sexual exploitation, with online platforms enabling more anonymous, scalable, and transnational recruitment and control.

Evidence shows that sexual exploitation of vulnerable individuals is increasingly facilitated by online platforms, weak regulation and high demand for sexual services. In 2026, the National Crime Agency (NCA) reported that around 1,000 child sexual abuse suspects are now arrested each month, with the number of children safeguarded rising by approximately 50 per cent over the past five years, reflecting both increased identification and a genuine growth in harm.²⁵ The NCA assesses that this rise is being driven by technology, including online forums that normalise the viewing of child sexual abuse material and gradually radicalise offenders. It reports that offenders commonly use mainstream internet platforms to identify and groom children, while coordinating abuse and sharing material via dark web services, exploiting secrecy and encryption. The agency has publicly expressed concern that current platform safeguards do not adequately prevent abuse or disrupt offender networks at scale.^{26 27}

Commercial sex websites and social media platforms facilitate the recruitment, advertising, and control of exploited individuals, including women trafficked

²⁵ National Crime Agency (2026) *Child sexual abuse is increasing in severity, complexity and accessibility, say policing leads.* [Link](#)

²⁶ Dodd, V. (2026, February 17). *Police arresting 1,000 paedophile suspects a month across UK.* [Link](#) from The Guardian.

²⁷ National Crime Agency (2026) *National Strategic Assessment 2026.* [Link](#)

through online relationships or misrepresentation, with professional enablers arranging accommodation and logistics.

In February 2026, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner published a report centred on adult service websites that can heighten the exploitation that threatens sex-workers. Data from 12 adult services platforms and interviews with 12 victims identified that many women face exploitation, coercion and trafficking through the platforms. Survivors described how some women are fully controlled by pimps or gangs who manage their online profiles and keep their earnings. Others initially felt in control but became increasingly exploited over time. An analysis of content displayed on the sites showed at least 3 indicators of exploitation or trafficking occurred in 59% of advertisements.²⁸

International and UK evidence indicates that criminalisation or poorly implemented legislative changes can shift exploitative practices into less visible and more dangerous spaces rather than reducing harm. When enforcement or regulation focuses on suppressing visibility, exploitation is often displaced online, indoors or into transient locations, increasing risks of violence, coercion and reduced detection. Demand for sexual services remains high and is now largely concentrated on digital platforms, which can drive trafficking, scale exploitation and generate profit for third parties. Frontline services report rising numbers of women seeking support to exit sexually exploitative environments, alongside emerging patterns such as the use of short-term lets as flexible exploitation sites, online-initiated grooming relationships and substance-enabled coercion in specific communities.²⁹ Without coordinated policy, regulation and survivor-centred support, legislative shifts risk further embedding and expanding these forms of exploitation rather than preventing them.

²⁸ Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (Lyons, E.) (2026) Behind the Profile: Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking through Adult Services Websites. London: Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. [Link](#)

²⁹ World Health Organization (2024) *Violence against sex workers: evidence and international standards*. Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. Geneva: WHO. [Link](#)

Safeguarding and enforcement capacity

Safeguarding and enforcement capacity is likely to remain a critical factor shaping the future MSHT threat. If pressures on funding, specialist skills and coordination between organisations continue, authorities and support services will struggle to identify victims, protect survivors and bring offenders to justice. Gaps are already emerging, including fewer trained specialists, inconsistent training, and weaker coordination across agencies. When modern slavery is treated mainly as an immigration issue, victims are less likely to come forward or trust the system. Together, these pressures risk creating an environment where exploitation is easier to sustain, harder to detect, and able to adapt over time.

Reports indicate that there are constraints to the victim safeguarding and crime enforcement system within the UK's response to modern slavery. Namely, a low rate of conviction, underuse of the available legal powers and perpetual weakness is the identification of victims by statutory first responders. Although all 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales have experienced real-terms increases in overall funding since the financial year ending March 2016, the scale and operational impact of these increases varies significantly between police force areas.³⁰ This variation reflects differences in the allocation of central government grant funding and the reliance on locally raised Council Tax precepts, which advantage some force areas while constraining others. Consequently, increases in headline funding have not translated evenly into enhanced specialist capability.

Evidence suggests that lower-visibility threats, including modern slavery and human trafficking, have been deprioritised within some forces, leading to inconsistent levels of investigative capacity and victim safeguarding.^{31 32} These inconsistencies may get worse as the Home Office have announced the withdrawal of dedicated MSHT funding streams to policing, including defunding the modern slavery arm of the Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Unit. This

³⁰ Home Office (2025) Police funding for England and Wales 2015 to 2026. London: Home Office. [Link](#)

³¹ Institute for Government (2025) Performance Tracker: Police. London: IfG. [Link](#)

³² Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2025) Policing response to modern slavery: how has it changed in the last 10 years? London: IASC.

funding cut will likely weaken national capability to prosecute traffickers and limits opportunities for proactive prevention opportunities through training and toolkits.

At the national level, the National Crime Agency (NCA) leads the UK's response to serious and organised crime, with eradicating modern slavery and human trafficking designated as one of its highest priorities. The Agency's work on this threat is led by the Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU), which operates in partnership with UK police forces and international counterparts to pursue offenders, safeguard victims, and prevent exploitation in source countries.³³ However, the effectiveness of this model remains dependent on sustained investment and prioritisation across the wider policing system.

Findings from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (MSPEC), corroborate the systemic inconsistencies in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). These include, but are not limited to, non-standardised and uneven referral practices across different groups, a high rate of negative decisions and repeated failures by police and UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) to recognise or respond appropriately to modern slavery indicators.³⁴

Meanwhile, intelligence data generated through the Modern Slavery Helpline is seldom acted upon by law enforcement agencies, all while recent legislative changes have reduced victims' access to protections and added additional strain to already stretched systems.³⁵ Resource constraints remain a persistent challenge in policing, survivor support and care or charity services. This is compounded by a reduction in international funding and diminished specialist leadership which continues to undermine effective prevention, victim support, and accountability for perpetrators.

These systemic resourcing issues are present at the local level. A 2025 report by Middlesex University concluded that less than half of local authorities in the UK have comprehensive training programmes to tackle modern slavery. Working with

³³ National Crime Agency. (n.d.). *What We Do: Modern slavery and human trafficking*. [Link](#) from National Crime Agency.

³⁴ Modern Slavery & Human Rights PEC. (2025, November 6). *Statistical analysis of the National Referral Mechanism*. [Link](#) from Modern Slavery & Human Rights PEC:

³⁵ Unseen UK. (2024). *Unseen Helpline Annual Assessment 2024*. Unseen UK. Retrieved March 30, 2026

the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, associated with Anti-Slavery International, researchers found that many councils did not have the necessary resources for thorough supply chain assessment, allowing exploitative contractors to slip through the cracks. The report highlights issues that include a lack of awareness on the topic, poor training, failure to understand 'first responder' responsibilities, poor operational processes for identifying and supporting survivors as well as a strong trend of miscommunication and lack of trust in the victim / supporter relationship.³⁶

³⁶ Middlesex University London. (2025, May 27). *Local authorities lack training to tackle modern slavery - new MDX report finds*. Retrieved from Middlesex University London

High and Moderate Threats by Category

Global context



Geopolitical shifts and the erosion of human rights norms are likely to become an increasingly significant enabler of MSHT. Hostile political narratives globally can weaken rights-based protections and vulnerable populations may face growing barriers to reporting abuse or accessing support, creating conditions in which exploitation can flourish with reduced scrutiny.

The Global Slavery Index 2023 warns that the UK's anti-slavery response relies heavily on international cooperation - that is increasingly undermined by a decline in shared rights. The International Organization for Migration (2024)³⁷ reports a rise in highly irregular immigration driven by conflict and climate change which contributes to a growing uncertainty that UK stakeholders report about future government commitment. Concerns are also emerging about how victims of exploitation are treated within the UK's support system. The UK-based charity Unseen UK has reported what it describes as a "growing culture of disbelief" toward victims of slavery and trafficking. As a result, victims are disappearing from support systems while criminal networks continue operating. The report also identifies entrenched distrust toward specific nationalities, especially Albanians. In this case, a systemic bias has been created in which survivors' credibility is questioned based solely on their nationality.³⁸

Developments in the corporate and regulatory sphere have raised concerns about the prioritisation of economic growth over human rights protections. In April 2025, fast-fashion company Shein received approval from the Financial Conduct Authority to pursue a listing on the London Stock Exchange. The Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner warned the UK Government and FCA in 2024 that permitting the listing could signal a shift of priorities in favour of economic

³⁷ International Organization for Migration. (2024). *World Migration Report 2024*. International Organization for Migration.

³⁸ Unseen UK. (2026, January 14). *UK's modern slavery response weakened by immigration legislation*. [Link](#)

development at the expense of human rights. The exploitative labour practices associated with fast-fashion supply chains are widely documented across the sector. The failure of the government to compel companies into human rights due diligence suggests that further disregard and profiting from forced labour could persist.

Looking ahead, rising geopolitical instability and declining institutional trust could push more people into precarious and informal labour, while disinformation and anti-migrant narratives may further normalise exploitation and conceal harm. Emerging indications of closer alignment between organised crime and political or state actors suggest a future threat that is more adaptive, transnational, and resistant to disruption. A deteriorating geopolitical environment, coupled with the erosion of protective measures and the escalating tide of anti-immigrant sentiment, is increasing the risks for individuals susceptible to exploitation. A 2023 report by Chatham House, and a report by the United Nations Human Rights Council highlight a trend of states deprioritising international human rights obligations. As a result, states are issuing rollbacks on labour and migrant protections.^{39 40}

Climate-induced displacement is expected to become an increasingly significant driver of MSHT. Climate shocks are expected to both heighten vulnerability and reshape labour conditions, embedding exploitation risks within global supply chains through factors such as heat stress, informalisation of work, and workforce mobility. These dynamics point to a future threat that is more systemic, less visible, and increasingly embedded across borders rather than confined to source countries alone.

Research highlights that marginalised communities experience the most severe impacts of climate change, and that climate-induced mobility can both force movement and trap people in place due to poverty or structural barriers, increasing exposure to exploitation. Evidence from international organisations identifies

³⁹ Griffiths, D. (2023, September 14). *Renewing human rights*. [Link](#)

⁴⁰ United Nations. (2025). *Internal displacement in the context of organized criminal activity*. United Nations.

climate change as a structural driver of modern slavery, with environmental shocks correlating to exploitation across supply chains and migration routes.^{41 42 43 44}

Climate change is also interfacing with broader economic pressures that can exacerbate exploitation risk. Research on climate finance by the Washington Center for Human Rights shows that countries most exposed to environmental shocks face higher borrowing costs in international markets.⁴⁵ As a result, these countries pay higher interest rates when taking on debt amounting to an estimated additional \$20 billion (US equivalent) for those with the highest exposure. This financial burden increases the likelihood of economic instability and crisis, which can in turn intensify cycles of poverty and labour exploitation.

Evidence from the United Nations, presented by the OCCRP, suggests that large criminal networks actively target populations affected by environmental degradation and displacement.⁴⁶ Individuals who have lost livelihoods or been forced to migrate are often more susceptible to deceptive recruitment practices, debt bondage, and coercive labour arrangements.

Displacement and distressed mobility both heighten the risk-factor of MSHT in a population. There is a noted probability of greater forced labour prominence in sectors like agriculture, food production, construction, mining, and brick kilns driven by climate change, and its impacts on the environment are linked to increased exploitation risks, particularly where people migrate without adequate legal or social protections.

⁴¹ International Organization for Migration. (2024). *Global Appeal 2024: Spotlight Climate and Migration*.

⁴² Anti-slavery International. (2023). *The costs of the climate crisis*. Anti-slavery International. [Link](#)

⁴³ United Nations Office at Geneva. (2024, December 11). *Poverty, conflict and climate fuel spike in trafficking victims: UN report*. [Link](#)

⁴⁴ Walk Free. (2025, July 18). *UN 2030 goal to end modern slavery at risk of being missed as exploitation risks rise*. [Link](#)

⁴⁵ Washington Center for Human Rights. (2025, December 3). *Unveiling Modern Slavery: Hidden \$236 Billion Human Cost of Forced Labor Worldwide*. [Link](#)

⁴⁶ Shenawy, M. (2025, December 2). *UN Sounds Alarm on Expanding Modern Slavery*. [Link](#), from Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

Immigration and status-based exploitation is likely to intensify as a form of MSHT risk. As immigration systems, visa conditions, and access to welfare become more restrictive or complex, these mechanisms may increasingly be used to control, coerce, or profit from individuals, leaving those with precarious status reluctant to report abuse or seek help.

Looking ahead, exploitation is expected to become more deeply embedded within immigration, visa, and welfare systems themselves. The expansion of tied and restrictive visas, debt from fees or sponsorship costs, and the use of ostensibly legitimate recruitment and professional structures point to a future threat that is more sophisticated, concealed, and difficult to detect.

Technology & Finance



The increasing use of cryptocurrencies and illicit finance is likely to further enable MSHT. As digital currencies facilitate fast, borderless transfers with limited identifying information, they are expected to reduce financial friction for traffickers and weaken the effectiveness of traditional financial oversight and intelligence mechanisms. Emerging threats include

the integration of cryptocurrencies into trafficking models, allowing perpetrators to move and conceal funds with greater speed, anonymity, and complexity. Crypto is increasingly used not only for laundering profits but also for controlling victims and facilitating transactions across borders. The use of mixers, decentralised exchanges, and multiple wallets is creating more fragmented and harder-to-trace financial systems, reducing visibility for UK enforcement agencies.

Cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology are often lauded for their privacy features. However, research shows that this foundational principle of such tools is both what incentivises their exploitation by organised crime groups and what creates substantial challenges for law enforcement. A 2025 report by TRM Labs highlights that the pseudo-anonymity of cryptocurrencies makes tracing transactions far more difficult for authorities than monitoring traditional banking or alternative payment channels.⁴⁷

This opacity, inherent in the technology, has facilitated a dramatic rise in illicit payments. By 2025, transactions linked to suspected human trafficking services surged by 85% compared to the previous year,⁴⁸ and similarly Wired reported that the use of cryptocurrency in sales of human beings for prostitution and scam compounds nearly doubled in 2025.⁴⁹

Blockchain data shows expanding, organised criminal networks in South-East Asia that operate illicit services (such as “international escorts”, illegal online gambling

⁴⁷ TRM Labs. (2025). *2025 Crypto Crime Report*. TRM Labs.

⁴⁸ Jaupi, J. (2026, February 13). *Crypto Flows Tied to Suspected Human Trafficking Reached ‘Hundreds of Millions’ in 2025: Chainalysis*. [Link](#).

⁴⁹ Greenberg, A. (2026, 02 12). *Crypto-Funded Human Trafficking Is Exploding*. [Link](#). Wired.

and Chinese-language money laundering) tend to make payments using stablecoins designed to maintain a stable value sometimes pinned to the value of a FIAT currency. These operations funnelled at least \$16B US of funds in 2025. Other, smaller vendors that produce child sexual abuse launder their earnings with Bitcoin or privacy coins and “Instant Exchangers” that anonymously swap cryptocurrencies. These transactions were found to be smaller in size, individually, but operated within subscription-based models. Chainalysis discovered payment networks that span customers around the globe, linking them to illicit activities by groups tied to forced labour, prostitution and the sale of child pornography.^{50 51}

In late 2025, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation announced the seizure of the web domain TickMilleas(dotcom). The site was used as the core infrastructure in a transnational crypto investment network operating in Myanmar. The site’s operators have ties to Chinese organised crime syndicates and have armed support from insurgent groups like the DKBA - who have been sanctioned by the US Office of Foreign Assets Control. These scam centres are largely staffed by trafficking victims that are forced to operate them.⁵²

Crypto based crime can operate across international borders. Themis, a financial crime prevention organisation, noted the existence of dark web marketplaces where illicit services (including sex trafficking advertisements or “hitman for hire” services) are exchanged. These predominantly rely on cryptocurrencies for payment which provides a layer of anonymity for buyers and sellers operating within, or targeting, the UK. In June of 2025, an article published by MDPI detailed how perpetrators are increasingly using cryptocurrency to exert control over victims.⁵³ This involves forcing victims to set up crypto wallets, confiscating access keys, or paying wages in cryptocurrency that victims cannot convert or access - effectively creating a digital debt-bondage that is significantly more difficult to detect and track.

⁵⁰ Butts, D. (2026, February 16). *Crypto is playing a growing role in human trafficking networks, report shows*. [Link](#). CNBC.

⁵¹ Herzlich, T. (2026, February 16). *Cryptocurrency use explodes in human trafficking networks, online scams: report*. [Link](#). New York Post.

⁵² Chainalysis. (2026, January 14). *AI changing the face, surging the profits of crypto scams*. [Link](#). Asia Times

⁵³ Schidlow, M. (2025). *Forced Fraud: The Financial Exploitation of Human Trafficking Victims*. MDPI.

Cybercrime and digital coercion and exploitation could become an increasingly central form of MSHT threat. As online platforms, digital financial systems, and emerging technologies continue to expand, traffickers are expected to use them to exert control, conceal abuse, and force victims into criminal and exploitative activity with greater distance and deniability. Emerging threats include the rapid growth of online forced labour and cyber-enabled exploitation, where individuals are coerced into scam operations, digital content production, and online sexual exploitation. These models are highly scalable, low-visibility, and transnational, making them harder to detect and disrupt than traditional forms of exploitation.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, there has been a significant rise in trafficking victims coerced into operating online scam schemes, particularly within organised compounds across Southeast Asia. Investigations by Reuters and the BBC between 2023 and 2025 document victims confined in scam centres, with countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar and Indonesia implicated in the expansion of the industry. Evidence further indicates that these networks have diversified geographically, extending operations into the Middle East and Latin America, while simultaneously targeting UK victims and, in some cases, exploiting UK nationals directly within scam operations. The UK therefore functions both as a major target market and as a site in which elements of online-facilitated exploitation are embedded within local communities.⁵⁴

The UN estimates suggest that approximately 100,000 individuals in Cambodia alone may be trapped in online scam centres, many confined under conditions amounting to forced labour.⁵⁵ These operations are run by powerful transnational criminal syndicates that target victims worldwide through online investment and romance scams. Amnesty International's analysis found worker escape attempts at 10 compounds across Cambodia. Senior advisors to intelligence company Inca

⁵⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2025) *Inflection Point: Global Implications of Scam Centres, Underground Banking and Illicit Online Marketplaces in Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: UNODC; Arranz, A., McPherson, P., Ghoshal, D. and Huang, H. (2025) 'They travelled to Thailand. They wound up cyber scam slaves in Myanmar', *Reuters*, 18 September; Reuters (2025) 'UK, US sanction Southeast Asian scam networks exploiting trafficked workers', 14 October.

⁵⁵ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023) 'Hundreds of thousands trafficked into online scam operations in Southeast Asia', Geneva: OHCHR

Digital suggest that Cambodia’s scam industry has become a key source of wealth and power in the region.⁵⁶

Financial exploitation linked to these crimes frequently intersects with employment opportunities that appear legitimate on the surface. Victims may be drawn into roles where wages are paid into third-party accounts or that appropriate existing apprenticeship schemes that are poorly regulated. They may be coerced into granting access to personal bank accounts or to conduct cash withdrawals. These activities can ultimately implicate the victim themselves in money laundering. While the victims may experience serious repercussions, including suicide, the criminal elements are often based overseas which makes enforcement and building intelligence a significant challenge even despite increased rates of reporting.

For instance, in early 2026 the Punjab state cybercrime police force acting in Mohali dismantled a “cyber slavery” syndicate that trafficked young tech professionals to scam compounds under the guise of legitimate careers in the tech sector. With forged appointments and job contracts, scam agents secured visas for victims who were detained and coerced upon meeting the scammers. With their passports and phones seized, these workers were forced to impersonate banking and government officials under the threat of violence.⁵⁷

Future technological developments, including the weakening of encryption through quantum computing, could further enable exploitation by exposing personal and financial data for use in coercion and control.

Platform-mediated gig economy work is likely to present a growing form of MSHT risk. As delivery and on-demand labour models expand, insecure working conditions, low pay, opaque algorithmic management, and limited legal protections are expected to increase worker dependency and reduce the ability to refuse unsafe or exploitative work, particularly for young and migrant workers.

⁵⁶ Ratcliffe, R. (2026, January 21). *Thousands of workers flee Cambodia scam centres, officials say*. [Link](#) from The Guardian.

⁵⁷ The Times of India. (2026, February 3). *‘Cyber slavery’ racket busted in Mohali*. [Link](#) from The Times of India.

A consistent picture of weakly regulated, platform-based and digitally mediated employment has begun to create conditions in which workers are ripe for exploitation. A rising number of cases expose coercive online labour and sexual exploitation. Victims are controlled through debt, deception, and constant digital surveillance.

Concerns around power imbalances are not limited to adult workers. The risks associated with precarious labour extend to minors. In 2024 the BBC documented the death of a 17-year-old Deliveroo rider in London,⁵⁸ an individual whose age fell below the minimum eligible age to make use of the app. A wider black-market of account dealers produce legitimate user profiles, then sell them to those who would likely fail the background checks. Deliveroo, and a competitor platform Just Eat, were criticised for improper handling of existing accounts being sold to minors and their subsequent profiting from illegal labour.

Couriers may earn as little as £2.90 per delivery with worker union IWGB, in partnership with charity group Possible, finding that only 8 of 47 focus group workers were earning enough to cover the living wage for London. Gig-economy issues are not confined to the UK. After a decade of population decline by roughly 400,000 people, Croatia has seen an influx of foreign workers from Asia that typically arrive through private agencies that offer little support. 4 in 10 work permits issued in Croatia in 2025 were granted to Nepalis, Filipinos, Indians and Bangladeshis, largely in tourism or catering work such as food delivery. Some employers offer overcrowded, “unliveable” housing at extortionate rates and are expected to work more than 12 hour days, 7 days a week. Violence and hardened public attitudes toward delivery riders has been attributed to anti-immigrant sentiments.⁵⁹

Deliveroo’s Italian operational arm has been placed under judicial supervision by prosecutors in Milan following accused non-compliance with labour laws, underpaying an estimated 20,000 workers. A police labour unit served a decree

⁵⁸ Crawford, A. (2023, November 14). *Children working as riders for food delivery apps - BBC investigation*. [Link](#) from BBC:

⁵⁹ InsideNoVa. (2026, February 16). *'Pure extortion': foreign workers face violence and exploitation in Croatia*. [Link](#) from insidenova.com Press Releases.

stating that Deliveroo riders were paid an average of 3-4 euros per delivery, putting them firmly below the poverty line. The decree was signed by 54 workers, of whom almost all were immigrants from Pakistan and Nigeria, recording between 10 to 17 hours of work, 7 days a week.⁶⁰

Recognising these risks, policy and research bodies have begun to respond. Reports from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre emphasised the necessity of stronger protections in platform-based work. The UK Government's 2024–2026 Strategic Plan identifies gig economy risks as an area to be prioritised in modern slavery prevention.⁶¹

Looking ahead, the continued growth of gig-economy platforms may enable more scalable and harder-to-detect forms of labour exploitation. Practices such as account-sharing, weak identity checks, and limited regulatory oversight are likely to facilitate the use of underage or unregistered workers and the transfer of exploitative models across sectors, creating a future threat that is adaptive, low-visibility, and challenging to regulate effectively.

⁶⁰ Parodi, E. (2026, February 25). *Deliveroo's Italian arm placed under supervision over alleged labour exploitation*. [Link](#) from Reuters:

⁶¹ Global People Strategist. (2024, June 26). *United Kingdom's Gig Economy: New Regulations and Their Implications*. [Link](#) from Global People Strategist.

Labour & Livelihoods



Demographic change is expected to increasingly shape the MSHT threat. Ageing populations, declining birth rates, and persistent labour shortages are likely to expand demand for low-wage, informal, and precarious work, while also increasing vulnerabilities linked to care needs, social isolation, and dependency. Emerging threats include the expansion of exploitation linked to

demographic pressures, particularly in ageing societies and among younger at-risk groups.

Changes in demographics are increasingly recognised as key factors that have been reshaping the vulnerability to exploitation of entire populations. Shifts within the last century include population ageing, declining fertility rates and widening gaps in the provision of proper care. Looking forward, The Office for National Statistics has stated that between mid-2022 and mid-2032, the population of the UK is projected to increase by 4.9 million (7.3%) from an estimated 67.6 million to 72.5 million. The number of people at state pension age over this period is projected to increase by 1.7 million from an estimated 12.0 million to 13.7 million people (13.8% increase).⁶²

These factors have become instrumental as drivers of risk in financial and labour exploitation, care-related negligence and reproductive abuse. Data evidence from the National Referral Mechanism has highlighted a marked rise in referrals linked to criminality, especially among children and young people under the age of 25. This includes those transitioning out of care systems. Simultaneously, older adults tend to see their personal contexts shaped by a growing dependency, social isolation and an eventual cognitive decline. These factors leave them open to be targeted by bad actors. Ultimately, both risk profiles and the exact nature of how victims are exploited are changing.

On a societal, structural level, institutions are unable to keep up. Aging populations create a rising demand for social care labour. A publication from Aberystwyth

⁶² ONS. (2025, 01 28). *Office for National Statistics*. [Link](#)

University notes that staff shortages in August 2022 had risen 52% on the previous year.⁶³ Demographic projections suggest that there is a need for 440,000 additional care workers to respond to workforce retirement. The gap in supply and demand incentivises rapid recruitment or migrant labour sourcing which are common risk factors for exploitation.

In 2024, the Royal College of Nursing called for an investigation after releasing data showing 134 cases of care workers reporting exploitation from their employers. Demanding large sums of money to cover processed visas if the worker decided to leave their job, the volume of such complaints had risen from 22 cases in 2021.⁶⁴ Workers, in these cases migrants brought in to ease the care sector staffing crisis, were threatened with deportation. Some had their passports withheld by employers.⁶⁵

Increasing demand for care and low-wage labour is driving more informal and unregulated working arrangements, while rising referrals for criminal exploitation highlight growing risks for younger people, including care leavers. There are also early indicators of more novel forms of exploitation, such as reproductive and care-related exploitation, reflecting changing population dynamics.

Economic pressures are likely to remain a significant driver of MSHT. As living costs rise, debt deepens, and economic insecurity persists, more people may face heightened vulnerability to coercion, particularly where survival depends on accepting unsafe, informal, or exploitative work. At the same time, sustained demand for cheap labour and goods is expected to continue incentivising exploitative practices across multiple sectors. Emerging threats include the deepening of economic vulnerability in the UK, where rising living costs and debt are increasing exposure to coercion, particularly through debt bondage and informal work.

⁶³ Norman, J. (2025, March 3). *The Risk of Exploitation in Adult Social Care*. [Link](#) Aberystwyth University: Trafficking Regulation and Policy.

⁶⁴ Royal College of Nursing (2024) 'RCN demands urgent investigation into exploitative migrant care worker contracts', 20 August. [Link](#)

⁶⁵ Stacey, K. (2024, August 19). *Sixfold rise in foreign care workers in UK complaining of exploitation*. [Link](#). The Guardian

Evidence of economic pressures is often episodic and reactive, mediated through journalism rather than measured on a systemic level. This makes these issues difficult to address as they are often diffuse, indirect to their consequences or embedded deeply in highly complex systems.

For example, economic pressures can be the driving factor behind a wider disregard for issues of exploitation. East African migrants are reported as being trafficked into forced labour because they lack legal protections and income. Displacement in the region is described as controlled by power and money, rather than law. Individuals face extortion from smugglers and intermediaries. Economic pressure drives victims into “survival sex”, a form of prostitution in exchange for the most basic of necessities such as food and water, which are unaffordable or inaccessible.⁶⁶

On a smaller scale, financial issues may push individuals into exploitative sectors. In November of 2025, 60 Bangladeshi migrants boarded a flight to Malaysia as part of Bangladesh’s overseas employment programme, with the intention of meeting a demand for workers in Malaysia’s construction and tourism industries. The UN High Commissioner warned that the workers are part of a large migrant group that completed paid recruitment procedures but were subsequently left behind with false promises of work or faced exploitative practices abroad. Some migrants, some of whom paid fees greater than five times official limits, are asked to make additional payments or are reassigned to jobs without consent with agencies sustained by systemic corruption.⁶⁷

Economic pressures are interacting with structural demand for cheap labour and goods, embedding exploitation more deeply within everyday economic activity. There is also an emerging risk of sudden economic shocks, which could significantly expand vulnerability at scale and create new pathways into exploitation.

⁶⁶ Aby. (2026, March 26). *Opinions*Border to border: modern slavery and human trafficking in refugee movements across East Africa. [Link](#). The Washington Blade

⁶⁷ OHCHR, U. N. (2025, November 21). *60 stranded Bangladeshi migrants board flight to Malaysia—UN warns of exploitation and debt bondage*. [Link](#).

Demand shock-induced labour exploitation are likely to become an increasingly significant form of MSHT. Large-scale housing and infrastructure programmes, net zero transitions, major events, and rapid growth in consumer and green technology markets are expected to create sudden labour demand that outpaces the availability of a regulated and protected workforce.

There is an incentive for the exploitation of forced labour in sectors undergoing extreme growth, or those that must meet deadlines both corporate and governmental such as climate goals. Supply chains that support the development and implementation of renewable energy technologies, as well as high-volume consumer goods like electronics, clothing and packaged foods, are at high risk of forced labour owing to the rapid growth, consistent demand and pressures on costing. The Nottingham Rights Lab has identified battery production and critical mineral supply chains as particularly vulnerable to exploitation, driven by rapidly growing global demand linked to new technologies, energy transition infrastructure, and electric vehicle manufacturing.⁶⁸

In the UK, the large service-based economy can amplify these risk factors. An increase in demand for construction services and manufacturing is often reliant on imported labour which creates a significant threat of exploitative working conditions.⁶⁹ Evidence has shown that victims are typically male and of specific foreign national identity, usually Romanian, Polish, Indian or Chinese. Exploitation is channelled through vectors of control or intermediaries such as employers, recruitment agencies or landlords. Housing is often provided by the exploiters, albeit under poor standards. This effectively ties the workers to unsanitary conditions, with examples emerging of victims living in shipping containers or sheds with no basic facilities. These issues are only compounded by abysmal working conditions, stripped employment rights and recruitment handled through social media with little oversight.⁷⁰ Similar concerns have been raised regarding short term demands for labour, for example “mega sporting events”⁷¹

⁶⁸ See Nottingham Rights Lab, *Blood Batteries* (2025). [Link](#) Cockayne et al., *The Energy of Freedom?* (2022). [Link](#)
⁶⁹ UK Cabinet Office. (2024, March 25). *Tackling Modern Slavery in Government Supply Chains - Guidance*. [Link](#)
from Gov.uk:

⁷⁰ National Crime Agency (2024) Law enforcement steps up response to modern slavery. London: NCA.

⁷¹ Thomson Reuters. (2026, 01 22). *Human rights due diligence and mega sporting events*. [Link](#)

Human rights monitors have taken specific interest in construction as being at especially high risk of exploitative practices. The UK Government's economic plans to build 1,500,000 homes over the next 5 years coincides with organisations like CCLA raising concerns about the incidence of modern slavery. Working conditions are physically demanding with a reliance on migrant labour that is not always easily visible. UK charity Unseen reported 492 potential victims relating to the construction industry in 2024.⁷²

Looking ahead, these demand shocks could increase reliance on subcontracting, temporary labour, migrant workers, and complex supply chains, heightening the risk of exploitative recruitment and working practices both domestically and internationally. Pressure to deliver at pace and low cost may further embed exploitation within high-growth sectors, creating forms of abuse that are more systemic, less visible, and harder to regulate and enforce.

⁷² Taylor, D. (2025, November 20). *UK construction workers at risk from modern slavery, charity warns*. [Link](#) from The Guardian.

Exploitation & Control



International state-enabled exploitation and illicit systems may become a more significant driver of MSHT. As some forms of organised exploitation are increasingly facilitated, tolerated, or shielded by state-aligned actors, the boundary between criminal activity and national security risk may continue to blur, weakening regulatory oversight and accountability.

Academic research, law enforcement intelligence and international investigations have consistently indicated the existence, and large-scale presence, of well-connected organised crime systems. These operations are either enabled or outright aligned with the state government of the country within which they reside and can expand outside national borders with little resistance.

In the UK, for instance, a 2025 PhD study focussed on Chinese organised crime syndicates identified crime groups originating from the Fujian Province in South-East China have become one of the most significant threats in the British West Midlands.⁷³ Across the Atlantic, the US House of Representatives have investigated the fentanyl crisis and revealed connections between state structures, organised crime groups and the widespread international harm caused by the production and trafficking of drugs. In a similar vein, organised crime groups based in Afghanistan operate both regionally and nationally. They exploit regulatory gaps to move drugs, weapons and other illicit goods, as well as in other crime types.⁷⁴

On a broader international scope, studies have shown the extent of systemic corruption across entire continents. A report by the United Nations Human Rights Office notes how scam operations in Asia, particularly those in countries along the Mekong River region, sees corruption within state and regional bodies, which are firmly entrenched within the criminal ecosystem. The UN Human Rights Chief has suggested that the work of independent media and human rights defenders may

⁷³ Wilson, D. (2025) *An Analysis of Chinese Organised Crime in the UK, the Efficacy of the Law Enforcement Response, and the Involvement of the CCP*, PhD thesis, University of Buckingham.

⁷⁴ US House of Representatives (2024) *The CCP's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis*. Washington, DC: Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. [Link](#)

face interference in these regions, likely as a result this state-OCG relationship⁷⁵ Freedom United has also raised concerns state-enabled exploitation with respects to the EU funding and training of Libyan authorities as part of its migration deterrence strategy with allegations of Libyan abuses against migrants.⁷⁶

The issue of political corruption facilitating these conditions has been the topic of high-profile legal cases. In 2025 the US and UK imposed sanctions on billionaire business tycoon Chen Zhi following the exposure of a vast criminal network connected to his business conglomerate, the Prince Group TCO. The network involved the exploitation of victims for forced labour, scamming through investment schemes, money laundering and asset theft. Officials from the US Treasury department said that Chen and his associates paid bribes and leaned on political connections worldwide, deeply entrenching the organisation within political systems, their correspondence with government officials and banks, many wilful participants, allows them to direct the flow of billions of dollars in illicit funds.⁷⁷ Cambodia, as a state, has been described by Western intelligence services as a state where organised crime has been shielded by the security cooperation of China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁷⁸

Looking ahead, state-enabled or state-aligned networks could grow more sophisticated and resilient, exploiting visa systems, laundering proceeds, and embedding exploitation within legitimate economic activity. The transnational nature of these networks, combined with displacement of offending across borders, points to a future threat that is harder to detect, disrupt, and deter, with implications extending into destination countries.

⁷⁵ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2026, February 20). *UN report details grave abuses against those trafficked into scam centres*. [Link](#)

⁷⁶ Freedom United. (2025, 09 29). *EU funds, Libya fires, and migrants pay*. [Link](#)

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury (2025) 'U.S. and U.K. take largest action ever targeting cybercriminal networks in Southeast Asia', 14 October. [Link](#). UK Government (2025) 'UK and US take joint action to disrupt major online fraud network', 14 October. [Link](#).

⁷⁸ Cooper, S. (2025, October 15). *Chinese Tycoon Arrested in Cambodian Modern-Slavery Empire Linked to Beijing's United Front*. [Link](#)

Hidden-economy labour exploitation is likely to become a more significant form of MSHT. As economic pressures persist and regulatory avoidance increases, greater reliance on informal, cash-based, and weakly regulated work is expected to expand, pushing more workers, particularly migrants and those with precarious status, into conditions where exploitation can occur with limited oversight. Emerging threats include the expansion of exploitation within the hidden economy, where economic pressures and rising employment costs are driving increased reliance on informal, cash-based, and weakly regulated work.

Exploitation is more likely in cash-intensive transaction practices in sectors such as nail bars in which cases of exploitation have been linked to organised crime in Vietnam. The exploitation of workers in these industries is sustained by dubious processes including repeated company dissolution then reregistration, tax evasion and professional enablers that offer services which permit criminality through negligence. Some also limit their compliance to anti-money-laundering efforts. Frontline work with police and victims further confirms the persistence and low visibility of exploitation within the hidden economy.

This kind of exploitation exists even within the supply chains of large multinational businesses. A trial against technology company Dyson concerning claims of modern slavery, forced labour and exploitation will take place in April 2027. In December of 2025, the judge ruled that the claims of 24 former migrant workers will be tried by hearing the cases of 6 individuals as lead claimants. The trial will be focussed on the conditions in the Malaysian factories and worker accommodation in the Dyson electronics supply chain. The claimants, recognised as impoverished and vulnerable individuals, allege that they were subjected to false imprisonment and forced labour while working for Malaysian companies that produce components for Dyson. Several documents Dyson have been ordered to disclose include pre-approvals and requests that forced Malaysian workers to work on rest days to maximise production volumes in 2021.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Leigh Day. (2026, January 14). *High Court rules that forced labour and exploitation claims against Dyson will be tried next year.* [Link](#) from Leigh Day 2026 News.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the working conditions and safety of migrant fisher workers in the UK. Flex assert that labour exploitation in the fishing sector is not simply a matter of individual bad actors; it is underpinned by legal and regulatory gaps. These gaps facilitate poor labour standards, limited inspections, and a lack of meaningful enforcement at sea.⁸⁰ In a similar vein, a review by the Modern Slavery & Human Rights Policy & Evidence Centre found that specific evidence on modern slavery risks in the UK housebuilding sub-sector are lacking and underscored the urgent need for both further research to study this issue.⁸¹

Businesses are increasingly using subcontracting, undeclared labour, and frequent company restructuring to evade oversight, while workers are pushed into precarious arrangements such as gig economy roles or visa-dependent employment. These dynamics are creating more fragmented and less visible forms of labour exploitation that are harder to regulate and enforce, particularly in sectors with limited scrutiny.

Reproductive exploitation is likely to emerge as a more significant form of modern slavery. Rising global fertility demand, declining birth rates, and expanding cross-border reproductive markets are expected to increase incentives to coerce or deceive individuals into exploitative reproductive activities, particularly where economic vulnerability and unequal access to protections persist.

Unregulated fertility markets, typically facilitated by private clinics or intermediaries that operate under legal grey zones in Europe, have been reported in greater numbers by Non-Governmental Organisations and frontline watchdog services. This is indicative of a rise in cases of coercive surrogacy, egg harvesting, and possible other forms of exploitation – Europol and Eurojust have been tackling cases of forced surrogacy and egg removal since 2016. However, in 2024, Unseen UK reported cases of victims reporting forced surrogacy to its helpline. The EU directive 2024/1712 now also officially recognises forced surrogacy as a form of

⁸⁰ FLEX. (2025). *Unravelling the nets: An examination of the seafarer visa policies and their impact on migrant fishers in the UK*. [Link](#)

⁸¹ Gabriela-Huerter O, G., Suhail, F., & Alzoubi, Y. (2025). *Evidence Review: Assessing the nature and scale of modern slavery risk in the construction sector, with a focus on the housebuilding subsector*. [Link](#)

human trafficking. Despite the indicators, awareness of forced surrogacy remains limited among professionals which can be a contributing factor in its underreporting, even as cases in helpline data signals the ongoing exploitation patterns.

Economic issues can exacerbate the problem, especially in struggling regions. The cost of surrogacy services in Ukraine is significantly cheaper than other nations, with some surrogates earning €20,000 for each child, a sum of money that may take impoverished people in the region several years to accrue. Albert Tochilovsky, owner of medical centre BioTexCom, has been accused of human trafficking by virtue of selling human beings and exploiting the vulnerability of surrogates' poor financial status.⁸²

The High Court in the state of Kerala, India, sought the release of 7 women trafficked to Kerala for surrogacy. Counsel for the detainees stated that the women has been coerced into travelling and becoming surrogates or egg donors for money. They note that prospective parents are also exploited, their vulnerability hampering their aversion to high risk. This has created a network of victims on either end of the parenting process that is controlled by exploitative middlemen seeking profit.⁸³

The lack of regulation leaves women involved in surrogacy schemes with no legal protections. Therefore, especially in regions with private healthcare systems such as the United States, many can incur overwhelming medical debts. In 2021, a victim was paired with a prospective couple via agency for a contracted \$70,000 deal plus medical fees in the event of a health emergency. The victim was promised compensation by the new parents, however significant complications during surgery left her with \$182,889 in medical debt with no financial protection to cover the bill.⁸⁴

⁸² Cooke, C. (2025, March 4). *Controversial surrogacy agency continues trafficking children in Ukraine, despite war.* [Link](#) from Live Action:

⁸³ The Times of India. (2025, October 8). *Assisted reproduction: Kerala HC shocked at alleged exploitation of vulnerable women.* [Link](#) from The Times of India.

⁸⁴ Long, K. (2025, December 27). *Surrogacy Is a Multibillion-Dollar Business—but Surrogates Can Be Left With Big Debts.* [Link](#) from The Wall Street Journal.

Looking ahead, exploitation is likely to become more concealed and difficult to disrupt, occurring within transnational fertility tourism, unregulated intermediaries, and weakly regulated or hidden clinical settings. Deceptive recruitment practices and social or economic pressures may further normalise abuse, creating a future threat that is low-visibility, cross-jurisdictional, and resistant to traditional safeguarding and enforcement approaches.

Organ harvesting is likely to emerge as a more prominent form of modern slavery and human trafficking. Rising global demand for organ transplantation, persistent shortages of legally available organs, and the expansion of cross-border medical markets are expected to increase incentives to traffic or coerce vulnerable individuals into exploitative organ removal.

Multiple legal, governmental and firsthand accounts paint a stark picture of a globally spanning organ-trafficking market system that has been shaped by ethical failures, poor regulation and the exploitation of vulnerable populations.

The NYC Bar Association have highlighted the systemic breaches of ethics within international organ markets and thus the weaknesses in its structure that allow illicit practices to persist.⁸⁵ Furthermore, in 2024 the US State Department began to formally recognise organ removal as a form of human trafficking under its Palermo Protocol, adopted as a supplement to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, to suppress and punish the trafficking of people. The Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act of 2025 explicitly linked organ harvesting to modern slavery and introduced sanctions targeting those perpetrating such crimes.⁸⁶

Empirical data indicates the accelerating scale of the illicit organ trade, with international datasets indicating substantial growth in detected cases since the mid-2010s. Synthesised analyses compiled by Gitnux (2025), drawing on UNODC and WHO data, link this growth to advances in medical technology and the

⁸⁵ New York City Bar Association (2023) *Human Organ Supply: Report on Ethical Considerations and Breaches in Organ Harvesting Practices*. New York: New York City Bar Association. [Link](#)

⁸⁶ U.S. Department of State (2024) Trafficking in Persons Report: Trafficking in Persons for the Purpose of Organ Removal. Washington, DC: Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. [Link](#) U.S. Congress (2025) H.R.1503 – Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act of 2025. Washington, DC: Congress.gov. [Link](#)

exploitation of regulatory loopholes that make trafficking easier to execute while remaining difficult to detect.⁸⁷

Structural enablers, such as these, also create dynamics at the institutional level. In November of 2025, the UK government rejected a request by Nigeria to deport a former Nigerian politician, Ike Ekweremadu, who was found guilty in 2023 of conspiring to exploit a man for the purpose of organ harvesting. The request faced criticism in Nigeria, raising questions as to why the Abuja government has made no efforts to intervene in the arrest of 230 other Nigerians imprisoned in the UK.⁸⁸

On an individual grassroots level, testimonies show the true human cost behind the wider systems. Victims of an organ trafficking scheme in Eldoret, Kenya have shared accounts with the National Assembly Health Committee revealing exploitation by doctors, leading to them giving up their kidneys for as little as \$386 (US equivalent). Survivors like Amon Kipruto were struggling with poor wages before being offered the deal. Those who participated in the surgery were not paid the promised sum, left without proper care and their lives are marked with pain and fatigue, while the trafficker pockets massive profits.⁸⁹

For decades, China has been under tense scrutiny, given the scale of organ harvesting operations that persist with little reprisal from the Chinese Communist Party. Despite published CCP numbers suggesting 5,146 eligible donors resulting in 16,000 transplants annually, international research group China Tribunal estimates from hospital bed and medical personnel statistics that the number is well over 60,000 per year.⁹⁰ Testimonies given before the United States Congress have illuminated large scale harvesting operations that target specific ethnic and religious groups. Uyghurs and Muslim minorities in China as well as spiritual practitioners such as those of Falun Gong, a controversial Buddhist-based religious

⁸⁷ Gitnux (2025) Organ Trafficking Statistics. [Link](#). United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024) Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024. Vienna: UNODC. World Health Organization (2021) Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation. Geneva: WHO.

⁸⁸ Weaver, M. (2025, November 24). *UK rejects Nigerian request to deport former politician jailed for organ trafficking*. [Link](#) from The Guardian.

⁸⁹ The Kenya Times. (2025, August 30). *Kenyans tricked into organ trafficking scam speak out*. [Link](#) from Freedom United.

⁹⁰ Proshan, J. (2025, August 7). *Uncovering Evil: Illegal Organ Harvesting in China and the 2025 "Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act"*. [Link](#) from McCain Institute: <https://www.mccaininstitute.org/resources/blog/uncovering-evil-illegal-organ-harvesting-in-china-and-the-2025-stop-forced-organ-harvesting-act/>

movement, are imprisoned in large numbers at forced labour camps. Some of these individuals are reported by the US Committee on International Relations to be “murdered by medical professionals for their vital organs”.⁹¹ Survivors of the practice describe being “killed to order”, having been forcibly pacified with drugs after refusing to sign consent forms, then waking up to discover that their organs have been transplanted.⁹²

Looking ahead, this threat is likely to become more transnational and concealed, facilitated by deceptive recruitment, financial coercion, and intermediaries operating across jurisdictions. Exploitation is expected to occur predominantly within unregulated or weakly governed clinical settings, supported by regulatory gaps, corruption, and advances in medical technology, creating a future risk that is low-visibility, difficult to evidence, and challenging to disrupt through traditional safeguarding and enforcement mechanisms.

Exploitation of cognitive vulnerabilities is likely to become a more pronounced form of MSHT risk. As pressures on health, social care, and safeguarding services persist, individuals with learning disabilities, cognitive impairment, or mental health conditions may remain increasingly exposed to manipulation, coercion, and sustained abuse, often without timely identification or intervention.

Statutory Care Act mandated Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARs) are consistently demonstrating a strong connection between cognitive impairments in people and their exposure to exploitation. These impairments have been identified as a recurring factor in cases involving serious harm or death. The studied trend of a rising prevalence in mental health conditions and learning disabilities coincides with results from 2024 Rights Lab research which found that approximately 96% of SARs involving exploitation, between 2017 and 2022, were focussed on adults with some form of cognitive impairment.⁹³ These statistics are reinforced by local authority safeguarding data which shows that a growing number of exploited

⁹¹ United States House Committee on International Relations. (2006). *FALUN GONG: ORGAN HARVESTING AND CHINA'S ONGOING WAR ON HUMAN RIGHTS*. United States House Committee on International Relations.

⁹² Doyle, L. (2026, February 1). *World's organ harvesting 'capital' where victims are 'killed to order'*. [Link](#) from The Mirror.

⁹³ University of Nottingham Rights Lab. (2024). *Exploitation of Adults with Cognitive Impairment in England*. University of Nottingham. Retrieved March 30, 2026

adults were not previously known to services suggesting that these vulnerabilities frequently go unrecognised until at a point of crisis. Academic and policy research further reiterates the connection between cognitive impairment, gaps in adult social care capacity and heightened risks of financial, criminal, sexual, or domestic exploitation.

The pattern of exploitation and delayed recognition also extends to younger populations. A report led by the University of Oxford found that the UK's national policy does not adequately address the vulnerability of children with Special Education Needs & Disabilities (SEND), namely that specific risk factors are rarely recognised and focus more broadly on disability without considering the nuances of child-specific cases. This, coupled alongside young people with SEND experiencing higher rates of exclusion and poverty, results in delayed intervention and a higher risk of exposure to internal trafficking and other forms of exploitation.⁹⁴ The National Audit Office estimated that there are around 1.9 million children in the UK with special educational needs.⁹⁵

2025 research indicators from OECD in G20 countries project that population aging will increase significantly over the next 25 years. For every 100 people aged 20 to 64, the number of people aged 65+ is projected to increase to 52 in 2050, up from 33 in 2025 and 22 in 2000. Researchers in a longitudinal study of 24 countries for BMC geriatrics note that social isolation in the elderly is significantly associated with a reduced cognitive ability.⁹⁶ Further research by BMC fellows note that midlife stress is also associated with cognitive decline.⁹⁷ These trends strongly indicate the growth of a key victim group that is susceptible to exploitation, and a likelihood of greater activity to exploit those with cognitive impairments.

Looking ahead, gaps in safeguarding capacity and early-warning systems are likely to create systemic blind spots in which exploitation can continue undetected until crisis point. This points to a future threat that is highly concealed, prolonged, and

⁹⁴ University of Oxford. (2024, July 16). *Trafficking and exploitation of children with special educational needs and disability*. [Link](#) from Modern Slavery & Human Rights Policy & Evidence Centre:

⁹⁵ NAO. (2024). *Support for children and young people with special educational needs*. National Audit Office. [Link](#)

⁹⁶ Wang Zhang, J. Z. (2025). *Social isolation and cognitive decline in older adults: a longitudinal study across 24 countries*. BMC Geriatrics. PubMed. doi:10.1186/s12877-025-06430-6.

⁹⁷ Christensen, D. S. (2023) 'Midlife perceived stress is associated with cognitive decline across three decades', BMC Geriatrics, 23(1), article 121. [Link](#)

difficult to disrupt, enabling financial, criminal, sexual, and domestic exploitation to persist with limited visibility or accountability.

Exploitation of children and young people by organised criminal networks is likely to become an increasingly severe MSHT risk. As criminal groups continue to professionalise and diversify, they are expected to exert greater control through digital grooming, surveillance, and coercive relationships, often combining sexual exploitation, forced criminality, and drug distribution within the same networks. The use of online grooming, social engineering, and technology-enabled control is expected to expand exploitation into less visible, localised, and community-based settings, creating a future exploitation form that is more integrated, adaptive, and harder to detect and disrupt.

Evidence of these exploitation strategies is often difficult to capture directly. Control mechanisms are frequently used to suppress disclosure, with victims managed through fear, coercion or intimidation. This can make crimes hard to document and cases difficult to track over time. There are, however, clear examples where law-enforcement action has exposed hidden exploitation, including 'county lines' trafficking. In 2025, a coordinated national policing response in the UK disrupted 241 county lines drug operations, leading to the seizure of large quantities of drugs, cash and burner phones. As part of this activity, an adult offender was charged with trafficking a 15-year-old child, identified through police intelligence.⁹⁸

A report by Sky News noted that in 2025, police referred 3,200 people to support services in connection with drug trafficking for county lines crime gangs. Children involved in these activities are left with severe mental health problems owing to cognitive vulnerability, as well as fears and threats of violence inflicted by the gangs. Recent figures suggest that the use of children in these operations show no sign of abating.⁹⁹ Swansea police detectives launched an investigation into modern slavery offences after a 16-year-old was intercepted by British Transport Police

⁹⁸ National Police Chiefs' Council. (2025, July 4). *241 county lines shut down following national action*. [Link](#) from National Police Chiefs' Council.

⁹⁹ Farrell, J. (2025, December 3). *'Death, prison or the loss of your sanity': A decade of county lines leaves its scars on children*. [Link](#) from Sky News:

carrying large quantities of crack cocaine, cannabis and a burner phone. A South Wales Detective Inspector noted that individuals found in such situations are likely to be victims of exploitation.¹⁰⁰

Beyond law enforcement investigations, the precise mechanisms behind the strategies have begun to encompass new victim demographics, technological methods and a wider range of criminal activity. Horizon scanning from the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner has highlighted the data that is reporting these changes. For instance, The Clewer Initiative, citing data from the National Crime Agency (NCA), has found that young women are less likely to be suspected of criminality by law enforcement and claims against them often go underreported. They are therefore targeted by county lines operators to be involved in illicit schemes and face direct violence, sexual abuse and blackmail, including the threat of sharing compromising images of the victim. Those with cognitive vulnerabilities are also likely targets for “cuckooing” a forcible arrangement where victims homes are appropriated and retrofitted as a drug dealing base or with manufacturing equipment.¹⁰¹

Social media platforms, online gaming applications and encrypted messaging apps have quickly become hunting grounds for predatory elements that leverage their ease of access, use and large communities to engage in sophisticated digital grooming schemes. The #LikestoLines social media campaign, reported on by Unseen UK in 2024, revealed how gangs operating county lines schemes were grooming children to engage in criminality through fake personas, unmoderated messages and targeted advertising on popular platforms including Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and the encrypted messaging service WhatsApp.

Contemporary tactics are employed, perpetrators offer the victim virtual gifts such as mobile phone credit, video game currencies and money transfers to create a sense of obligation known as "debt bonding". Gangs also employ the "loverboy method", a documented grooming approach where the offender plays the role of

¹⁰⁰ British Transport Police. (2025, November 28). *Teen caught with drugs and illicit cash during County Lines operation – Wales*. [Link](#) from British Transport Police.

¹⁰¹ FitzRoy & KeyRing, *Cuckooing: understanding and intervention for people with learning disabilities* (2026) [Link](#)

a romantic partner, quickly and intensely building an emotional relationship with the young and impressionable victim before implementing control and isolation measures once trust is established.¹⁰² In the same vein, "remote mothering" schemes position the perpetrator as a protective figure, mimicking parental concern. In these cases, victims have been manipulated into enabling tracking apps or location sharing which are used to monitor and control their movements or behaviour.¹⁰³ The NCA, in 2025, warned of a trend in online networks of mostly teenage boys involved in criminality exploiting victims with such social engineering approaches. Threats of violence or harm to family members, as well as "sextortion" where a victim is blackmailed with sexual material, are reported by the NSPCC as being increasingly common methods of control used especially against young teenagers.¹⁰⁴

The diversification of criminal activity beyond street-level dealing has now encompassed activities like forced cannabis cultivation, where in some cases migrants or vulnerable populations are targeted specifically to run the operation. The threat of arrest alongside existing debt-bondages, threats of violence or blackmail is a powerful tool to control victims' behaviour. Diversification may be a product of expansion as the geographic and operational model of County Lines begins to shift. According to NSPCC Learning and statistics from Talk About Trust, while external County Lines activity decreased by 12.2%, internal lines surged by 232% year-on-year as of June 2025.¹⁰⁵ A move towards localised exploitation, where victims are controlled closer to their homes, results in fewer traditional warning signs such as children going missing over long distances.

These networks are also expanding into areas that see less police scrutiny. Analysis by Royal United Services Institute has noted a growing presence of crime groups in rural areas that offer strategic advantages, and sparse criminal activity which presents the opportunity to establish new drug markets. As ever, children are

¹⁰² Europol. (2024, April 19). *How not to fall for the lover boy scam*. [Link](#) from Europol.

¹⁰³ Unseen UK. (2024, March 18). *#LikestoLines: Protect your child from county lines online exploitation*. [Link](#) from Unseen UK.

¹⁰⁴ National Crime Agency. (2024, May 25). *Financially Motivated Sexual Extortion (Sextortion)*. [Link](#) from National Crime Agency.

¹⁰⁵ Talk About Trust (2025) *Progress and Impact Report 2025*. Talk About Trust. [Link](#)

groomed to act as runners and couriers who are at significant risk of violence or arrest.¹⁰⁶

Looking ahead, the further entrenchment of county lines–style exploitation is likely to be driven by persistent social inequality, technological enablement, and ongoing demand for illicit markets

¹⁰⁶ Haenlein, C. and Redgrave, H. (2024) 'Drugs: An Old Threat Made New'. London: Royal United Services Institute.
[Link](#)

Governance & Safeguards



Legislative and regulatory gaps are likely to remain a significant enabler of MSHT. As legal, policy, and enforcement frameworks evolve, weaknesses and unintended consequences, particularly where prevention and protection intersect with immigration control, may continue to undermine victim identification, confidence in reporting, and access to

support. Emerging threats include the unintended consequences of shifting legislative and enforcement priorities, particularly the increasing conflation of modern slavery with immigration control. This is creating conditions where victims are less likely to be identified or supported, while exploitation becomes more hidden within informal and off-the-books labour markets. At the same time, regulatory gaps and inconsistencies are enabling exploitative practices, such as misuse of visa systems, to persist and adapt.

Evidence and research from frontline groups points to significant voids in the understanding that informs legislative action and regulatory frameworks, regarding modern slavery. Definitions that are unclear or misinformative, the shifting of regulations and the conflation of modern slavery issues with those of immigration enforcement have contributed to the misidentification of victims, inconsistent access to support and a reduction in reported cases and incidents. In the UK, the number of referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) continue to far-exceed the number of actual prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act as there is significant space between the ability to identify victims then successfully hold perpetrators to account, legally.

This picture is reflective of patterns seen on the global scale. Under Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 of the International Labour Organisation, all United Nations member states have committed to eradicating modern slavery by 2030. Despite this, countries have failed to criminalise all forms of modern slavery in-line with the standards set-out. And, where laws do exist, legal enforcement is frequently weak. According to the Global Slavery Index, counting just G20 countries, \$468B (US equivalent) worth of goods risk being produced with forced

labour each year. As well as this, most governments still rely solely on voluntary institutions rather than formal law enforcements to hold businesses involved in these practices accountable.¹⁰⁷

An institutional trust deficit could become an increasingly significant enabler of MSHT. As trust in authorities declines, vulnerable individuals may be less willing to report exploitation, engage with safeguarding systems, or seek protection, reducing visibility of harm and weakening prevention and disruption efforts. Emerging threats include a widening institutional trust deficit, driven by misinformation, social fragmentation, and political polarisation, which is reducing victim engagement with authorities. Migrants and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are increasingly unlikely to report exploitation or seek help, while official warnings may be dismissed as untrustworthy. This is creating conditions where exploitation can operate with lower visibility and reduced risk of enforcement.

General trust in the ability of institutions to provide safe and adequate support is at a major deficit, heightening the risks in safeguarding for victims. Polling data consistently shows declining public confidence in both the police and government's ability to care for victims and enforce legal action against perpetrators. Studies, including those by the Violence, Health and Society (VISION) research consortium, have shown a decline in community cohesion where neighbourhood-level social networks have weakened alongside a drop in prominence of informal support systems.¹⁰⁸

Vulnerable communities and migrants are likely to have engaged in negative experiences with institutions or been provided with misinformation. This produces a ubiquitous distrust of authorities and reduced their willingness to report instances of exploitation or engage with mechanisms intended to safeguard their wellbeing. Steadily low conviction rates for modern slavery offences further reinforce the perception that authorities are unable or unwilling to provide

¹⁰⁷ Walk Free. (2025, March 24). *The UK must strengthen its response to forced labour in supply chains*. [Link](#).

¹⁰⁸ More In Common. (2025, May 19). *Social cohesion: A snapshot*. [Link](#) from More In Common.

protection, creating conditions in which exploitation remains hidden and unchallenged.

Statistics support these conclusions. Between 2022 and early 2025, the number of people referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for victims of modern slavery, but refused at the initial stage, rose by 290%. Research by After Exploitation found that only 133 victims out of 51,193 cases themselves reported to the Home Office and had applied for victim compensation. Research from multiple sources suggests that fear of retribution from traffickers, fear of authorities and the poor quality of information provided by the system were major factors in those exploited avoiding looking for support. A solicitor at the Migrant & Refugee Children's Legal Unit in reference to Albanian trafficking operations, noted that the UK government's approach of safely returning trafficking victims to Albania is resulting in severe harm as many people are ultimately re-trafficked.¹⁰⁹

The activities of several Non-Governmental Organisations, as reported by CTOL, have eroded what was once an implicit trust in the capacity of these organisations to provide aid. Sexual misconduct has been described as a sector-wide crisis, notably Oxfam's staff members exploiting young prostitutes during the 2010 Haiti earthquake response. The Red Cross failed to deliver on funding rounds collected in 2016, 2018, 2021 and 2023. Global NGO trust metrics in 2024 from Edelman showed lower trust levels in Western nations.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, D. (2025, April 13). *Trafficking victims rejecting UK government support because they fear being deported.* [Link](#) from The Guardian:

¹¹⁰ Zhang, A. (2025, June 2). *The Erosion of Trust: How Scandals and Systemic Failures Have Transformed Public Perception of NGOs.* [Link](#) from CTOL Digital News.

Chapter 4: Scenario Insights

The five future scenarios outlined in Annex A are analytical tools rather than predictions. However, where consistent patterns emerge across multiple futures, these represent critical system-level observations that warrant attention in policy design and implementation.

Structural drivers of exploitation are persistent and systemic

Across all scenarios, modern slavery and human trafficking are shaped by long-term forces that cannot be switched off, only managed. Global conflict, climate change, economic instability, and geopolitical pressures are likely to increase displacement and put more people at risk of exploitation.

Migration plays a central role. Strict migration systems can push people toward unsafe routes and criminal intermediaries, while demand-led systems can increase dependence on employers or sponsors. In both cases, risk is shifted rather than reduced. Economic pressure also matters. Sectors that rely on cheap, flexible labour, and households under financial strain, create conditions where exploitation could become part of everyday economic activity. During economic shocks, these risks increase at the same time as institutions become less able to respond.

Fragmented international cooperation enables criminal adaptation

A consistent strategic tension emerges between domestic policy effectiveness and global instability. Strong domestic governance, enforcement, or humanitarian systems can reduce visible harm within the UK, but do not address upstream drivers of exploitation. In several scenarios, the UK appears effective at managing risks domestically while exploitation persists and evolves beyond its borders, enabled by weak governance, conflict, and displacement elsewhere. This creates a form of “contained visibility”, where harm is less apparent but not reduced in absolute terms. This tension highlights that there are some limits of nationally bounded responses and the importance of international cooperation to respond to an adaptive transnational issue.

Technology accelerates and obscures exploitation

Digital technologies, including AI, cryptocurrencies, and online platforms, consistently act as multipliers for exploitation. They enable recruitment, coordination, and financial transactions to occur at greater scale, speed, and anonymity. Where regulatory frameworks and enforcement capabilities lag behind technological change, these tools expand criminal reach and reduce the likelihood of detection. Platform-mediated labour and AI-enabled recruitment models are particularly significant, as they blur the boundaries between legitimate and exploitative practices. The implication is clear: without anticipatory regulation and technological capability within enforcement, the gap between criminal innovation and institutional response will continue to widen.

Institutional capacity, trust, and effectiveness are interdependent

High public awareness of MSHT does not automatically translate into effective mitigation. Across several scenarios, awareness coexists with declining trust, driven by slow responses, fragmented systems, and perceived trade-offs between economic growth and enforcement.

Institutional capacity is a critical constraint. Even where legal frameworks are robust, limited resources, competing priorities, and fragmented delivery reduce effectiveness. This is compounded by the reallocation of resources toward adjacent priorities such as organised immigration crime and child sexual exploitation, which can dilute focus on MSHT despite their interconnections.

Trust emerges as a central, under-recognised asset. Victims and communities must trust institutions to engage with them, while the public must trust that the system is both fair and effective. Where safeguarding systems are perceived as impersonal or ineffective, or where outcomes are delayed, trust erodes, reducing reporting, cooperation, and ultimately system effectiveness. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable in such contexts, with exploitation often taking forms that are less visible and harder to evidence.

Policy and governance must become more adaptive and coherent

MSHT is a dynamic and evolving threat, yet responses are often reactive and fragmented. Across scenarios, there is a clear need for adaptive policy frameworks that can respond to changing criminal behaviours, emerging technologies, and shifting patterns of vulnerability. This requires sustained political commitment over the long term, combined with regular review of legislation and policy to ensure alignment with the current threat landscape. It also requires clearer accountability structures, including agencies with the authority and visibility to drive cross-system coordination.

A key barrier to coherence is the conflation of immigration and modern slavery policy. While interconnected, treating MSHT primarily as a border issue risks oversimplifying the problem and overlooking exploitation within domestic labour markets. Effective MSHT policy can contribute to reducing organised immigration crime, but the inverse is not necessarily true.

Prevention, data, and system integration are critical levers

There is a strong consensus that greater emphasis must be placed on prevention. Given the diversity of drivers, preventative strategies must be equally differentiated, addressing specific forms of vulnerability such as poverty, inequality, conflict, and climate displacement, as well as specific exploitation types.

Improved data integration is central to this effort. Currently, data remains siloed across institutions, limiting the ability to identify patterns, target interventions, and understand both victims and perpetrators. Better use of existing data, aligned with data protection principles, would significantly enhance identification and disruption efforts.

At the same time, there are important gaps in understanding long-term victim outcomes. Mechanisms such as the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) require review to assess effectiveness, timeliness, and whether they support sustained recovery and protection from re-exploitation.

Enforcement and deterrence require rebalancing

Questions remain about whether current enforcement approaches provide a sufficient deterrent. The limited use of financial tools such as asset seizure and exclusion orders suggests that criminal actors may retain the benefits of exploitation even when detected.

Strengthening corporate accountability, including mandatory due diligence and liability frameworks, is a critical component of shifting incentives within supply chains. More broadly, resources must be allocated across the full system, not solely within law enforcement. Effective responses depend equally on prevention, safeguarding, intelligence, and victim support.

A whole-system response is essential

MSHT operates across a complex ecosystem involving government, law enforcement, health services, border agencies, civil society, and the private sector. These actors are embedded within wider systems of migration, labour markets, technology, and global supply chains. Siloed responses create gaps that both victims and perpetrators can fall through or exploit. No single intervention or institution is sufficient. A whole-system approach is therefore essential, aligning efforts across prevention, identification, enforcement, and support, while incorporating international partners and the voices of those with lived experience.

Futures thinking strengthens strategic preparedness

Finally, the analysis highlights the value of futures and horizon scanning approaches. Given the pace at which exploitation evolves, policymaking must move beyond reactive responses toward anticipatory, resilient strategies. Futures approaches enable policymakers to identify emerging risks, test policies against a range of plausible conditions, and design interventions that remain effective under uncertainty.

Chapter 5: The Preferred Future State

Backcasting is a futures method that begins with a clearly defined preferred future and works backwards to identify the steps needed to reach it from the present. Scenario E, set out in Annex A, describes a future in which the UK is recognised as a global leader in preventing and addressing the risks associated with modern slavery and human trafficking. This section sets out a possible pathway towards that desirable future. The mitigations proposed by stakeholders during the backcasting exercise are presented in Annex B.

The Preferred Future State: Summary

Scenario E describes a world in 10 years' time that is shaped by extensive conflict outside of Europe and large-scale migration. Regardless, the UK System is effective, well structured, well financed, and agile to changes in MSHT. There is effective partnership working across agencies and the third sector, regulation is fit for purpose and enforced. The public are aware, recognise the harms associated with MSHT, and proactively engage with prevention and victims are supported and trust the UK system. The focus of the backcasting was to explore what would have needed to happen to end up at this point, what are the blockers and enablers for these to occur and to present a possible narrative pathway.

Survivor-informed preferred state of the UK response to modern slavery

The following description of the preferred future state is informed directly by insights from people with lived experience of modern slavery and human trafficking. These insights were gathered through a Summit of Lived Experience Advisory Panels, commissioned by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, and organised by the Human Trafficking Foundation. Through preparatory work and an interactive session at the Summit, participants considered emerging drivers and forms of exploitation and system responses. Full details of the Summit are presented in Annex C.

Survivor informed views of the preferred state

Survivor-informed preferred state	What this world looks like in practice, based on lived experience insight
Reduced vulnerability in an unstable global context	Vulnerability is reduced before harm occurs through stable migration routes, access to legal work, and clear rights information. Poverty, insecure immigration status, poor housing and isolation are addressed as prevention priorities. Education, healthcare and community integration are treated as core anti-slavery measures. Early, tailored support for children, disabled people, neurodivergent people and those with mental health needs makes exploitation harder to initiate and sustain.
A trusted, accessible system that victims actively use	Survivors trust authorities because engagement leads to safety, clarity and long-term support rather than punishment or disbelief. Safeguarding, immigration, policing and criminal justice systems operate coherently, predictably and transparently. Identification leads directly to protection and recovery, with trauma-informed practice embedded in reality, enabling survivors to come forward earlier and remain engaged with support.
Criminal networks constrained despite concealment and adaptation	Criminal networks are consistently disrupted even as they adapt, move online or operate across borders. Authorities understand digital, financial and international exploitation and respond at pace. Online recruitment, grooming, false job advertising and AI-enabled coercion are identified early, reporting routes are clear and accessible, and the burden of detection does not sit with victims having to prove harm.
Accountability embedded across the systems that enable exploitation	Responsibility for exploitation sits with the systems and actors that enable it, not with survivors. Recruiters, employers, agencies, platforms, financial institutions and regulators are held to account for the environments they create. Exploitative practices are no longer normalised, consequences are visible and meaningful, and investigations are system-led. UK-linked global supply chains are subject to real scrutiny and accountability.

**A society that
recognises, resists and
responds to exploitation**

Modern slavery is widely understood as something that can affect anyone, anywhere. Public awareness is informed, compassionate and shaped by lived experience. Communities, employers and institutions see recognising and responding to exploitation as part of their role. A Council of Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking plays an active role in policy, strategy, training and oversight, and survivors are respected as contributors to solutions.



Annex A: The Scenarios

Independent
Anti-Slavery
Commissioner

About this Annex

This Annex presents the scenarios developed with stakeholders through this research. These scenarios are not predictions, but plausible and evidence-based descriptions of how exploitation risks could develop if current pressures and trends continue. They are designed to help policymakers and practitioners explore what different futures might look like, understand how risks could interact and intensify, and consider where earlier intervention could reduce harm. Used together, the scenarios provide a practical tool for stress-testing existing responses and informing more preventative, long-term decision-making.

Scenario A

Strong enforcement and tight regulation create the appearance of control, even as exploitation adapts into harder-to-detect spaces.

The Global Stage

Global conflict stays at about the same level as now and is mostly limited to specific regions. However, more extreme political movements become more influential in many countries. This makes international cooperation harder, as governments focus more on their own national interests rather than working together.

Climate change and extreme weather continue at similar levels to today. They cause problems in specific places but do not lead to major global crises. Most people displaced by climate impacts move within their own countries or nearby areas, rather than across the world. Even so, these movements can make life harder for migrant workers who are already vulnerable.

Countries turn inward economically, leading to smaller global supply chains. Exports of large, low value goods fall sharply, while trade in high value, low volume goods stays broadly the same as it is now.

International cooperation between law enforcement agencies becomes weaker, especially when tackling economic crime and the use of modern slavery and human trafficking in global supply chains. Sharing data across borders is increasingly seen as risky because of organised crime, which reduces trust and limits joint action.

The UK cannot fully regulate or hold international companies to account on its own. It still needs strong cooperation with the US, EU and other countries to take effective action.

The UK in Focus

The UK has become more centralised and more controlled by the government. Power sits more strongly with the executive, and people who disagree are more restricted. This is justified in the name of national security, controlling borders, and protecting the economy.

In response to an uncertain situation at home and abroad, there is long-term political support for strong enforcement and safeguarding. Law enforcement agencies are very well funded, have advanced technology, and have wide powers. They operate at national, regional, and local levels.

The UK can afford this because the domestic economy has grown. As imports from overseas have declined, UK businesses have had to produce more at home. This has led to a boom in British manufacturing and farming. However, this growth has

damaged the environment. Regulation has been weak, and polluting energy sources have been brought back to keep energy costs down.

Working in partnership across government bodies, local authorities, charities, and community groups is no longer a political priority. State control is favoured instead. Where partnerships do exist, there is little trust, openness, or shared resources. Because partnerships are under-funded, victims are less willing to trust authorities, information is not shared effectively, and safeguarding is weaker. Low trust means people are less likely to come forward, allowing exploiters to keep control over those they harm.

In the UK, the laws dealing with modern slavery and human trafficking have been tightened, and immigration rules have become more restrictive. This reflects public support and a wider focus on reducing risk and maintaining control. Authorities now have stronger surveillance powers and face less legal oversight, which allows them to act quickly but reduces independent checks and challenge.

Having stronger borders does not mean fewer migrants. Instead, how vulnerable people are depends largely on visa rules and how limited legal routes are. Irregular migrants, people working without legal status, and refugees remain at very high risk of exploitation. Migrants on seasonal farm visas, skilled worker visas, and student visas have only limited protection. Tighter border controls often push vulnerable people into illegal routes and greater reliance on agents or middlemen, which can increase their risk of exploitation rather than reduce it. Poor relations with France have also led to more people crossing the Channel in small boats.

High-profile investment in enforcement creates the impression that MSHT are under firm control. Government messaging focuses on arrests, raids, and disruption figures. This reassures the public and encourages the belief that the problem has been largely solved and does not need much further attention. At the same time, immigration policy continues to drive demand for cheap and hidden labour. Economic pressure means people who are not usually seen as at risk are increasingly pushed into unsafe or exploitative work, especially in low-profit sectors, seasonal jobs, and private homes.

Worker protections remain uneven. Risk continues to vary by sector and location. High-risk areas include care, logistics, food production, retail, construction, vape shops, barbers, car washes, cannabis cultivation, platform work, and similar sectors. Jobs with low profit margins that rely heavily on vulnerable workers, often migrants, remain especially exposed to exploitation.

At the same time, the UK's ageing population increases demand for workers in care, logistics, and manual jobs. Older people holding large savings also face a growing risk of financial abuse and exploitation. People working inside private homes and those with cognitive impairments remain particularly vulnerable.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

The UK keeps tight control over digital activity and financial systems. Online platforms, including adult service websites, are closely monitored. Financial activity, including the use of cryptocurrency and AI-driven payment systems, is also heavily checked.

As these online spaces become more tightly policed, criminals may shift sexual exploitation elsewhere. Some activity moves back into more visible offline settings, such as street-based sex work. Other activity goes further underground, using encrypted messaging services or foreign platforms that sit outside UK control, including sites based in countries like China and Russia.

Enforcement increasingly focuses on money rather than people. There is a strong emphasis on tracing funds, seizing assets, and disrupting criminal businesses that can be clearly identified. Success is measured through visible outcomes such as arrests, seizures, and financial disruption, rather than long-term prevention or improvements in safety for victims.

AI helps authorities monitor activity and spot patterns, but it does not replace how exploitation actually happens. Recruitment and control still rely heavily on face-to-face contact and community networks. At the same time, digital tools are increasingly used to promote and facilitate exploitation through social media and other online channels, even when the most harmful activity itself takes place offline.

Focusing on success in tightly regulated online platforms has knock-on effects. As these spaces become harder to use for exploitation, organised crime groups move their activity elsewhere. This includes encrypted messaging apps, closed online groups, and systems that mix online contact with offline abuse. Exploitation also shifts into harder-to-see areas such as private homes, hidden criminal activity, and practices like forced surrogacy or egg harvesting.

For children, this shift makes harm harder to detect. When abuse is organised through encrypted tools or happens partly online and partly offline, it is less visible and more difficult for safeguards to work.

Criminal networks also use technology and informal or poorly regulated financial systems, such as Hawala or certain payment apps, to move money and avoid monitoring. At the same time, low public concern and misleading narratives about the problem being under control help keep exploitation hidden and out of sight.

Even though enforcement is getting better on paper, the way victims are supported often feels cold and impersonal. People who have been exploited often feel their needs are not fully understood or taken seriously. Many are scared to

Speak out because they worry about what will happen if they do, and the help available to them is often confusing, patchy, or spread across different services.

Funding cuts to charities and community organisations make this worse. These groups have less time and capacity to build trust, support victims properly, and speak independently on their behalf. People without secure immigration status are pushed further into hiding. Many fear that coming forward will lead to immigration action, increased surveillance, or their personal information being shared without their control. This fear stops people from asking for help.

Civil society organisations are also working in a more restricted political environment. With less funding and limited influence over national policy, they struggle to close the trust gap between victims and the state. Differences in resources between police forces in different areas, combined with ongoing under-investment in partnership working, further weaken safeguarding.

At the same time, poor worker protections in low-profit sectors allow exploitation to stay built into parts of the labour market. This is especially true in sectors under pressure to meet demand. Seasonal farm workers, migrant workers, platform workers, and factory workers remain at high risk.

Criminal exploitation, including forcing people to commit crimes, moves into new areas. Meanwhile, the gig economy, delivery work, and the care sector continue to place workers in vulnerable situations. Economic pressure, an ageing population, and low public awareness all make these risks worse and harder to address.

Clear, visible enforcement creates the feeling that the situation is under control. But exploitation does not stop. It changes. It becomes more hidden, relies more on technology, and is harder to detect.

Well organised and well-funded criminal groups take advantage of weak international intelligence sharing and complicated legal routes into the UK. They move victims through systems that appear lawful and compliant, which makes exploitation harder to spot.

As a result, the UK gets better at tackling what is visible, such as known sites and obvious criminal activity. At the same time, risk builds up in places with less oversight. This includes private homes, city centres, rural areas, and communities that already have low trust in authorities. With less partnership working in these spaces, early warning signs are missed and prevention becomes harder.

Public messages that modern slavery and human trafficking are under control can also have unintended effects. Legitimate businesses may face suspicion and reputational damage, even when they are not doing anything wrong.

Overall, this shows that investing more money in law enforcement alone is not enough. Better outcomes also require cultural change, joined-up data systems, strong partnerships, and well-informed decision-making.

Women, Children and UK Nationals

Changes in how exploitation happens affect different groups in different ways.

For women and girls, strong action against visible online markets and adult service websites initially reduces more obvious forms of sexual exploitation. However, this does not stop exploitation altogether. Instead, criminals move their activity into harder-to-see places. Activity moves into encrypted messaging apps, private online groups, and informal offline networks. This makes exploitation much harder for authorities and support services to spot and investigate. The harm continues, but it is less visible.

Children experience a similar pattern. Grooming and exploitation increasingly happen through encrypted apps, private social media groups, and a mix of online contact and offline abuse. Because this activity is spread across multiple digital spaces that are not routinely monitored, it is harder to identify risks and protect children. Detecting abuse now requires more specialist skills and deeper investigation to spot patterns that are no longer obvious.

For UK nationals, a stronger domestic economy reduces some of the immediate risks linked to job insecurity and poverty. However, vulnerability does not disappear. Instead, it changes form. Growing savings and pension wealth make older people more attractive targets for financial exploitation, leading to a gradual rise in pensioner abuse and financial pressure. At the same time, weak protections in some low-profit sectors mean that some UK nationals are still at risk of exploitative work, especially in informal jobs or fast-growing industries where oversight is limited.

Scenario B

Strong enforcement coexists with weaker legal frameworks and digital regulation.

The Global Stage

Global politics increasingly prioritises economic advantage over shared values. Armed conflict tends to focus on control of key resources. Large-scale wars are generally avoided, but governments and multinational companies are willing to use force when it helps protect profits or commercial interests.

Climate change and extreme weather continue at roughly the same levels as today. They cause disruption in specific places but do not lead to major global crises. Most people displaced by climate impacts move locally, so there is only limited pressure on international migration policies.

International cooperation between law enforcement agencies is weakening. This is especially true for tackling economic crime and the use of modern slavery and human trafficking in global supply chains. Data shared between countries is often unreliable or compromised by criminal groups, which reduces trust and makes joint action less effective.

Weak regulation of cryptocurrency and a lack of transparency in global finance allow criminal networks to operate across borders more easily. These networks exploit global supply chains and hide illegal money flows.

At the same time, growing inequality, secrecy in financial systems, and poorly regulated digital and crypto markets put pressure on countries, businesses, and consumers to look for cheaper goods and labour. This indirectly supports exploitation. Many people become more accepting of poor working conditions because of rising costs and limited understanding of how exploitation happens. As a result, market-driven abuse becomes easier to sustain.

The UK in Focus

The UK has strong enforcement and safeguarding bodies that are well funded and work together at national, regional, and local levels. These agencies mainly focus on crimes that drain money from the UK economy or involve violent organisations. Activities such as money laundering, drug trafficking, and tax evasion are heavily targeted and closely controlled.

At the same time, the legal framework around work and migration is relatively loose. Migration policy is openly linked to what the labour market needs. When there are fewer jobs, deportation is used more often. For many people, their right to stay in the UK depends on their job. This makes workers more dependent on employers and agents and increases the risk of exploitation.

Work visas can be withdrawn, leading to deportation. This creates widespread and built-in vulnerability, especially for migrant workers in low-profit sectors. Public views about the kinds of jobs migrants do can reinforce stereotypes and increase social division.

Funding labour market enforcement is not seen as politically rewarding, so it is often given low priority. There is a degree of public acceptance, alongside government, businesses, and online platforms, of exploitative practices because they help keep jobs filled and costs low.

People trapped in exploitative work often find it hard to report abuse. They fear losing their job, facing immigration action, or getting caught up in legal problems. In some cases, businesses and even fellow workers actively discourage people from speaking out.

Economic pressure causes cycles of hiring and job losses in low-profit sectors. More profitable industries are able to offer better pay and stronger worker protections. Struggling sectors often rely on unclear and poor labour practices to stay competitive, and in difficult periods wages may be delayed or withheld.

Because growth is prioritised, migration is often used to fill jobs that local workers do not want. This increases stereotypes about migrant workers and can prolong exploitation. Workers rarely go on strike or report abuse because if a business fails, workers may lose their job and, for migrants, face deportation. As conditions worsen, exploitation starts to affect a wider group of people, including those who are more educated or from middle-income backgrounds.

Employers increasingly use technology to monitor and control workers. This control is often impersonal, using cameras, tracking systems, or automated tools. Workers may be pressured into compliance through threats, with decisions made remotely and without direct human contact.

UK enforcement bodies are well funded, but they mainly focus on crimes that are clearly visible and cause direct economic harm. Many businesses see regulators as a barrier rather than a partner, which makes them less willing to share information. Enforcement and safeguarding systems also struggle to keep up with abuse that happens through digital platforms.

Weak regulation of digital markets allows platform-based and AI-driven labour systems to operate with little oversight and in legal grey areas. This increases the scale and reach of exploitation. Some companies take advantage of this by outsourcing labour overseas, using fake recruitment routes or visas, or expanding technology-led exploitation inside the UK. As automation grows and jobs become scarcer, more workers are pushed into exploitative arrangements.

An ageing population puts additional pressure on the workforce. At the same time, lower pensions and reduced welfare support make households more vulnerable, especially older workers. In sectors like care services and gig work, intense competition to keep costs down leads to corner-cutting and poorer standards. This increases exploitation, particularly for people with low incomes or limited options.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Visible success in enforcement creates a tricky situation. On the surface, the system has reduced violent crime and drug-related violence. But exploitation does not disappear. Instead, it adapts. In some cases it moves away from traditional criminal gangs and becomes part of ordinary businesses. In other cases, it shifts into spaces that are less regulated and harder to monitor.

Sexual exploitation supported by digital technology increasingly takes place on mainstream online platforms. This is a global problem that the UK cannot control on its own. Artificial intelligence and cryptocurrencies are used to automate recruitment, hide activity, and move money across borders more easily.

Criminal networks take advantage of weak international cooperation and governments' focus on economic convenience. They move victims through systems that appear legal and compliant but are still highly exploitative. Enforcement agencies are often forced to respond after harm has already happened, and they struggle to predict new forms of abuse, especially those linked to international networks or digital platforms.

Cross-border operations, AI-driven recruitment, and online platforms allow exploitation to grow quickly and change form. At the same time, employers use technology to monitor and control workers from a distance, making exploitation easier to manage and harder to challenge.

Many victims see the enforcement system as well funded and powerful, but not focused on protecting them. People who are being exploited often do not come forward because they fear immigration action or other legal consequences. This fear keeps many people silent and reduces trust in authorities.

Charities and public services try to step in, but they cannot keep up with how widespread exploitation has become or how normalised some exploitative practices are. Ongoing economic pressure plays a major role. Low-profit industries depend on cheap labour, the population is ageing, and welfare support has been reduced. Together, these factors create long-term conditions where exploitation can continue.

Because children can be paid far less, they are sometimes used as cheap labour. Families under financial pressure may support this, taking children out of school and into work to improve the household's income. Children in these situations lose

education and face long-term harm. People with learning disabilities or cognitive difficulties are also at high risk, and there are limited protections in place for them. Severe crimes such as organ harvesting remain rare in the UK and Europe. However, these practices have increased in poorer regions. Weak UK regulation, poor international cooperation, and pressure to keep costs low mean that products linked to these abuses can still enter British markets without detection.

Even though enforcement looks strong overall, modern slavery and human trafficking are often treated as a lower priority in sectors where flexibility and low costs matter more than protection. Some exploitation stays hidden in international systems or online spaces and does not clearly fall within existing legal definitions. This keeps public awareness low and limits accountability.

Exploitative businesses often close and reopen under new names, lobby against regulation, or cut corners to save money. At the same time, public focus on cheaper prices and cost-saving reinforces tolerance of abusive practices. As a result, exploitation continues beneath the surface, even when the system appears to be working.

There is a clear split between different parts of the economy. Profitable and stable industries are better able to protect workers. In contrast, lower-profit sectors that are under pressure to keep costs down often rely on unclear recruitment methods and digital middlemen to find and manage workers.

Lack of transparency around money, together with weak oversight of cryptocurrency, makes it easier for exploitation to happen across borders and harder to detect. This weakens the overall system.

Sudden changes in demand, ongoing economic pressure, and poor worker protections push people into exploitative jobs. This happens both in physical workplaces and online. Workers in the gig economy, delivery platforms, cleaning, hospitality, and similar services are particularly affected.

When enforcement focuses strongly on obvious and visible markets, modern slavery and trafficking are pushed into hidden spaces. These include international networks, digital platforms, and more resilient underground systems. The result is a hidden economy that adapts quickly and is difficult to monitor.

Organised crime takes advantage of gaps in regulation and weak oversight. In some sectors, criminal groups can operate almost like normal businesses and face little challenge. Traffickers also profit from the growing use of digital tools and artificial intelligence to recruit and control people.

Trust in public institutions is low. Responsibility for reporting exploitation is unclear and spread across many actors, so public engagement is inconsistent. This lack of

clarity and confidence allows exploitative practices to become further embedded and harder to challenge.

Women Children and UK Nationals

In this situation, exploitation becomes more severe and more deeply built into digital systems and the economy. Weak rules for online platforms allow sexual exploitation to spread across everyday websites and apps. Women and girls are targeted using automated profiling, social media contact, and encrypted messaging. Because enforcement mainly focuses on violent crime and financial offences, large-scale online exploitation grows with little oversight. This makes it harder to tell where legal digital business ends and abuse begins.

Children face even greater risks. AI tools, automated messages, and cryptocurrency payments allow exploitation networks to find, recruit, and move children quickly, both online and in the real world. At the same time, financial pressure on families leads to more child labour in the UK. Some families rely on children to help earn money, pulling them out of school and into unsafe or exploitative work.

For UK nationals, cuts to welfare and unstable job markets increase vulnerability. Older workers and people in low-profit sectors are especially affected. Financial pressure pushes some into insecure or informal jobs where pay may be withheld, workers are closely monitored through technology, and control is maintained through pressure or threats. Although this exploitation can look like normal work on the surface, it continues because workers depend on these jobs and have limited protection.

Scenario C

Strong national and international liberal institutions, with good technological knowledge, in a world gripped by austerity.

The Global Stage

Strong international organisations, shared rules, and ongoing diplomacy have greatly reduced the risk of countries going to war with each other. Clear global expectations against violence, good cooperation between states, and generally well-regulated digital and financial systems have helped create stability. Large-scale wars no longer happen. Major powers have started to reduce nuclear weapons, and global arms controls are stricter. Radical states and extremist groups have declined sharply because they have less power, less support, and fewer arguments that resonate.

Climate change still has an impact, but its effects have been reduced. The transition to cleaner systems has been expensive, increasing government debt and leading to widespread spending cuts. Countries work well together across borders, and digital platforms and cryptocurrencies are mostly well regulated.

However, tight public finances and limited resources mean enforcement agencies around the world cannot always act as strongly as they would like. Organised crime groups take advantage of this, choosing where to operate based on where they think enforcement is weakest. Even though international cooperation is strong, economic stability remains fragile because of high spending on global institutions, pressure on national budgets, and insecure labour markets worldwide.

Visible inequality has grown. Celebrities have truly global reach and can build enormous wealth, even those who would once have been considered minor figures. This makes inequality very obvious to the public.

Low prosecution rates, slow court processes, and weak systems for managing offenders allow organised crime to operate with relatively low risk. Liberal values still dominate globally, but there is growing political resentment at the spending cuts and economic pressure that come with this system.

The UK in Focus

The UK remains strongly committed to protecting people from exploitation. Its laws are robust, and the country is seen as a global leader in regulation and intelligence sharing. The UK has some of the strongest rules in the world for digital platforms, AI, and financial systems, including cryptocurrencies. These systems are closely monitored, regularly updated, and shared with other countries. Law enforcement and regulatory bodies work across national, regional, and local levels and cooperate closely with trusted international partners.

Despite this, limited public funding restricts how much these agencies can actually do. Enforcement can be slow and fragmented, and poor coordination between different agencies often delays action against criminals who operate across multiple sectors. Public awareness of exploitation is high, and communities frequently pass on information. However, law enforcement often struggles to act quickly or effectively on this intelligence, which can reduce public trust and confidence.

Migration and labour policies are generally fair, modern, and designed to protect both UK residents and asylum seekers. However, unemployment is higher than it is today, and the continued use of tied or restrictive work visas increases the risk of exploitation. People who lose long-term work or fall out of legal migration routes can become undocumented, which makes them especially vulnerable.

Public bodies continue to prioritise safeguarding, but limited capacity and pressure to support economic growth restrict how much they can intervene. Civil and criminal enforcement systems often work slowly together. Better and faster use of civil enforcement tools could close down non-compliant businesses more effectively.

Changes in employment law, including the Employment Rights Act 2025, combined with looser oversight and budget pressures, have increased self-employed and contract-based work. This reduces visibility through systems like PAYE and makes exploitation harder to detect. As a result, more people are at risk, particularly in sectors such as construction.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

MSHT continues to be a serious risk, but the problem is now built more deeply into everyday systems rather than standing out clearly. Protecting adults and children is essential to preventing harm, but because these systems are under-funded, action often happens only after damage has already been done.

The UK has some of the most advanced digital monitoring in the world. It closely tracks AI-driven platforms and cryptocurrency activity, supported by strong UK laws that fit well with international rules. On paper, this system is strong.

In practice, criminal groups keep adapting. They find new ways to get around regulation, work across different types of crime, such as fraud, drugs, and sexual exploitation, and take advantage of gaps in processes. Links between criminals are often loose and hard to spot and are usually only discovered through tracking money rather than people.

Although the regulatory system is solid in principle, enforcement bodies such as the police, courts, and labour market inspectors do not have enough resources. They receive large amounts of intelligence but cannot act on it quickly enough.

Labour market enforcement is particularly under-funded, including bodies like the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority.

Because enforcement focuses mainly on criminal investigations, it is not enough on its own to tackle modern slavery and trafficking. A wider approach is needed, involving communities, civil authorities, worker protections, and prevention. Criminal networks take advantage of slow enforcement, changing their methods faster than authorities can move from spotting problems to shutting them down.

Economic hardship is affecting many households, public services are under constant pressure, and worker protections are weak. Together, this makes more people vulnerable and allows the hidden economy to grow.

More workers are hired as self-employed, through limited companies, or on short-term contracts. These workers have fewer rights and protections, and their work is harder for authorities to see and monitor. This means less information reaches enforcement agencies. Rising debt and insecure jobs push more people into risky situations, while hidden businesses and digital platforms make it easier for exploitation to happen both in the UK and across borders.

More British nationals are now at risk as well. With fewer job opportunities at home, some people look for work overseas, where exploitation and trafficking can happen, sometimes funded or organised by people based in the UK.

Clear, high-profile exploitation in regulated institutions, such as hospitals, is rare. Instead, exploitation tends to be spread out, built into everyday work, and organised through digital platforms or informal arrangements. These forms are harder to spot and deal with.

Criminals adapt quickly. They take advantage of slow court processes, weak systems for managing offenders, and low prosecution rates. While authorities struggle to move cases forward, exploiters continue operating with relatively low risk.

People generally believe the government is acting to protect them. However, long delays between gathering information and taking action are damaging trust. This is especially serious for children who are being exploited. Slow responses are leaving many children from poorer backgrounds exposed to harm. In communities where people do not believe authorities will act, exploitation becomes harder to spot and stop. Even when concerns are reported, the lack of visible action weakens public confidence.

Criminals use reputation-based and digital tools to control people. This includes using fake images, videos, or messages created with technology to blackmail or threaten victims, particularly in the sex industry. Tackling demand is important.

Penalising people who knowingly use services linked to exploitation could help discourage abuse.

Public awareness of exploitation is high, and many victims or community members do report concerns. Understanding of modern slavery and trafficking is improving across different sectors, types of exploitation, and local areas. However, huge amounts of information are gathered and much of it is not properly used. Better consistency between local authorities, enforcement bodies, and different countries would help share good practice and improve results.

Stronger checks on supply chains, starting with government procurement, could make a real difference. Making greater use of civil powers to seize assets and money would help disrupt criminal networks more effectively.

Overall, MSHT is restricted by laws and technology, but they continue because enforcement is slow and under-resourced, not because rules are weak. Unless safeguarding, labour regulation, and enforcement systems are properly funded, well-coordinated, and able to adapt, exploitation will continue across many sectors and will increasingly rely on technology and financial systems to operate with low risk.

Women, Children, and UK Nationals

For women and girls, strong laws, international cooperation, and close monitoring of online and financial systems reduce many obvious forms of exploitation. However, spending cuts and slow responses from authorities mean exploitation still continues in less obvious ways. Criminal groups take advantage of delays between spotting abuse and stopping it. They move exploitation into harder-to-see areas such as informal jobs, hidden workplaces, or situations where people are controlled through debt, housing arrangements, or online pressure and manipulation.

Children benefit from high public awareness and strong expectations that they should be protected. Concerns about exploitation are often reported by parents, schools, communities, and frontline workers. However, limited resources and slow court processes mean authorities cannot always act quickly. This gap between reporting and action reduces confidence and allows some harm to continue. Children from low-income families are especially at risk, as they are more likely to face pressure, online grooming, or criminal exploitation.

Ongoing economic pressure and higher unemployment mean more UK nationals are taking insecure work. This includes informal jobs, self-employment, or work with little job security. Although rules to protect workers exist, people in these kinds of jobs are often missed by normal monitoring and support systems.

As a result, more UK nationals are facing poor and exploitative working conditions. This is especially common in sectors hit by spending cuts, low pay, and weak enforcement of worker protections.

Scenario D

Climate pressures and infrastructure demands drive migration and informal labour in the UK, creating fertile conditions for MSHT despite high public awareness.

The Global Stage

Climate change is treated as a serious, urgent threat. Because of this, countries work together more closely, which lowers the risk of major wars between states. However, conflict is not fully under control. Fragile regions still experience violence and instability.

Extreme weather happens often and is very severe. It creates harsh conditions that make exploitation more likely. It disrupts supply chains, raises the cost of living, and puts ongoing pressure on humanitarian systems. More people are forced to leave their homes because of environmental damage and economic disruption. Many try to stay close to where they lived before, which creates crowded areas where people are especially vulnerable.

Global governance becomes focused on managing constant crises. This pulls attention and funding away from tackling modern slavery and human trafficking. Countries still work well together on climate action and energy transition, but public attention shifts away from cross-border crimes like trafficking and exploitation.

In theory, international law enforcement cooperation continues. In practice, agencies struggle to deal with complex cases linked to large-scale migration. Intelligence sharing, joint investigations, and coordinated action weaken, especially in countries where recruitment is poorly regulated.

Unstable markets, growing inequality, and deep economic gaps put further strain on governments and institutions. Economic insecurity combined with forced displacement creates extreme conditions where exploitation flourishes and more people become vulnerable.

Digital and financial systems expand rapidly across borders. Oversight of AI-based platforms and crypto-assets is uneven and still developing, which creates gaps that criminals quickly exploit. Children, and women and girls, are especially affected. New groups of vulnerable people also emerge as living conditions become more unstable because of environmental shocks.

AI makes it easier to move victims quickly and hide financial transactions. However, modern slavery and trafficking are still driven by people. They rely on direct contact, manipulation, and community-based networks. Online grooming, fraud, and other digital pressure increase, but technology does not replace face-to-face control.

The UK in Focus

The UK is under ongoing economic and social strain. Extreme weather and the need to adapt infrastructure require large amounts of money and workers. An ageing population and labour shortages mean the country depends more on migrant workers and people on low incomes. This is especially true in rebuilding, construction, and other manual jobs, but also affects skilled roles.

Migration rules are adjusted to meet labour shortages, but checks and oversight become weaker. More people end up working in informal or unrecorded jobs. New industries linked to clean energy and climate infrastructure create jobs, but they also create new risks of exploitation. This is especially the case where workers' visas are tied to a single employer. As migrant numbers increase and labour rules are loosened, employers who want to cut corners find it easier to exploit workers.

Local councils often lack the power or resources to respond effectively, while national systems are stretched and under-funded. Enforcement bodies like the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority are small compared to the scale of the problem, leaving major gaps in protection.

Government spending is focused on climate resilience, infrastructure, and energy security. As a result, safeguarding receives less attention and funding. Agencies responsible for enforcement and protection are under-resourced, fragmented, and poorly coordinated within the UK and with other countries.

Plans to improve data sharing, intelligence gathering, and coordinated enforcement are limited. This makes it harder to intervene early or take effective action. Although laws stay largely the same, the ability to enforce them weakens. Without clear rights and strong international commitment, fewer survivors feel safe coming forward to report exploitation.

Public awareness of exploitation is growing, but so is a general acceptance that hidden and informal labour is helping to rebuild the country. People are worried about exploitation, yet many also accept weaker rules as a trade-off for getting work done and keeping the economy moving. Over time, exploitation starts to feel normal and becomes built into how the economy works.

Some people tolerate poor working conditions because they see them as better than the situations workers may have escaped from. This makes exploitation harder to see and easier to ignore. Charities and community organisations mostly react after harm has happened and do not have the power or resources to challenge these wider pressures.

As delays by authorities and lack of investment become more visible, victims lose confidence in the system. People are less likely to believe that reporting abuse will lead to timely or meaningful help, which allows exploitation to continue.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

MSHT grows rapidly in sectors that need a lot of workers and are poorly regulated. Industries like construction, logistics, care, farming, and infrastructure repair become especially risky. Informal and long-standing hidden markets in these sectors increase vulnerability for migrants, displaced people, and low-income households.

Weaker checks and more unrecorded work make exploitation harder to see. It becomes built into normal business activity rather than standing out as illegal. Exploitation often concentrates in places where there is high demand for rebuilding or climate-related work, such as areas affected by floods, storms, or drought.

The hidden economy becomes a routine part of rebuilding efforts. Poor working conditions start to feel normal, and the same people can be exploited again and again. Both UK nationals and migrant workers become more vulnerable due to poverty, gaps in social support, and insecure or short-term jobs.

Exploitation is built into how both skilled and unskilled workers are recruited. This often happens through open online platforms that are only lightly monitored. Oversight of AI-based recruitment tools and digital money systems is uneven, which makes abuse easier.

Exploiters use automated recruitment, international networks, and digital payment systems to grow quickly. Payments are often moved through informal or unregulated systems, such as Hawala or peer-to-peer apps, which makes the money hard to trace. These networks work across borders and split up tasks like recruiting, transporting, and exploiting people. This makes them harder to detect and disrupt.

Some digital tools also give vulnerable people access to job information, but this can increase risk when safeguards are weak or misleading offers are spread online. Because safeguarding has been pushed down the priority list, information about exploitation is not analysed well and action is slow. Many exploiters believe they are unlikely to be caught or punished, which reduces the deterrent effect of the law. Weak regulation and lack of resources create an environment where abuse can continue with little consequence.

Exploiters take advantage of deregulation and growing grey markets, spreading exploitation most easily in sectors with the least oversight. Many victims stay in exploitative situations because they believe returning to what they had before would be even worse.

Clear and obvious cases of exploitation do appear from time to time, but the bigger problem is quieter and harder to see. Subtle forms of labour abuse and online-enabled exploitation are spreading across many different sectors and locations. Exploitation affects both skilled and unskilled workers. Short-term visas, work permits tied to one employer, and weak checks during recruitment allow people to be exploited in ways that still look legal on the surface.

More extreme forms of exploitation, such as forced surrogacy or organ harvesting, appear in specific high-risk groups. These are often linked to conflict, poverty, or desperation. At the same time, online sexual abuse and grooming continue to grow, alongside labour exploitation.

Exploitation increases sharply among very vulnerable groups, including people with learning or cognitive difficulties and older or unwell people. The hidden economy becomes a routine part of rebuilding and recovery efforts, making poor working conditions feel normal.

Many victims do not believe that reporting abuse will lead to quick or meaningful protection. This discourages people from coming forward and keeps harm hidden. Exploitation continues not because laws no longer exist, but because governments are focused on managing ongoing crises and resources are stretched elsewhere. This allows harm to grow out of sight and become widely tolerated.

Over time, exploitation becomes part of how systems operate. Many victims stay in harmful situations because they see no better alternative. There is little political appetite for stronger regulation, which weakens local safeguarding efforts. As migration increases and more vulnerable people arrive, fewer feel safe enough to seek help, making exploitation even harder to detect.

Many people are aware that exploitation exists, but this awareness often comes with a level of complacency. At the same time, agencies responsible for responding are under-funded and fragmented. Public campaigns help people recognise the problem, but there is limited capacity, energy, or momentum to step in and take action when harm is identified.

Public and private organisations try to work together to support victims, but whether someone gets help often depends on how easy it is to access services and funding. This affects whether people feel it is worth coming forward.

More victims now have insecure immigration status. Negative attitudes toward migrants can discourage them from trusting authorities or asking for help. As a result, a growing number of victims remain hidden, unsupported, and unheard.

Women, Children, and UK Nationals

or women and girls, the growth of informal and poorly regulated work increases the risk of exploitation. This is especially true in sectors like care, farming, logistics, and infrastructure repair. Even though many people know exploitation happens, enforcement bodies often lack the staff and funding to respond properly. At the same time, rebuilding efforts rely heavily on informal labour, which means abuse is often ignored or accepted as part of getting work done.

Women working in private homes, care roles, or short-term infrastructure jobs are particularly at risk. They can become dependent on employers or middlemen for work, housing, or visa security, which makes it easier for others to control them or pressure them into unsafe and unfair conditions.

Children face greater risks as large numbers of people move and more work happens in informal and unregulated ways. These scattered labour markets are hard for authorities to keep track of. In areas where there is a lot of rebuilding work or not enough workers, children may be pulled into informal jobs or exploited in criminal activity because of local economic pressures. Even though communities and public services are more aware of these risks, safeguarding systems are often disjointed and understaffed, which means action is slow or does not happen at all.

UK nationals are also affected. Work linked to climate adaptation and rebuilding creates demand for flexible, short-term labour. Some UK workers take informal or insecure jobs because they need the income. While this can help in the short term, weaker protections and limited oversight mean these workers face a higher risk of unfair or exploitative conditions. This is especially true for people on low incomes or those already under financial strain.

Scenario E

A humanitarian Britain stands strong at home with high trust and capable systems containing visible harm, yet ongoing large scale global conflicts drives displacement and exploitation that adapts and migrates into international shadows.

The Global Stage

Outside Europe, global tensions are extremely high. Many regions are experiencing serious armed conflict, especially where political instability, poverty, and social division come together. Large numbers of people are fleeing these areas. Most first move to nearby countries, but many are also travelling further to reach more stable places.

Climate change and extreme weather are getting slightly worse, but they are not the main driver of displacement. Conflict is the bigger cause. Still, climate impacts add extra pressure and make people even more vulnerable.

Modern slavery and human trafficking are happening within these large migration movements. War, instability, and environmental stress increase the number of people who are desperate for safety or work, making them easier to exploit.

Many governments outside Europe are focused on security and internal problems. As a result, international law enforcement cooperation has weakened, especially beyond Europe. While European countries still work closely together, cooperation is much weaker elsewhere. This allows exploitation to move outside Europe more easily and highlights the need for stronger cooperation between countries, both regionally and globally.

International politics have become more inward-looking. Many countries are focused on protecting their own interests, tightening immigration rules, and only cooperating with others when it brings clear benefits to them.

Europe has mostly resisted this shift. European countries continue to favour cooperation based on shared rules and agreements, and they try to stay out of direct involvement in global conflicts.

This has created a growing divide in how the world works. Cooperation within Europe remains relatively strong, but outside Europe it is weaker, more fragmented, and less reliable.

Economic instability is increasing worldwide as conflicts disrupt supply chains and shake investor confidence. Trade within Europe is holding up relatively well, but Europe is importing less from outside the region, and the cost of living is rising quickly.

Financial uncertainty has also reduced trust in cryptocurrencies. Both governments and organised crime groups are turning back to physical assets and trade-based methods they see as more reliable.

Outside Europe, some governments allow or turn a blind eye to illegal economic activity. This creates environments where well-organised criminal networks can operate more easily and take advantage of weak controls.

The UK in Focus

The UK is stepping back from trying to influence the whole world and is focusing more on being strong at home and working closely with European partners. It increasingly presents itself as a country that puts humanitarian values first, with protection, welfare, and human rights built into how it sees itself and makes policy.

The UK has strong laws and a clear focus on putting victims first, which strengthens its reputation as a global leader in regulation. Policies on modern slavery are clearly separated from immigration policy. Tackling illegal immigration is treated as a different issue from protecting victims and enforcing laws against modern slavery and human trafficking.

Public awareness of MSHT is high, and there is little tolerance for visible abuse. Because people trust institutions more and understand the issue better, exploitation is easier to spot. This creates a positive cycle. Victims are more likely to recognise what is happening to them, come forward for support, and encourage others to do the same.

The UK's reputation for protecting people and upholding human rights makes it an attractive place for those fleeing war and conflict. The government brings in clearer visa and immigration routes to manage arrivals, but demand is usually higher than the system can handle. Because of this, some migrants still rely on agents or informal middlemen to help them enter the country or find work.

Public attitudes toward immigration and ethnicity are generally positive. This confidence is stronger when people believe protection systems are fair, inclusive, and work well across borders.

However, exploitation can still happen through legal immigration routes. As more pathways open, there are more opportunities for abuse by unscrupulous employers or intermediaries. This creates political pressure and broader impacts across society, even where overall support for humanitarian protection remains strong.

The UK works closely and effectively with European countries. However, cooperation with countries outside Europe is much weaker. This creates gaps in

shared information and makes it harder to stop exploitation across long international supply chains.

Safeguarding and enforcement agencies in the UK are well funded, skilled, and work closely together at national, regional, and local levels. They also have strong links with charities and community organisations. MSHT is treated across government as a safeguarding issue, not just a crime issue. Staff across public services receive compulsory training so there is a shared approach and consistent standards.

Partnerships between government bodies, businesses, and charities are stronger and more established. This has improved how victims are identified, how criminals are prosecuted, and how exploitation is prevented in the first place.

There is long-term political support and funding for this work. As more victims come forward and more organised criminal groups are identified, pressure increases on courts, prisons, and case-management systems. Even so, the commitment to safeguarding and enforcement remains strong to meet this growing demand.

Digital and financial rules are strong, especially in the UK and Europe, and the use of AI is tightly controlled. However, there are still gaps when harmful activity starts outside Europe, where these rules do not apply as strongly.

New technologies are being used in new ways to exploit people. This includes abuse that happens entirely online and growing types of fraud. Better regulation helps reduce some of this harm, but many people still do not have the knowledge or skills to spot AI-based scams and deception, which keeps them vulnerable.

Advances in robotics and AI-based sexual technologies may reduce some direct physical harm. However, they can also make abusive behaviour seem more normal, reinforce harmful attitudes, and contribute to addiction and social isolation. These risks have led to calls for, and the introduction of, stronger regulation.

Workers' rights are strong, but the rising cost of living means that in some sectors wages do not go as far as they used to. Even with legal protections in place, some people still struggle financially.

To address this, a universal wage system has been introduced. Stronger regulation of industries, tougher labour laws, and better safety and protection measures in higher-risk workplaces have reduced the chances for exploitation to take hold.

The UK's population is getting older, but most older people remain in good health and have strong social support. This helps reduce the risk of exploitation among older age groups. However, older people are more likely to be targeted by AI-based

scams. How much they trust institutions, shaped by their own experiences and the country's history, affects whether they are willing to ask for help when something goes wrong.

People who struggle with digital skills or who have learning or cognitive difficulties are especially at risk from online scams and AI-driven exploitation.

Low youth unemployment means fewer young people are being pushed into exploitative work because of money worries. At the same time, good health care and social support for older people help protect them from more direct forms of exploitation.

Even so, some low-profit sectors, such as gig work and delivery platforms, remain vulnerable to hidden exploitation. This happens despite formal worker protections, as abuse in these areas can still be difficult to see and challenge.

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

In this situation, modern slavery and human trafficking do not become easier to see. Instead, they change and adapt. Strong action by authorities and high public awareness push criminal groups to work more quietly and more cleverly, staying largely out of sight.

Because the chances of being caught and convicted are still relatively low, exploitation remains a high-reward and low-risk activity for criminals. Each time enforcement improves, organised crime groups adjust their methods and create new, more hidden ways to exploit people. As a result, exploitation becomes harder to spot rather than disappearing.

Recruitment abuse is now mostly happening in the hidden economy, especially in low-profit sectors where wages are under pressure, even with a universal living wage in place. When enforcement agencies do uncover organised criminal networks, they are usually able to act quickly and shut them down effectively.

Stricter monitoring of websites and online platforms has led criminals to move sexual exploitation and online coercion into new places. This includes more heavily encrypted apps and systems spread across different countries. Because the UK and Europe have strong regulations, many criminal groups move their control systems, websites, or money routes outside Europe, where rules are weaker.

As cryptocurrency becomes less attractive and harder to use safely, criminals rely more on mixed methods. These include cash-heavy businesses, using trade to hide illegal money, and working through offshore middlemen to move funds and avoid detection.

Most victims trust the UK's safeguarding systems. This is because the UK is widely seen as taking a strong, humane approach and putting real resources into protecting people. Secure digital systems that let victims safely upload and store evidence make it easier to work with the police and courts. This builds confidence, helps cases move forward, and reduces the risk of evidence being lost.

High public awareness and trust in institutions make MSHT easier to see and less socially acceptable. This creates a positive cycle. Victims are more likely to recognise what is happening to them, ask for help, and encourage others to come forward.

Support systems are built into national services and work together rather than in isolation. As soon as someone becomes vulnerable, services can step in early. Victims can access joined-up support that includes identification, advocacy, safe housing, welfare support, and help with immigration matters.

Organisations that support disabled people also play an important role. They help shape policy so it responds quickly to real risks, protect disabled people from exploitation, and help spot potential victims early.

Organised criminal groups continue to exploit distribution networks, entrenching county-line style strategies for labour and sexual exploitation.

Reductions in modern slavery and human trafficking inside the UK do not automatically mean the same improvements happen abroad. UK businesses and investors are still connected to global supply chains where people in other countries remain vulnerable. In some cases, exploitation outside the UK may stay the same or even increase.

This creates a growing tension. Inside the UK, systems are trusted and work well. But at the same time, risks coming from overseas are increasing. In countries outside Europe, weak law enforcement and, in some cases, state-tolerated illegal systems continue to provide a steady supply of vulnerable people and opportunities for criminal groups.

Severe forms of exploitation such as forced surrogacy, egg harvesting, illegal adoption, and organ harvesting remain highly regulated and are rarely detected in the UK. However, stronger oversight and the use of AI tools have pushed these practices further underground. This includes the use of fake paperwork and activities disguised as legitimate medical or care arrangements, making abuse harder to identify even when controls appear strong.

The UK is increasingly effective, trusted, and well regulated, yet exploitation does not disappear; it relocates, fragments, and internationalises. Exploitation extends beyond UK borders, including honeytrap schemes and internet-enabled trafficking of children for online sexual exploitation material. As global conflict and

displacement continue, the strategic risk is not systemic failure within the UK, but a steady accumulation of harder-to-detect harms flowing in from a more unstable and uneven world. Hybrid models involving state actors and organised crime increase, alongside greater use of the dark web. New technologies and robotics may shift some harms online but can incentivise criminal skill development and normalisation of abusive behaviour.

Domestic reductions in MSHT do not necessarily extend to global value chains linked to UK investors and businesses, where vulnerable people outside the UK remain exposed and exploitation may persist or increase. Hybrid models involving state actors and organised crime increase, alongside greater use of the dark web. Exploitation extends beyond UK borders, including honeytrap schemes and internet-enabled trafficking of children for online sexual exploitation material.

Women, Children, and UK Nationals

For women and girls, strong action by authorities, high public awareness, and good safeguarding systems have reduced obvious forms of exploitation within the UK. However, conflict and mass displacement around the world continue to create large numbers of vulnerable people abroad. Criminal groups target these women and girls through international trafficking routes and online exploitation.

As a result, even though exploitation is less visible inside the UK, risks have not disappeared. Women and girls can still be exploited through cross-border recruitment, online pressure and manipulation, and global supply chains that operate outside the UK's laws and controls.

Children are better protected because people are more aware of exploitation, safeguarding services have good funding, and there is strong trust in public institutions. This means concerns are more likely to be noticed, reported, and acted on. Early support and joined-up work between services help identify and protect many children within the UK. However, some risks remain. Exploitation increasingly uses encrypted online spaces and international networks, with some abuse starting outside the UK. Even with strong protections at home, this makes it harder for authorities to investigate and stop certain forms of online sexual exploitation and coercion.

For people living in the UK, strong worker protections, a universal wage, and social support systems reduce the risk of many common forms of labour exploitation. Older people are generally well protected through health and social care services. However, they are increasingly targeted by online scams that use AI and other digital tools to steal money or manipulate them.

Overall, vulnerability inside the UK is relatively limited. But the cost of living is still high, which puts pressure on many households. At the same time, exploitation linked to global supply chains connected to UK businesses shows that many risks now come from outside the country rather than from within it.

FUTURE THREAT SCENARIOS

SIGNAL MATRIX 10 SYSTEMS. 5 POSSIBLE FUTURES.

SCORING METHOD

Red = Worse than today (3) **Blue** = Not dissimilar (2) **Green** = Improvement (1)
 Threat Score: (Total - 10) + 20 x 100 | **0** = Most Resilient **100** = Highest Threat

- Global Security & Geopolitics Pressures
- Climate & Environmental Pressures
- Immigration & Visa Routes + Migration Policy
- UK Economic Situation
- Effectiveness of UK enforcement & safeguarding agencies
- UK Political Context
- Digital & Technology Oversight
- Workers' Rights
- Public Awareness & concern
- Public / Victim Support in the system

Threat Score

Scenario	Threat Score	Global Security & Geopolitics Pressures	Climate & Environmental Pressures	Immigration & Visa Routes + Migration Policy	UK Economic Situation	Effectiveness of UK enforcement & safeguarding agencies	UK Political Context	Digital & Technology Oversight	Workers' Rights	Public Awareness & concern	Public / Victim Support in the system
Scenario A:	45	Blue	Blue	Blue	Green	Green	Red	Green	Blue	Blue	Red
Scenario B:	75	Blue	Blue	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Red	Red	Blue	Red
Scenario C:	35	Green	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Green	Blue	Green	Blue
Scenario D:	75	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Red	Red	Green	Red
Scenario E:	25	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green

KEY INSIGHT

SAME SYSTEMS. DIFFERENT FUTURES.

Scenario **B** and **D** carry the highest systemic threat. Scenario **E** offers the strongest resilience despite geopolitical pressure.

HIGHEST THREAT

75

SCENARIOS B & D

Market excess and weak safeguards create cumulative risk

MOST RESILIENT

25

SCENARIO E

Cordinated action builds trust, rights and stronger systems.

MID-RANGE RISK

45

SCENARIO A

Control without trust still leaves systems vulnerable.

BALANCED BUT FRAGILE

35

SCENARIO C

A constraint world avoids collapse but misses opportunity.



Scores are indicative and derived from comparative ratings across 10 scenario dimensions. They are intended as a visual guide, not a predictive forecast.



Annex B: Mitigations

Independent
Anti-Slavery
Commissioner

The Table below provides a set of potential mitigations developed with stakeholders with the intention of reducing the prevalence and impact of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking.

CONSOLIDATED MITIGATION	SECTOR	PROPOSED OWNER	PROPOSED SUPPORTING PARTNERS
Introduce mandatory MSHT training for all statutory agencies, health professionals, NHS staff, schools, housing providers, judges, and Crown Prosecution Service lawyers, including dedicated modules on child trafficking and county lines.	Central Government; Health; Law Enforcement; Education	Home Office	NHS; Department for Education; Police; Local Government
Enforce mandatory due diligence laws and embed MSHT-specific KPIs into public procurement, implement Modern Human Rights Due Diligence (MHRDD) using clear, accessible language, and require businesses to demonstrate compliance with workers' rights throughout their supply chains.	Central Government; Business / Employers	Cabinet Office	Home Office; HMRC; Businesses
Ensure labour laws and regulations are effectively enforced and regularly reviewed, including through strengthened legislation, significant fines, and criminal prosecutions against those who exploit workers, ensuring penalties are actively collected as genuine deterrents.	Central Government; Law Enforcement; Business / Employers	Department for Business and Trade	HMRC; Police; Fair Work Agency; CPS
Support and operationalise the Insolvency Unit's role in reducing phoenixing by companies evading accountability for labour exploitation.	Central Government; Business / Employers	Insolvency Service	HMRC; Companies House
Establish and operationalise the Hidden Economy Team within the Fair Work Agency to tackle hidden-economy labour exploitation.	Central Government; Law Enforcement	Fair Work Agency	HMRC; Police; NCA
Reform the visa system to remove tied employer provisions, prevent debt burdens, and include worker protections such as the ability to change employer, while ensuring workers have legal status to work and removing the vulnerability created by irregular status.	Central Government	Home Office	UKVI; DWP; Fair Work Agency
Implement forward workforce planning in sectors facing labour shortages and consider the role of managed migration in addressing demographic pressures.	Central Government; Business / Employers	Department for Business and Trade	Home Office; DWP; Sector Skills Councils
Provide dedicated support for asylum seekers and refugees, and deliver integration support to newly arrived individuals, to reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.	Central Government; Third Sector	Home Office	UKVI; Local Authorities; NGOs
Implement international law enforcement measures such as Prevention Orders to mitigate exploitation of those with immigration status vulnerabilities.	Law Enforcement; International	NCA	Home Office; Interpol; International Law Enforcement
Counter government-sponsored misinformation campaigns about other countries and nationalities that increase vulnerability to state-enabled exploitation.	Central Government; International	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	Home Office; Counter Disinformation Unit

CONSOLIDATED MITIGATION	SECTOR	PROPOSED OWNER	PROPOSED SUPPORTING PARTNERS
Develop and strengthen global support systems and international agreements to address displacement and exploitation risks associated with climate change.	Central Government; International	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	UN Agencies; International Organisations; NGOs
Deliver education to countries contributing significantly to climate change on the human impact of displacement and exploitation	Central Government; International	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	DEFRA; UN Agencies; International Partners
Clearly separate Modern Slavery policy from Immigration policy, and ensure all government communications on migration adopt a supportive, trauma-informed tone that actively challenges anti-migrant rhetoric.	Central Government	Home Office	Cabinet Office; FCDO; Communications Teams
Ensure the voice of lived experience is central to policy development and authority responses, treat survivors as equals rather than case studies, share information with them, and address the adversarial experience of navigating support systems.	Central Government; Third Sector; Law Enforcement	Home Office	NGOs; Police; Local Authorities; Survivor Groups
Ensure survivors of modern slavery and exploitation are not criminalised for offences committed as a result of their exploitation, and are treated as survivors in both policy and practice.	Central Government; Law Enforcement	Home Office	CPS; Police; NGOs; MSHT Survivor Groups
Establish Independent Modern Slavery Advocates to provide dedicated, ongoing support to survivors as they navigate the system.	Third Sector; Central Government	Home Office	NGOs; Local Authorities; MSHT Survivor Groups
Provide survivors and those at risk (including children and young adults) with proper, timely access to mental health support and specialist services of sufficient duration, including long-term recovery plans for child victims.	Health; Third Sector; Central Government	DHSC	NGOs; Local Authorities; Department of Health; MSHT Survivor Groups
Deliver training in trauma-informed practice to practitioners and the public, incorporating learning from survivors' healing stories and lived experience, to improve responses to exploitation.	Health; Third Sector; Education; Law Enforcement	Home Office	NHS; NGOs; Police; Social Services; MSHT Survivor Groups
Ensure mental health professionals, therapists, and those delivering online therapy are properly trained to work with survivors of exploitation, including understanding the links between neurodiversity, mental health, and vulnerability.	Health; Education	DHSC	Department of Health; Department for Education; NGOs; MSHT
Introduce follow-up processes to verify that funds allocated to Modern Slavery Advocates are spent appropriately.	Central Government; Third Sector	Home Office	NGOs; Treasury
Provide sufficient, consistent, and sustained long-term funding for centralised policing of MSHT, anti-slavery services, NGOs, and third-party organisations so they can fill gaps and complement law enforcement.	Central Government; Third Sector; Law Enforcement	Home Office	NGOs; Police; Local Authorities; HM Treasury
Appropriately resource and train law enforcement, including specialist police units, with dedicated technology, financial experts, and cryptocurrency and cybercrime tracing capabilities to tackle digitally-facilitated MSHT.	Law Enforcement; Central Government; Technology	NCA	Police; GCHQ; Tech Companies; Financial Institutions

CONSOLIDATED MITIGATION	SECTOR	PROPOSED OWNER	PROPOSED SUPPORTING PARTNERS
Ensure police actively use their powers to seize cryptocurrency wallets on arrest and, engage with key cryptocurrency market providers to develop measures that prevent crypto from being used to facilitate MSHT.	Law Enforcement; Financial Services; Technology	Police	NCA; Financial Intelligence Unit; Crypto Exchanges
Consolidate police intelligence systems so all forces operate from a single unified platform.	Law Enforcement; Central Government	National Police Chiefs' Council	Home Office; Police Forces
Use the Police Reform white paper to establish new safeguarding capability at force and national level, ensure safeguarding teams operate alongside operational and intelligence functions, and redirect regional organised crime units to address sexual and criminal exploitation alongside firearms and drugs.	Law Enforcement; Central Government	Home Office	National Police Chiefs' Council; Regional Organised Crime Units; College of Policing
Enable law enforcement to merge data sets and adopt new intelligence collection processes to deliver safeguarding at scale.	Law Enforcement; Technology	National Police Chiefs' Council	Home Office; NCA; Tech Companies
Increase the use of digital tools at the border to identify at-risk individuals, provide upstream support in their home countries, and invest in horizon-scanning for emerging threats.	Central Government; Law Enforcement; Technology	Home Office	Border Force; NCA; UKVI
Protect young people from county lines exploitation through early intelligence mechanisms, appropriate safeguarding of victims, and comprehensive youth work provision including youth clubs, mentoring, and work experience in the most deprived areas.	Law Enforcement; Local Government; Third Sector; Education	Police	Local Authorities; Schools; Youth Services; NGOs; MSHT Survivor Groups
Implement effective regulation of digital platforms and technology firms (including enforcement of the Online Safety Bill, accountability for financial firms processing payments through exploitation-linked sites, and legislation requiring tech firms to act against AI-enabled exploitation) while giving law enforcement the powers and capacity to respond.	Central Government; Technology; Financial Services; Law Enforcement	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	Ofcom; Home Office; FCA; Tech Companies
Deliver targeted public awareness and education campaigns on MSHT risks (including online harms, grooming, digital coercion, high-risk sectors, cognitive vulnerability, and the reality that exploitation can happen in the UK) and educate people to verify the legitimacy of online opportunities.	Central Government; Education; Third Sector; Technology	Home Office	Department for Education; NGOs; Tech Companies; Media
Deploy AI tools within law enforcement and across the technology sector to detect fraudulent adverts, misuse of AI, and cryptocurrency-facilitated exploitation, making effective use of legislation and leveraging commercial incentives for technology firms to invest in anti-exploitation AI.	Law Enforcement; Technology; Central Government	NCA	Police; Tech Companies; Home Office; GCHQ
Require technology companies to improve in-platform flagging mechanisms and ensure effective action is taken on reports of digital coercion and exploitation.	Technology; Central Government	Tech Companies	Ofcom; Home Office; DSIT

CONSOLIDATED MITIGATION	SECTOR	PROPOSED OWNER	PROPOSED SUPPORTING PARTNERS
Require job platforms to remove fake adverts and suspicious accounts and introduce clear reporting mechanisms for suspicious social media adverts.	Technology; Central Government	Tech Companies	Ofcom; Home Office; Trading Standards
Require banks to report suspicious transactions and implement robust internal monitoring to detect corruption facilitating exploitation and, apply diplomatic pressure on international banks and countries that fail to act.	Financial Services; Central Government; International	Financial Conduct Authority	HMRC; NCA; International Regulators; Banks; FCDO; Treasury
Actively involve younger people in the response to exploitation, drawing on their understanding of technology and online environments.	Central Government; Third Sector; Technology	Home Office	NGOs; Tech Companies; Youth Organisations
Maintain and strengthen robust adoption and surrogacy procedures in the UK, requiring full immigration documentation and proof of legality for international arrangements.	Central Government; Law Enforcement	Home Office	UKVI; CPS; Family Courts
Deliver training and awareness raising on forced surrogacy and egg harvesting at universities and educational establishments, targeting staff and students including on student visa applications.	Education; Central Government	Department for Education	Universities UK; Home Office; UKVI
Introduce legislative and operational protections for gig economy workers, including reforming 'self-employed' status, tightening employment checks, requiring modern slavery statements on platforms, tying app access to face ID verification, and applying labour exploitation mitigations to the gig economy context.	Central Government; Business / Employers; Technology	Department for Business and Trade	Fair Work Agency; HMRC; Tech Companies; Gig Economy Platforms
Develop programmes building on older people's growing digital and travel awareness to reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.	Central Government; Third Sector; Technology	Home Office	NGOs; Tech Companies; Age UK
Strengthen SEND education and PSHE programmes to raise awareness of exploitation risks among parents and educate children with cognitive vulnerabilities.	Education; Central Government	Department for Education	Schools; Local Authorities; NGOs
Promote MSHT champions and share success stories, progress, and whole life cycle learning, including lessons from survivors, across agencies and organisations to build public trust and demonstrate impact.	Central Government; Third Sector; Law Enforcement	Home Office	NGOs; Police; Independent Anti- Slavery Commissioner; MSHT Survivor Groups
Reinstate modern slavery as a clear government priority, address gaps in legislative understanding within justice institutions, improve communication between policy and frontline teams, and ensure the UK keeps pace with international legislation including CSDD and EU forced labour regulation.	Central Government	Home Office	Cabinet Office; Ministry of Justice; IASC; Academia
Treat MSHT more consistently as a safeguarding issue across statutory agencies, law enforcement, and education.	Central Government; Law Enforcement; Education; Health	Home Office	Cabinet Office; Police; Local Authorities; Schools; NHS

CONSOLIDATED MITIGATION	SECTOR	PROPOSED OWNER	PROPOSED SUPPORTING PARTNERS
Recognise that supply side labour pressures can increase worker bargaining power and design interventions that harness this dynamic to mitigate labour exploitation.	Central Government; Business / Employers	Department for Business and Trade	Fair Work Agency; DWP; Trade Unions
Monitor current labour practices and strengthen enforcement to identify emerging threats and future exploitation risks.	Central Government; Law Enforcement; Business / Employers	Fair Work Agency	HMRC; Police; Health & Safety Executive
Require the CQC to take a more active role in identifying and acting on labour exploitation within regulated care settings, including revoking licences from care agencies that exploit workers.	Health; Central Government	Care Quality Commission	Local Authorities; Fair Work Agency; Home Office
Embed MSHT prevention provisions within international free-trade agreements and strengthen joint working across international trading blocks to combat exploitation.	Central Government; International	Department for Business and Trade	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; International Trading Partners
Embed human and labour rights education within school and educational curricula.	Education; Central Government	Department for Education	Schools; Local Authorities
Invest in technology systems, such as blockchain, that can track and verify business supply chains to identify and prevent exploitation.	Business / Employers; Technology; Central Government	Department for Business and Trade	Tech Companies; HMRC; Fair Work Agency
Increase funding for the labour inspectorate to raise the cost of committing MSHT and deter exploitation.	Central Government; Law Enforcement	Fair Work Agency	HM Treasury; HMRC; Police
Run public-facing behaviour change campaigns to raise consumer awareness of the link between suspiciously cheap services, such as car washes and nail bars, and labour exploitation.	Central Government; Third Sector	Home Office	NGOs; Local Authorities; Trading Standards
Enshrine international MSHT protections and law clearly within national law, including victim rights and protections, duties to prevent exploitation, identify victims, protect those at risk, and hold perpetrators accountable.	Central Government	Home Office	Ministry of Justice; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; Parliament
Address the linkages between climate change and MSHT vulnerability in legislation, policy, and climate adaptation plans, including the links between climate targets and modern slavery in supply chains such as solar panel production.	Central Government; International; Business / Employers	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	DEFRA; Home Office; UN Agencies; Department for Energy Security and Net Zero; Supply Chain Organisations
Include MSHT data within the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy to ensure it is reflected in data collection and policy.	Central Government	Home Office	Ministry of Justice; Office for National Statistics
Introduce legislation that establishes corporate liability for modern slavery occurring within business operations and supply chains.	Central Government; Business / Employers	Department for Business and Trade	Home Office; Ministry of Justice; CPS

CONSOLIDATED MITIGATION	SECTOR	PROPOSED OWNER	PROPOSED SUPPORTING PARTNERS
Address the legal and evidential barriers that lead prosecutors to pursue non-MSA charges rather than modern slavery offences, making it easier to bring prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act.	Central Government; Law Enforcement	Crown Prosecution Service	Home Office; Ministry of Justice; College of Policing
Engage diaspora communities as active partners in identifying and preventing exploitation, treating them as part of the solution.	Central Government; Third Sector; Local Government	Home Office	Local Authorities; NGOs; Community Organisations
Invest in computer vision and satellite imagery technology to identify illegal operations such as car washes and cannabis farms that are associated with exploitation.	Law Enforcement; Technology; Central Government	NCA	Police; Tech Companies; Home Office
Introduce measures to prevent the import of products tainted with forced labour, including from within Europe.	Central Government; Business / Employers; International	Department for Business and Trade	Border Force; HMRC; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
Develop financial intelligence capabilities to follow exploitation proceeds and identify where money generated through MSHT is going.	Law Enforcement; Financial Services; Central Government	NCA	Financial Intelligence Unit; HMRC; Police; Banks
Develop a long-term MSHT strategy spanning at least 10 years that is protected from short-term political change.	Central Government	Home Office	Cabinet Office; Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner
Make more effective use of asset seizure powers as part of MSHT investigations to disrupt exploitation financially.	Law Enforcement; Central Government	NCA	Police; HMRC; CPS
Build trust and collaboration between faith and community groups and law enforcement to improve detection of and education about MSHT.	Law Enforcement; Third Sector; Local Government	Police	Faith Organisations; Community Groups; Local Authorities; NGOs
Use confidential computing and similar data technologies to resolve data sharing barriers between agencies working on MSHT.	Technology; Central Government; Law Enforcement	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	NCA; Home Office; NHS; Tech Companies
Build transparency and trust in MSHT data to enable the development of AI systems capable of analysing exploitation information.	Technology; Central Government; Law Enforcement	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology	Home Office; NCA; NHS; Academic Institutions
Shift cultural attitudes around gender and employment and empower women to work, to reduce their vulnerability to domestic servitude and MSHT.	Central Government; Third Sector; Education	Home Office	Department for Education; NGOs; Women's Organisations



Annex C: Lived Experience Workshop

Independent
Anti-Slavery
Commissioner

Across the UK there are Lived Experience Advisory Panels, made up of experts with lived experience of modern slavery and human trafficking and co-ordinated by NGOs, to advise on organisational practice and external policy matters relating to modern slavery. A Lived Experience Advisory Panels Summit ('the Summit') was held in London on 17th March 2026 to bring together thirteen representatives of these different panels. The IASC commissioned the Human Trafficking Foundation to organise and facilitate the Summit.

The summit included an interactive session where the panel members were asked to consider a preliminary set of new and emerging threats grouped into themes. The panel was asked to review the themes and new and emerging threats with their panels prior to the summit.

The key insights from this session are provided below. These insights have been integrated into the main body of the report.

Global Context

Global drivers

Participants identified a range of conditions that drive human trafficking at a global level. Political instability, conflict, and climate change were all raised as factors that displace people and increase vulnerability. Poverty, unemployment and persecution were seen as interconnected forces. When people lack rights, education and economic opportunity in their home countries, the conditions for trafficking are created. Joblessness and lack of income were also mentioned as drivers, and there was a recognition that new and emerging conflicts require an active and adaptive response. The view was expressed that increasing vulnerability compounds risk, making those already marginalised more susceptible to exploitation.

Immigration Policy and Status

The complexity of immigration policy was a recurring concern. Frequent rule changes and shifting immigration legislation were seen as creating instability for those already in a precarious position. Asylum seekers without the right to work were highlighted as particularly exposed, and participants called for the right to work to be extended as a protective measure. Complicated immigration status and the absence of documents were identified as factors that traffickers exploit. Forced removals to home countries were described as potentially damaging, and the need for safer, more clearly defined routes for migration was expressed.

International Cooperation and Accountability

There was a sense that the UK was lagging behind other parts of Europe in its response to human trafficking. It was felt that different countries bring different resources to the problem and that greater collective effort was needed. Pressure on other countries to comply with international laws was seen as essential, with

calls for more effective collaboration between nations to address the underlying causes of trafficking, including poverty, unemployment, wars and persecution. Holding traffickers accountable and making that accountability the central focus of any response was seen as important. Participants also noted that where dictators violate national and international laws without consequence, the silence of other countries enables the continuation of harm.

Awareness and Education

Raising awareness of human trafficking was seen as a prerequisite for effective response. Participants called for public-facing campaigns including television and radio that help people recognise that trafficking can happen in their communities. When people are informed, they are better placed to feel safe, protect themselves and educate others. In-country awareness at points of entry such as airports was suggested as one practical measure. There was also a call for trauma-informed language when discussing immigration publicly, and for countries that contribute to climate change to receive education about its human consequences.

Support and Integration

Across this theme, participants returned repeatedly to the need for accessible, well-resourced support. Government was expected to plan resources for health, education and social care in a way that accounts for the needs of people who have experienced trafficking. Support for asylum seekers and refugees was framed as a means of reducing vulnerability rather than a discretionary service. Community-based support, clear information pathways and standardised policy were all put forward as solutions. People not feeling safe to come forward was identified as a significant barrier, and integration support was seen as a way to reduce the risk of re-exploitation. Access to accurate information was also raised as necessary.

Technology and Finance

Digital Threats and Vulnerabilities

Digital threats were described as growing in sophistication, with participants questioning how the sector could keep pace and that stronger digital protection was required. Loneliness and lack of financial freedom were identified as vulnerabilities that bad actors exploit online. Traffickers and other perpetrators were noted to use AI to cover up information, create false profiles and obscure their activities. Data taken from people without their knowledge was raised as a specific concern. Cultural differences in exposure to digital platforms, for example, communities less familiar with AI and online environments, were seen as creating additional risk. Participants also questioned what was preventing perpetrators from continuing to create and use technology for exploitation.

Online Exploitation and Recruitment

Online environments were identified as a significant route through which exploitation and recruitment occur. False job adverts on social media and job platforms were raised as a particular problem, with agencies in some cases charging individuals substantial sums, often in cash, for work that does not materialise on arrival. The gig economy, operating through digital platforms, was flagged as an area where exploitation can be obscured. Grooming through social media was also raised. Participants called for job platforms to remove fake adverts and suspicious accounts, and for employment agencies to be cut out of the overseas recruitment process in favour of a system where workers apply directly to employers or through government channels.

Financial Crime and Accountability

The financial mechanisms underpinning trafficking was noted. Participants noted that communication between banks and criminal gangs exists, and that victims of financial crime can be made more vulnerable to trafficking as a result. Banks were called upon to report suspicious transactions and to monitor their own staff for corrupt practices. Cash-in-hand work was identified as a route through which exploitation is hidden and participants called for it to be stopped. International banks were expected to take greater responsibility for internal corruption, with pressure from countries like the UK seen as one lever for driving change.

Regulation and Oversight

A range of regulatory measures were put forward. Specialist police units trained in cryptocurrency and cybercrime were called for, alongside the use of AI to detect misuse of AI and crypto. Technology verification systems were suggested including registering devices and building in mechanisms to prevent illegal activity. Platform companies such as those operating delivery or taxi apps were expected to display modern slavery statements. There were also calls for AI disclosure requirements, so that people know when AI is being used. The government was asked to work more closely with tech companies, and questions were raised about whether existing software solutions and data protection frameworks were helping or hindering progress. A digital inventory of images and stronger digital protections more broadly were also proposed. It was proposed that Government work more closely with technology companies.

Awareness, Reporting and Response

The sector was described as more reactive than proactive, and participants called for a more dynamic approach to keeping pace with technological change. Easier and clearer ways to report suspicious social media adverts and online content were seen as necessary. Education was seen as the primary counter to digital threats helping people recognise when jobs or opportunities are not legitimate, and supporting people to understand how grooming online works. Younger people were identified as having greater digital literacy and were seen as an asset in shaping the response. Statutory services were described as behind in their

understanding of technology. People being afraid to come forward, in part because of changing UK laws, was raised, as was the need for survivors to be treated as survivors, with proper information provided to those who have been identified.

Exploitation and Control

Vulnerability Factors

A consistent message was that exploiters do not create vulnerabilities, they identify and use them. Immigration status, lack of knowledge of rights, poverty and the absence of the right to work were all cited as factors that leave people exposed. Young people with disabilities were specifically highlighted as a group at risk. Neurodiversity was raised as an area that is massively underrepresented in terms of understanding, with participants calling for research into the links between neurodivergence and exploitation. The absence of English language provision was identified as a barrier to safety, and participants called for education and social care to be used as tools to reduce vulnerability. Safe and flexible migration pathways, including the ability to renew visas, were also seen as protective.

Methods of Exploitation

Participants described a range of exploitation methods. County lines exploitation was raised, as were false job adverts and the difficulty young people face in extracting themselves from exploitative situations. Cases were described of traffickers targeting poor families with promises of education and support for their children, with those children subsequently exploited and cut off from their parents. Forced surrogacy was noted as a method where people agree to arrangements that are later abandoned by those who sought them. The extent of unknown births was also raised as a risk. The exploitation of people with mental health issues was described as occurring within the UK itself, particularly when survivors are prevented from working legally and turn to informal employment, leaving them vulnerable to underpayment, non-payment and abuse.

Mental Health and Trauma Support

Access to mental health support was described as inadequate. Participants called for longer provision, more funding for organisations offering therapy, and specialist services for children and young adults. Learning disabilities and mental health difficulties were seen as both vulnerabilities to exploitation and conditions that can be worsened by it. The lack of a sufficiently long and well-resourced mental health response was seen as leaving survivors without the support they need to recover. The Mental Health Act was mentioned as requiring updating to reflect a deeper understanding of these issues.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice was described, in many cases, as little more than a tick-box exercise for organisations. Where it does exist, the failure to embed it properly was seen as capable of causing further harm. Counsellors and therapists, including

those working online, were described as not always being person-focused or properly trained. Participants were clear that meaningful trauma-informed training must include the voices of survivors and people with lived experience; without that, genuine understanding cannot develop. Training gaps were identified across the police, schools and housing providers, and there was a call for cultural understanding and awareness of the impact of trauma to be improved across all these settings.

Governance and Safeguards

NRM and Legal Process Gaps

The National Referral Mechanism was described as having significant gaps. The 30-day waiting period was identified as a source of uncertainty that can, in some cases, lead to re-trafficking. A positive NRM decision was not seen as guaranteeing support or recovery, and participants questioned the value of identification if people are subsequently told to leave the country. Low prosecution rates were described as demoralising for survivors. More broadly, legislation around trafficking was characterised as existing largely on paper, with people not being held accountable and information not being followed up. Participants felt that the justice system lacked sufficient understanding of the relevant laws.

Survivor Voice and Rights

Survivors' voices were described as not being heard enough, with the system at times feeling as though it is trying to catch people out rather than support them. Anti-migrant rhetoric from government was seen as unhelpful and at odds with a supportive approach. Participants were clear that the voice of lived experience must be present when policies are written. Survivors, including children, were described as being criminalised, and participants called for this to stop. There was a call to treat survivors as equals rather than as case studies, to share information with them properly, and to build survivor-informed approaches into how authorities respond. A shared voice across the sector was also seen as something to work towards.

Multi-Agency Coordination and Funding

Policy design teams and support teams were described as not talking to each other enough. Multi-agency working was seen as in need of improvement, with stronger coordination called for between agencies, law enforcement, local councils and voluntary organisations. Funding for anti-slavery services was described as inconsistent, leaving NGOs and charities struggling. Charities were noted as being stretched to the point where they are unable to take on new cases. Participants called for more resources and funds to support survivors, and for collaboration between organisations to be strengthened rather than left to chance.

Trust, Information and Support

Systems were described as difficult to navigate, with better signposting seen as one practical remedy. Support systems themselves were noted as capable of triggering re-traumatisation, which participants felt needed to be addressed. Building public trust in authorities, through enforcement, prosecution, and visibility, was seen as essential. Survivors were described as arriving in the UK without knowledge of their rights or the legal context, with traffickers actively providing misinformation to maintain control. Participants called for information to be provided to people before they arrive in the UK, in their first language, covering their rights and how to access help. There was no long-term recovery plan for children noted as a particular gap, and the need for ongoing trust-building between survivors and authorities was raised consistently.

Professional Training and Identification

Poor identification of survivors by police and social workers was raised as a recurring problem, with missed opportunities to identify and support people noted across a range of settings including the NHS. Staff need to know the signs of exploitation and should not allow others to speak on a survivor's behalf during encounters in health or other professional settings. Local authorities were called upon to be aware of domestic workers in their areas and to carry out spot welfare checks. Training for police, first responders and frontline services was described as inadequate, particularly in relation to child trafficking. Missing children were raised as not being properly investigated. Participants proposed that NHS staff and other professionals should be trained in identifying signs of human trafficking, and that private spaces within hospitals and clinics should be available for survivors to disclose and seek support.

Legal and Legislative Gaps

Laws were described as needing to both protect victims and punish exploiters, with more convictions seen as essential. Participants questioned whether existing legislation, including the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000, was being practiced or simply existing on paper. Whether funds allocated for people with learning disabilities were reaching the right people, and whether advocates were following up on how those funds were spent, were both raised as concerns. Exposing traffickers in their home countries and applying public accountability were put forward as part of the solution. There were also calls for laws to protect people in situations of exploitation within the UK, and for services independent of government so that survivors feel able to seek support. Modern Human Rights Due Diligence (MHRDD) was viewed to not be implemented meaningfully with "Due Diligence" a jargon and seen as a barrier. Survivor informed policies were seen as a gap.

Labour and Livelihoods

Employer and Agency Accountability

Current labour practices were seen as requiring monitoring to identify and respond to future threats. There were insufficient consequences for companies found to be perpetrators of exploitation, care agencies that had exploited workers were cited as continuing to hold their licences, prompting questions about the role of regulatory bodies. Participants called for employers to be held accountable for their labour practices, and for organisations and agencies found guilty of malpractice to face meaningful consequences.

Workers' Rights and Legal Protections

Survivors having legal status to work was seen as a basic protection that reduces vulnerability to exploitation. Stronger labour rights were called for, with monitoring of high-risk sectors such as construction and health specifically mentioned. The ability to continue working while escaping an exploitative job, through a flexible working visa, was raised as a practical safeguard that does not currently exist in a satisfactory form.

Recruitment Risks and Reform

The skilled worker visa scheme was described as having resulted in people paying large sums of money, sometimes selling their homes or using their life savings, only to arrive in the UK without a genuine job. Employment agencies were identified as a key risk point, with some charging individuals significant fees and operating in ways that increase vulnerability to trafficking. Discrimination within recruitment processes, including on the basis of identity and country of origin, was also raised. Participants called for better checks on recruiters in home countries, for employment agencies to be removed from the overseas recruitment process, and for a direct system between employers and prospective workers to be created. Ethical, transparent and regulated recruitment was put forward as the standard to aim for.

Economic Vulnerability and Support

Economic vulnerability was seen as both a cause and a consequence of exploitation. Participants called for a system that actively reduces that vulnerability, through access to stable, fairly paid employment, fair financial support and practical pathways into safe work. The cost of the certificate of sponsorship was raised as a burden that, combined with poor pay and no reimbursement for travel or home loan costs, leaves workers exposed to agencies offering below-minimum-wage arrangements.