

# Prevention of child trafficking and exploitation

A synthesis of Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre funded research on child trafficking and child exploitation (2020-24)

#### **Research summary**

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# Introduction

This **Research Summary** provides a synopsis of the **key findings** from across a set of three interconnected reports (**Report 1: Methods and Approach; Report 2: BETR Prevention Continuum; Report 3: Cross-cutting Themes and Recommendations**) which, combined, provide an evidence synthesis of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre's (PEC) funded research portfolio on child trafficking and exploitation from Phase 1 (2020-24).

This Research Summary also provides a set of new and additional recommendations based on the evidence synthesis to inform Phase 2 of Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's commissioned and funded research.

# What new findings arise from the evidence synthesis?

Each of the seven studies on children funded by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC has its own set of key evidence-based findings. The synthesis of this research reveals new findings from across the reports.

# **Collaboration and expertise**

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded research portfolio on children combines outputs from researchers and research centres from across England, Scotland and Wales including the University of Nottingham, Portsmouth University, Sheffield Hallam University, Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Stirling and Cardiff University.

Four studies have also partnered with specialist organisations and consultancies: Celiksoy (2024), Hynes (2022) and Ayeb-Karlsson (2024) with ECPAT UK and Skeels (2024) with Safe to Grow. A wider network of partner organisations has been involved in supporting recruitment, facilitating or advising on the research: Barnardo's Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship (ICTG) service (Skeels, 2024); NWG Network (a UK network and charitable organisation of over 25,000 practitioners (Franklin, 2024b); National Working Group on Safeguarding Disabled Children (NWGSDC) (Franklin, 2024b); Scottish Guardianship Service (Grant, 2023) and ECPAT UK's global network (Hynes, 2022).

It is likely that the range of researchers, institutions and non-academic partners involved, and the emphasis placed on collaboration, helps provide a broader and fuller understanding of child trafficking and exploitation in the UK.

# Nature of the funded research on children

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded research on children refers predominantly to people under the age of 18 but extends up to 25 years under certain circumstances (for example those who are looked after or in education with SEND). The terms 'child', 'young person' and 'young adult' are all used. Who is considered a 'child' can vary by context, vulnerability and need. This has implications for services and support.

**Children and young people engaged directly in the research range from 15-25.** The voices of younger children as research participants, their experiences, and views, are not included in any of the research, potentially because of the greater safeguarding issues involved.

Three of the seven child-focused studies (Grant, 2023; Hynes, 2022; Ayeb-Karlsson, 2024) are wholly concerned with children who are not UK-born and who have migrated to the UK. Two reports (Celiksoy, 2024; Skeels, 2024) are concerned with both UK-born and non-UK born children. Two reports (Franklin, 2024a and 2024b) focus solely on children with SEND who have been internally trafficked within the UK. Franklin (2024b) cautions against the assumption that these children with SEND are all UK-born and that 'this is an under-researched area of need.'

Countries of origin of young research participants include the UK, Afghanistan, Albania, Brunei, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria and Vietnam.

The most focused on types of child exploitation in the reports are child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation. There is very little discussion on child labour and domestic servitude and relatively little mention of organ harvesting. Reports comment on the complexity / multiple forms of exploitation experienced by children and young people and the crude and reductionist categorisation used.

The research is spread across the UK, including reports focusing on specific nations (Scotland, England and Wales) except Northern Ireland which is not included. Two reports have a more targeted or 'micro' geographical focus: one on the education sector/schools in England, the other on Home Office hotels in Brighton and Hove.

# Methods and approaches

The research involves a rich variety of research methods including those that are creative, survivor-centred and participatory and, in places, innovative, as well as multiple methods employed for increased rigour and reliability. Combined, these make for a strong portfolio.

There is potential to further explore longitudinal research using linked administrative data; to include parents and carers more in child exploitation research and to enable, even require, children's participation in research design and the research process itself where safe and ethical to do so.

The synthesis reveals valuable consideration of some of the unique ethical challenges faced by research with children at risk of or affected by exploitation and the practical application of a trauma-informed approach.

# **BETR prevention continuum**

There is merit in exploring the application of the BETR prevention continuum – its definition of prevention, prevention stages and pathways – to research on children and child exploitation. This provides:

- A broader definition of prevention which includes recovery and support for young survivors of human trafficking, as well as an explicit focus on the prevention of re-trafficking.
- A means of identifying gaps in the research in relation to prevention of child trafficking, for example:
  - · limited focus on the risks, nature and consequences of re-trafficking of children
  - · lack of detail related to children going missing
  - limited evidence on deterrence, disruption and perpetrators of child trafficking and exploitation (one of the five 'prevention pathways')
  - what works in terms of multi-agency working and partnership (another identified pathway to prevention)
- A means of identifying promising avenues for further research, for example:
  - potential to use a deep dive approach to explore different sectors and 'sites' of prevention Before harm occurs beyond school settings, for example through youth services, youth justice and police
  - building on a positive outcomes' focus for young survivors of modern slavery
  - a way of investigating how the prevention of child trafficking and exploitation is different in nature, involves different definitions (for example, of 'recovery' and 'outcomes'), actors (for example, teachers, parents and carers), spaces and 'sites' (for example, schools) timescales (for example, children don't conceptualise outcomes in terms of the short, medium and longterm) and understanding compared to prevention of adult modern slavery to be effective.

# **Cross-cutting themes**

**Cross-cutting themes** have been drawn inductively from Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's funded research on children and, where relevant, by connecting to cross-cutting topics from the PEC's adult-focused portfolio. Approaching the childfocused research in this way **reveals newly combined 'bodies' of evidence**.

It also highlights connections between evidence under cross-cutting themes with BETR prevention stages (Before exploitation occurs; Early-stage intervention; Treatment of harm and prevention of Re-trafficking) and 'prevention pathways' from Such and Aminu et al (2022).

# Participation and being heard

Evidence from the portfolio indicates a lack of participation of children at risk of exploitation before any harm occurs and at the early stages of exploitation, although guardianship support services for children and young people affected by human trafficking are demonstrated as participatory.

**Children and young people with lived experience of human trafficking's voices are mainly missing from debates in the UK** and their opinions rarely invited and acted upon, leading to practice and policies that are less relevant and effective for them.

**Co-developed guidance with children in a school setting of what might work to 'open conversations' around the prevention of exploitation is promising** and has potential application to other sectors and sites, for example youth justice, police and youth services.

# **Relationships and a trusted adult**

Children and young people identified at risk of or subject to exploitation are in contact with a range of adults in their lives. These relationships are complex, dynamic, can be harmful and/or protective in different ways at different times and can intersect.

The research portfolio analysed provides evidence of **the unique importance of a relationship with a trusted adult for children and young people** at risk of or affected by exploitation and for the prevention of exploitation, re-exploitation and support for recovery.

**Evidence shows that the role of the trusted adult** – someone concerned with the best interests of the child or young person, there to provide support and to advocate for what they are entitled to and need – is being met by independent guardianship services in Scotland, England and Wales.

There is the potential for children and young people in other settings to be supported to identify and select which adult might play this important role for them.

# Space and time

The lived experience of modern slavery, trafficking and exploitation of children, as well as of prevention, support and recovery, has multiple geographies and contexts and is embedded in space, place, and time.

Whilst not mentioned by Such and Aminu et al (2022) in relation to 'prevention pathways', or how prevention works, the **evidence suggests that there are important spatial and temporal dimensions to the prevention of child exploitation**.

# **Cultural competence**

A 'cultural competence' lens can be productively applied to Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's funded research on children to explore the differential identification of, and prevention and response to, child trafficking. Evidence shows that:

- Cultural and religious differences are important to young people affected by human trafficking who have migrated to the UK, can impact on their perception of their own exploitation as well as its identification by others and should inform needs-led support for their full protection and recovery.
- Institutional barriers, professional attitudes, assumptions and bias related to race and ethnicity result in differential treatment (for example, less proactive relationship building, slower response to children going missing, overfocus on criminality and disbelief) and can negatively impact the early identification and prevention of exploitation amongst Black, Asian and minority ethnic children and young people affected by human trafficking, particularly boys.
- The perception that some forms of child exploitation solely affect boys or girls can lead to the under-identification of 'counter' cases of exploitation<sup>1</sup> and miss the important interrelationships, complexities and nuances of children and young people's lived experience.
- A widespread lack of awareness, understanding, training and informed ways of working on child trafficking and SEND increases children with SEND's vulnerability and risk of exploitation and the ability to identify and prevent exploitation before harm occurs.

1. Counter cases might include boys and CSE or girls and CCE, for example and counter to current NRM referral trends.

# **Mental health**

A review of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded research on children reveals evidence on mental health related to risk, the identification and prevention of modern slavery as well as recovery and support. Evidence shows that:

- Poor support for children and young people (and/or their parents) with mental health issues is a risk factor contributing to exploitation. The definition of SEND is inclusive of mental health needs so that training and knowledge about SEND is essential for better identification of this potentially at-risk population of children and young people.
- Children and young people at risk of or affected by human trafficking, including those UK-born with SEND and those who have migrated to the UK, face challenges accessing mental health support services (for example, CAMHS) including long waiting times and high thresholds for referral.
- Navigation of the UK immigration and asylum system, including waiting for documentation and status, creates additional stressors and 'system trauma' and impacts negatively on the mental health of the young survivors involved.
- Mental health support is a right and considered essential for and by young survivors of human trafficking for their wellbeing and recovery. The ICTG and Scottish Guardianship services provide emotional and mental health support and take a trauma-informed approach, but such support may well be needed through and (well) after transition from these services.

# Systems navigation

Children at risk of and affected by modern slavery are often navigating complex statutory systems, such as those related to social care, criminal justice and immigration which can sometimes *create* additional risk of exploitation.

From a 'prevention pathways' (Such and Aminu et al, 2022) perspective, these systems relate to access to rights and essential services and impact on children and young people's power and control over their own lives. The lack of 'literacy' around child trafficking amongst professionals working within these systems is also a risk.

#### Social care system

Social workers are significant in their number and activity in terms of the identification and referral of children into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), as well as their support for those children affected by human trafficking.

Being listened to, cared for and having a good relationship with their social worker matters to young survivors.

A lack of awareness of and training on modern slavery, as well as the practices and attitudes of some social workers, can present barriers to the effective identification and protection of children identified as at risk of or affected by modern slavery.

There is a mismatch between social care legislation and practice and the challenges and needs of children at risk of or affected by modern slavery, including those with SEND, unaccompanied children seeking asylum and Children in Need. The social care system needs further attention and revision to better serve and support these children so that they do not 'fall through the gaps.'.

#### Criminal justice system

The criminalisation of children affected by modern slavery and associated 'victim blaming' attitude and practice negatively impacts on early identification and prevention, as reported by research participants and widely in the literature.

Criminal justice, immigration and asylum structures and systems pose a barrier for children achieving positive outcomes and these systems do not always work in their best interests.

#### Immigration system

Evidence from across the children's research reports shows that unaccompanied children seeking asylum **are negatively impacted by the UK immigration and asylum system and particularly vulnerable to re-exploitation.** This is especially the case for those children that have been accommodated along with adults in Home Office' hotels, increasing both the risk and practice of trafficking and re-exploitation.

The practice of 'lawfare', undermining entitlement to protection, as well as unstable immigration status and waiting for documentation, delegitimises asylum-seeking children and young people with lived experience of human trafficking and increases their vulnerability, pushing them 'to the edges of society' and into risk and exploitation.

Recent UK immigration legislation - the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Immigration Act 2023 - as well negative media reporting and political rhetoric around this, has created a hostile and less protective environment for unaccompanied children seeking asylum with lived experience of human trafficking, including Albanian boys, delegitimised through Albania being considered 'safe'.

The ICTG Service in England and Wales and the Scottish Guardianship Service help unaccompanied children and young people to navigate the immigration system. Part of this is by helping young people understand their rights and entitlements. It is important to note that the Scottish Guardianship Service supports all unaccompanied children seeking asylum, including those who do not have lived experience of human trafficking. **Children and young people at risk of or affected by modern slavery need good quality, independent legal advice and support,** including those with SEND facing school exclusion and children who are part of the National Transfer Scheme.

Non-UK born young people with lived experience of exploitation want lawyers and solicitors that do a good job, are reliable and trustworthy, that understand what they are going through, support them to tell their stories and who can properly represent them in complex circumstances.

# **Going missing**

Going missing is an important 'red flag' for the prevention of child trafficking: it can be an indicator of a child or young person being affected by trafficking, or re-trafficking, or can indicate a risk of exploitation before it happens.

Numbers of children and young people suspected or identified as affected by human trafficking going missing from care and accommodation are significant, with over 30% of looked after children reported going missing at least once in 2020 and 440 missing episodes of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children aged 12 and over missing from Home Office' hotels over a two-year period.

Children with SEND, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and looked after children are particularly vulnerable to going missing. Responses to this can be varied including inadequate or non-existent.

**Missing episodes can continue to occur when children are supported by the ICTG or Scottish Guardianship services**, with 10% of those supported having one or multiple instances or going missing longer-term.

# **Transitions**

The transition to adulthood or to adult services (and any related support service exit) can put young survivors of modern slavery at higher risk of re-exploitation, as well as presenting barriers to their further development and positive outcomes.

Evidence suggests that non-UK born young people reaching the age of 18 who are awaiting immigration status decisions and / or undergoing age assessment, looked after young people and those with SEND face particular challenges during transition.

There is not one but multiple transitions in the lives of children and young people affected by modern slavery, related, for example, to changing circumstances (for example, the move from primary to secondary school), newly emerging risks and evolving needs at different times. Support services need to be adaptive, flexible and responsive as a result.

**Evidence shows that recovery and related support needs can continue well beyond the transition to adulthood at 18** suggesting a longer timeframe is important for achieving positive outcomes and full recovery and support.

## Parents / carers / family

Children and young people at risk or affected by modern slavery who are the focus of the child-focused research have diverse and dynamic family situations and experiences and a focus beyond the 'traditional' and normative notion of family in this context might be further explored.

The role of parents and carers is unique to children and child trafficking, varied in nature and impact and requires further exploration in relation to the prevention of child exploitation at different stages, with parents and carers increasingly engaged as participants in research.

In some cases, family, parents and carers can present or exacerbate risk through absence, neglect and abuse, intrafamilial harm and exploitation. Financial pressures on support services indirectly contribute to decreasing parents' and carers' awareness of children's vulnerability or directly impact through children taking on responsibility to earn money and not recognising the exploitation involved.

Parents and carers can also have a strong protective function. They can help children and young people achieve stability and reduce uncertainty and can aid early identification. Responding well and responding early to the risk of or actual exploitation of children with SEND is dependent on parents./carers being listened to concerning their child's (often undiagnosed or unrecognised) SEND needs and regarding concerns they have around their child's safety and experiences of exploitation, as well as not being judged, but instead being supported and seen as protectors of their child when harm is being committed outside of the family home.

Children and young people engaged through guardianship support services report mainly positive experiences of foster care but have varied views on / capacity for contact or reunification with their families outside the UK. Unaccompanied children seeking asylum accommodated in Home Office' hotels with adults were at higher risk of trafficking and exploitation than children placed with foster parents in their homes. Training for foster carers on recognising the risks and indicators of exploitation is highlighted.



# What new recommendations can be made?

Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's Phase 1 funded research on children is a small but varied research portfolio, approaching child trafficking through multiple lines of enquiry. Combined, the research makes empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions and demonstrates potential for an explicit research focus on child trafficking for the PEC's continuation.

Related recommendations and opportunities for future research funded by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC on child trafficking include:

# **Conceptual** / theoretical:

1. Support a continued, critical consideration of the BETR prevention continuum to help frame and inform future commissioned research on child trafficking. This would:

- a. Encourage and support a broader definition of, and maintain an explicit drive and continuous focus on, the prevention of modern slavery.
- b. Enable the commissioning of new research addressing gaps in evidence on child trafficking related to the BETR continuum, for example a deliberate, deeper exploration of the risks, nature and consequences of the re-trafficking of children and, in connection with this, children 'going missing' (somewhat a 'black box' in child trafficking research and evaluation)<sup>2</sup>, to drive increased accountability and targeted effort in this domain.
- c. Enable further exploration of how the prevention of child trafficking is different in nature, involves different definitions (for example, of 'recovery' and 'outcomes'), actors (for example, teachers, parents and carers), spaces and 'sites' (for example, schools) timescales (for example, children don't conceptualise outcomes in terms of the short, medium and long-term) and understanding compared to the prevention of modern slavery of adults to be effective, and thus how different interventions and policies and re-thinking around timescales and contexts are required.
- d. Mean future research could build on the limited evidence from Phase 1 on deterrence, disruption and perpetrators of child trafficking (one of the five identified pathways to prevention), which whilst reflecting a broader research and evidence imbalance in the sector, is highlighted as a gap to address by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC Lived Experience Advisory Panel.

<sup>2.</sup> The exception here is Ayeb-Karlsson, although it is still not clear the extent to which those children going missing from the Home Office hotels are affected by trafficking.

e. Help commissioned research to connect to and build on existing adultfocused literature on what works in terms of multi-agency working and partnership (another identified pathway to prevention) with potential for application to the prevention of child trafficking field.

2. Employ a more explicit child rights-informed framing of future calls and commissioned child trafficking research – through, for example, the upfront recognition of children globally as holders of a unique set of rights connected to their distinct vulnerabilities and power differential that sets them apart from adults and requires a different understanding, methodology and approach – to:

- a. Align with the Centre's focus on human rights but also recognise the unique and universal, indivisible and inalienable nature of the rights of the child and their incorporation into domestic UK policy and law.
- **b.** More clearly position public actors as 'duty bearers', adding weight to policy-focused research.
- c. Further highlight the multiple child rights violations and infringements taking place through the exploitation of children, exacerbated by the formal systems, structures and processes they are required to navigate.
- **d.** Counter the trend towards conceptualising child survivors in immigration and asylum or in criminal justice terms rather than in relation to their protection.
- e. Promote a more complex, holistic and empowering view of the child at risk of or affected by modern slavery, including both risk and resilience, vulnerability and agency, opening more space for children's contributions to their own protection. The BETR continuum prevention definition as incorporating 'choice' and control' for survivors over their own lives and the 'ability to thrive' are all important here.

3. Require future commissioned research to reinforce a positive, holistic and survivor-informed definition of outcomes for children affected by human trafficking (as outlined by Hynes (2022), Grant (2023), Skeels (2024)). There is an opportunity to commission research that:

a. Explores further the inter-relationships between the Creating Stable Futures Positive Outcomes Framework and the Modern Slavery Core Outcomes Standards or MS COS (both developed through Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded research), enabling an important conversation around transitions and supporting positive outcomes for young adult survivors – who fall 'in-between' – to take place. This is also of interest in relation to the conceptualisations of the child and complexity in assessing this (for example in relation to age assessment, adultification and other pertinent themes). Understanding of transition to adulthood for children with SEND.

- **b.** Considers further how such outcomes and frameworks relate to the diversity of children and young people affected by modern slavery in the UK, for example UK-born criminally exploited children and young people and children with SEND.
- c. Further explores the multiple dimensions of 'safety' including physical, ontological, psychological, emotional and relational, all of which have reference in the child trafficking related research funded in Phase 1.

# Methodological / Ethical:

4. Place a continued – and enhanced – emphasis on safe, survivorcentred research and the employment of innovative and creative participatory approaches to:

- a. Enable the participation of children and young people affected by modern slavery as research participants and co-researchers, highlighting their experiences, perspectives and views. Future funded research on child trafficking, wherever safe, meaningful and relevant should involve the participation of children and young people with lived experience. To ensure a child rights basis to, and the quality of, the process of participation for children and young people, irrespective of research outputs, an appropriate model – for example the Lundy model of participation – or similar might be suggested or endorsed.
- b. Foster young survivors' engagement in the research process (for example, research design, analysis and dissemination) wherever safe and meaningful. The details around any participatory panel established or pre-existing mechanism employed to engage children and young people in the research process or any alternatives (for example peer and co-research models) and related activity, including outcomes and what works, should, where appropriate, be captured and reported on as a requirement of being funded by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC. In this way, shared interest in and oversight of such activity is encouraged and a bank of best practice and vehicles suitable for engaging young survivors in knowledge co-creation can be built.
- c. Consider timescales set for funded research and what this enables/disables, including in relation to the engagement of young survivors in knowledge production and greater diversity of young participants in the research.

5. Commission an investigation into the potential for secure administrative data linkage and longitudinal (or other approaches to) research to reveal long-term outcomes for young people affected by modern slavery post exit from support services (including related to education, employment, health etc), a key gap in the evidence base. Given the partnerships and stakeholders already engaged in Phase 1, there is a window of opportunity and an alignment of interests that might be further explored in the PEC's next phase.

#### 6. Continue to have a focus on:

- a. **Responsive research funding** (for example Ayeb-Karlsson) as well as a more 'routine' and planned approach (for example service evaluations), enabling flexibility to focus on child trafficking related 'events' (for example children missing from HO hotels), emerging trends or early-stage approaches (e.g., opening conversations) as they arise.
- b. Co-creation of research with Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC and involvement of range of non-academic partners fostering a breadth of perspectives and a more holistic view.
- c. Encouraging multiple and diverse methods including those enabling the participation of children within research projects to aid triangulation, rigour, relevance and reliability of findings.
- d. A range of settings and spaces as the focus of research, with potential to contribute to debates on spaces of protection, for example child protection in the home, contextual safeguarding and extra-familial harm.

7. Require increased and structured content on the ethical processes and issues related to each funded piece of research at application – and at reporting – stage, beyond the confirmation that ethical approval was sought and granted and that a trauma-informed approach was taken. Additional detail on these areas will help to share lessons learned, build a bank of evidence on what works in practice and in research, as well as inform research on ethics and child trafficking. It will also reinforce the iterative nature of ethics in research as opposed to a one-off tick box activity.

# **Empirical**:

8. Consider commissioning research focused on other relevant 'sites' for the prevention of child trafficking including specific sector 'deep dives', or hyper-local studies. This would build on the funded research on prevention in school settings (Franklin) and related to Brighton and Hove Home Office hotels (Ayeb-Karlsson) from Phase 1. Phase 1 research suggests that this might productively include a focus on early identification of exploitation in health, police, youth justice and youth service settings, for example.

9. Commission survivor-informed, solution-focused research on how systems, procedures and structures engaging children and young people affected by modern slavery might be navigated differently or transformed. What might constitute more child or young person friendly approaches or alternatives? How might this be further informed by a systems-based approach? How might evidence contribute to system reform?

**10. Support research that addresses an intersectionality gap**, i.e., that challenges and cuts across the silos and stereotypes identified through funded research in Phase 1, for example the almost automatic association of SEND with UK-born children and young people; the over-focus on boys and CCE, girls and CSE and the under-exploration of child labour.

**11. Address and explore other empirical gaps on child trafficking revealed by synthesising the child-focused research from Phase 1,** for example a greater focus on younger children and the prevention of exploitation; on young survivors' navigation of the criminal justice system; on the nature of child exploitation in Northern Ireland.

**12. Enable a more explicit and strategic exploration of themes across child and adult-focused modern slavery research** to reveal the similarities and differences and benefit from the collective weight of evidence, learning and impact, for example as revealed by exploring housing, cultural competence and mental health as part of this report.

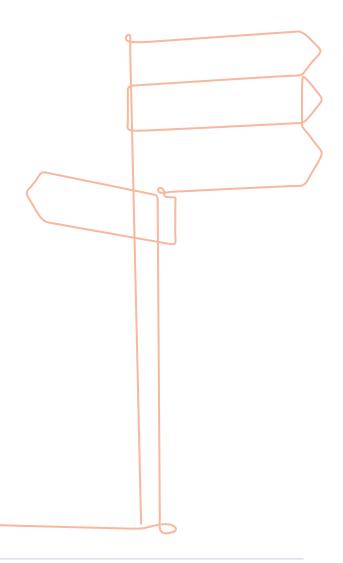
13. Support research into the trusted adults which the existing evidence suggests is promising practice for what works to support children and young people.

# Other ideas:

14. Consider the potential to explore prevention in relation to 'future generations', and the use of futures and foresights methods in the child trafficking research field.

**15.** Support innovative approaches to measuring the extent and nature of child trafficking, for example exploring the feasibility and ethics around studies on prevalence, projection, community-based monitoring.

16. Explore children and young people's ability to safely contribute to the identification and prevention of exploitation of other children and young people.



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