MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS | POLICY & EVIDENCE CENTRE
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Ethics in modern slavery research

Review of the current landscape and evaluation of research ethics appropriateness

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Content Notice

This report does not discuss in detail any explicit/sensitive topics. Some of the content will, however, refer to topics relating to slavery, servitude, human trafficking, forced labour, forced marriage, child marriage, conflict and forced migration.

Acronyms

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
ATMG	Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group
CSO(s)	Civil Society Organization(s)
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EDI	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
EPSRC	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FLEX	Focus on Labour Exploitation
FPAR	Feminist Participatory Action Research
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HEI	Higher Education Institution e.g. university or university college
IASC	Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner
LEAP(s)	Lived Experience Advisory Panel(s)
MSCOS	Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set
MSHT	Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking
MSVCC	Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
NGO(s)	Non-governmental Organization(s)
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PWLE	People with Lived Experience
REC	Research Ethics Committee
REF	Research Excellence Framework
RO	Research Organisation
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation

Contents

1.0 Executive summary

There are increasing calls for researchers, research organisations and funders active in the field of modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) research to reflect on their own practices of engagement and co-production. Momentum has built on this point as lived experience experts have become more directly involved in the production of research. As a result, a greater range of stakeholders involved in MSHT research now regard such practices of inclusion as both a normative good and a means of delivering more robust and relevant research that can inform policy and practice of greater efficacy. In this context, attention must be given to ensuring that research underpinning anti-trafficking policy and practice is ethically-robust, attentive to the prevention and mitigation of harms and attuned to the needs, goals and aspirations of those with lived experience (IASC, 2024; Paphitis and Jannesari, 2023; Brotherton et al., 2020).

This study, commissioned by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC) draws on the extant body of evidence about approaches to research ethics in the field of MSHT as well as original empirical data collection with three key objectives. Firstly, to take stock of current practice and consider its appropriateness. Secondly, to share understandings of what it means to conduct research on MSHT ethically from a range of perspectives and, thirdly, to make targeted recommendations for a range of research stakeholders. These include research funders, research organisations (e.g. universities), research ethics committees, research teams, NGO partners and lived experience experts engaging in research.

Our findings pointed to current challenges and opportunities for ethics innovation in four areas of research practice or infrastructure:

- **Ethical Governance:** a need for greater scrutiny, review and reform of institutional/sectoral or organisational structures to ensure that they provide the necessary infrastructure, resourcing and peer support for ethical research to take place.
- **Ethical Co-production and Participatory Methods:** a need to develop better and clearer expectations of project onboarding practices for lived experience experts involved in co-produced research either as peer-researchers/consultants or as research participants.
- **Adopting a Trauma-Informed Approach:** a need for training around how to accommodate trauma in research through a more explicit trauma-informed approach that promotes inclusion, empowerment and choice on the part of those with lived experience.

- **Ethical Legacies:** a need to consider robustly the legacies of research for all partners/participants from the outset of projects. This will ensure there is scope for all to experience benefits - from career development, training opportunities or improved self-esteem, to sharing of ethical challenges encountered and opportunities to improve practice through reflecting on lessons learned.

All stakeholders engaged in MSHT research should be mindful of these four key areas of concern (**ethical governance, ethical co-production and participatory methods, adopting a trauma-informed approach,** and **ethical legacies**) and can begin to take short-term non-costed changes in their approaches to research based on the recommendations in this report. Structural changes will be necessary in the longer-term, and this requires an open dialogue between multiple stakeholder groups. Acting in an ethical manner to produce research in the field of MSHT requires action beyond individual research teams' enhanced engagement with existing ethics review processes. Established ethics frameworks tend to be top-down and focus predominantly on project-specific issues relating to confidentiality, consent, data protection, sampling etc. Whilst these remain central considerations, our study also asks research organisations, funders and other stakeholders who surround and support these teams to consider whether their current systems and structures are cultivating the conditions in which ethical research can thrive.

Continuous review of structural conditions and reflection upon research practice alongside a willingness to update methods, processes and systems as necessary should be a fundamental part of any ethical approach to MSHT research. This will enable innovation, responsiveness to challenges encountered and most importantly will lay the necessary groundwork for experiences of engagement in research to be positive for all involved.

2.0 Introduction

2.1 Background and project aims

Research on modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) has grown apace in the UK, particularly over the last two decades prompted by new international and national legislation to address extreme forms of exploitation framed in these terms.[1] The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC) alone has funded over 50 projects since its inception in 2019 following major investment by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which is part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Much of this research, across the field, has both highlighted and been enriched by the experiences and insights of those with lived experience (LE),[2] as consultants on and participants in empirical studies, and as researchers in their own right (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2022; Dang et al. 2023; Asquith et al. 2022; Hutchison et al. 2021).

Working with those who have lived experience has challenged, established and generated new ways of thinking about and doing ethical research. It is well-documented that lived experience-led organisations lobbied tirelessly to establish the legislative frameworks and status of human trafficking as an internationally recognised crime that violates human rights (Wylie, 2016). Since then, an increasing diversity of lived experience experts and survivor-led collectives have fed into discussions about the principles that should govern working practices in the anti-trafficking sector, including the research that informs it (see notably Dang, 2013; Perôt et al. 2018; Brotherton et al. 2020; Hutchison et al. 2021; Ash and Otiende, 2023; NSN, 2022; Paphitis and Jannesari, 2023). Recognising the ways in which lived experience-led advocacy has improved the integrity and efficacy of sectoral practice has prompted recent moves in the anti-trafficking sector towards embedding lived experience expertise within organisational structures. As such, the creation of a range of committees, advisory boards and panels has become commonplace among NGOs, donors and funders and within national and international governance structures.[3] There are now increasing calls for researchers, research institutions and funders active in the field of MSHT research to reflect on their own practices of engagement and co-production, with a view to ensuring that research underpinning anti-trafficking policy and practice is also ethically-robust, attentive to the prevention of harm and attuned to the needs, goals and aspirations of those with lived experience (IASC, 2024).

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[1] Most notably the Palermo Protocol and in the UK context the Modern Slavery Act of 2015.

[2] We define 'lived experience' as those individuals and communities who have been directly impacted by an issue and have specialist understanding gained through personal, first-have experience – in this case of forms of exploitation collected under the umbrella terms of modern slavery and human trafficking.

[3] See for example: US Advisory Council on Human Trafficking; ODIHR's International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (ISTAC); MSPEC's Lived Experience Advisory Panel and Telford and Wrekin Council's work with ILECs to inform their Independent Inquiry into Telford Child Sexual Exploitation: Crowther, 2024).

> *“Make sure that it’s serving [lived experience expert’s] needs … and it’s not just extractive and a benefit to the charity and the academic institution or just with the aim of furthering research in this area, but that actually it’s in itself a great experience … A benefit to them, yeah.”*
> **NGO partner**

> *“From where these studies come from? Of course, these come from the survivor … You know what they’re going through … We have to learn. We have to listen.”*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

> *“I think there is something there, about universities really being brave in talking to each other and maybe making investments … there’s a really big challenge there about understanding the value of doing things right, not just doing things quickly and as funders, that is a conversation that we need to continue to engage with up the chain … None of these things are easy, but again, let’s be aspirational”*
> **Funder**

The study underpinning this report, commissioned by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC, responds to these calls and draws on the extant body of evidence to take stock of what it means to conduct research on MSHT ethically. Specifically, it considers:

1. What are the common ethical issues that arise in modern slavery research?
2. How do funding structures and requirements of funders and research organisations (such as universities) perpetuate or address these ethical issues?
3. How do these ethical issues change/develop throughout the course of a research project?

Within this study, research ethics is understood to mean the moral framework in which research is undertaken and covers, but is not limited to, the benefits, harms, scope for agency and equity experienced by all stakeholders involved in research including research participants (Carpenter et al. 2020).[4]

This is a broad definition that requires fresh consideration of how researchers, participants, ethics committees and funders define, identify and respond to established and emerging ethical issues in MSHT. It also requires some reflection on whether current ethics and safeguarding guidance and practice have kept pace

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[4] For more on the normative principles governing processes of ethics review in the UK see the six principles outlined by the ESRC in their Research Ethics Framework: ESRC, Framework for research ethics: https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/framework-for-research-ethics/our-core-principles/#contents-list accessed August 2024.

with the changing approaches to research on MSHT, particularly when it involves those with lived experience; and where improvements can be made to maximise the potential for research to impact positively on those affected by MSHT.

Importantly, this study confronts some evident limitations in our understanding and governance of MSHT research ethics and, indeed, in the ethics of participatory research more broadly. It acknowledges that resources to support good ethical practice are disparate and duplicated and good practice is often hidden. Our study, therefore, considers not only ways in which good ethical practice can be shared across projects and disciplines, but also how ethics translate and are shared across institutions and sectors.[5] It acknowledges also that established ethics frameworks tend to be top-down and focus predominantly on project-specific issues relating to confidentiality, consent, data protection, sampling etc. Whilst these remain central considerations, our study interrogates the extent to which funders, HEIs, and other official structures and systems support or undermine ethical governance of research. Our recommendations are not, therefore, simply concerned with informing the practice of individual researchers and research teams, but also with asking research organisations and funders who surround and support these teams to consider whether their current systems and structures are cultivating the conditions in which ethical research can thrive. In doing so, the study reviews and reasserts the fundamental values and principles underpinning MSHT research, particularly considering how these should be applied where research involves those with lived experience.

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5. This study focuses primarily on the ethics of MSHT research in the UK rather than internationally.

2.2 Methods

The research was conducted in **three phases between November 2023 and March 2024**.

The first phase involved a rapid desk-based review of published work on the ethics of research in fields related to MSHT to gain a sense of the quality, accessibility and coherence of existing guidance.

A search of literature where terms including 'ethics' or 'research ethics' appeared in conjunction with modern slavery typologies (e.g., modern slavery, human trafficking, forced labour etc.) was undertaken on several repositories (including Scopus and Web of Science) with targeted searches undertaken on key NGO, think-tank and academic institutions webpages (e.g., Global Fund to End Modern Slavery). All searches were based on publications produced from 1990 onwards, when the language of MSHT emerged alongside advocacy leading to key national and international legislation. A total of 35 academic publications from the field of MSHT and beyond (covering intersectional research topics such as social care/work and public health, asylum and refugee status, migration, working with children, and gender-based violence) were deemed relevant and reviewed alongside 45 additional reports, articles and toolkits, including sources produced by peer researchers, academics, civil society organisations (CSOs) and research funders that were not captured in the initial academic search. This includes supplemental documentation shared by participants during the focus-groups.

The second phase gathered data through individual interviews and focus groups with different MSHT research stakeholders to explore knowledge, understanding and the application of existing ethical guidance in practice.

A total of 18 participants took part in the study, which included five focus groups, one email response, and three one-to-one interviews. All focus groups discussions and one-to-one interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Teams. Participants were recruited through existing networks with a focus on the MSHT research community and related research. Participants included individuals with lived experience of MSHT who have taken part in previous research projects as participants and/or peer-researchers, researchers working in the field of modern slavery research, members of Research Ethics Committees (RECs), representatives of funders in the field of MSHT and representatives from NGOs and community groups engaged in modern slavery research. Due to time and resource constraints, the study was limited to English speakers and the focus groups were conducted in English.

Prior to data collection, the research team took part in a focus group training workshop at the University of Liverpool. This covered issues such as conducting online focus groups and facilitating effective focus group discussions. We also used this opportunity to develop a series of short ethics scenarios to supplement specific interview questions designed to stimulate thinking and discussion. These scenarios were shared with participants in advance of the focus groups/interviews and reflected a range of challenges in MSHT research highlighted by our preliminary desk-based review and previous research experience.

The third phase centred on analysis and the testing of findings with research participants.

Through a thematic analysis of sources identified via the desk-based review and data gathered through focus groups/interviews a range of challenges and opportunities for improvement or innovation in ethical practice were identified, with particular attention to issues relating to the engagement of those with lived experience. A first draft version of this report, including its key findings and recommendations, was shared with all participants and a feedback session was held online with lived experience participants to open up an accessible space for feedback: ensuring accuracy of data transcription, quote usage, resonance of analysis, and accessibility of recommendations before finalising and publication.

Drawing from our analytical work, the below summary of our project findings has been structured into four overarching sections: **Ethical governance, ethical inclusion: co-production and participatory methods, adopting a trauma-informed approach and ethical legacies**. Whilst this study was located in the context of research on MSHT, our hope is that our findings will be of value to research in a range of areas, particularly that of a participatory nature involving those with lived experience.

3.0 Ethical governance

An important, yet commonly overlooked, aspect of research ethics relates to the ethics of governance processes and principles themselves. This requires some scrutiny of how institutional or organisational structures embody ethics in terms of accommodating and managing MSHT research with diverse groups. We reflected, in particular, on the practice of research ethics committees. These are so central to ethical governance – not only in terms of their relationship with the research teams and projects they are tasked with scrutinising, but also in terms of their readiness and potential to extend their ethical responsibilities in an 'upwards' fashion. Our aim was to examine the extent to which institutional and infrastructural factors may facilitate or, indeed, inhibit ethical governance.

3.1 Research ethics committees: role, remit and relationships

In the context of UK HEIs, Research ethics committees' (RECs) are groups of researchers appointed to review referred research proposals (usually those involving human participants) to ensure planned activities are ethical. RECs' primary role is to ensure that research will respect the dignity, rights, welfare and, where possible, the autonomy of participants and all parties involved in and potentially affected by the research (UKRI, 2021). RECs help researchers identify potential risks involved in research and consider how to mitigate against these. The review process also protects the integrity and reputation of the institution from poor research practices.

The relationship between RECs and researchers engaged in work on MSHT and other forms of participatory arts, humanities and social science research is commonly experienced, or at least perceived, as antagonistic and even combative rather than constructive and collaborative (Maya-Jariego et al. 2021; Su, 2018; Fox et al. 2018). Our research revealed a similar lack of confidence among researchers as to REC members' insights into and prescriptions regarding the interests and capabilities of research with lived experience experts.

A common critique – and one viewed as a barrier in the ethics approval process – is the 'deficit-oriented' approach of some ethics committees (focussed on limitations and assumptions about who has what capabilities), evidenced in the dominance of questions in ethics processes around safeguarding and participants' vulnerability (Ryan et al. 2019; Shankley et al. 2023). Such preoccupations, whilst important, often override more asset-focused considerations of equitable and empowering participatory research (centring strengths and capability to learn). Given the growing emphasis, particularly in MSHT research, of enabling lived experience groups and communities not just to participate in or respond to research and policy agendas but to lead it (Brotherton et al. 2020), it has been noted that ethical approval "should not be a form of control, that is controlling who does research. It should…be collaborative and community centred" (Mugumbate et al. 2022: p.63).

> *"You're relying on the applicant presenting the research in a clear way. And unfortunately, and this isn't a criticism of sort of modern slavery researchers, it's one of the challenges in putting perhaps words on a form … There's almost an assumption sometimes that we'll understand what they're saying …reviewing these applications, you know, we are looking at, you know, a vulnerable group. We're definitely thinking about things like, you know, safeguarding, protecting from harm."*
>
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

Our study indicates that issues around this process may be more to do with the lack of guidance relating to the ethics of antislavery research or of engaging with those with lived experience in a variety of research functions (beyond being respondents in an empirical study) than it is to do with a lack of enthusiasm on the part of ethics committees to engage with these more empowering narratives. The UK's main research funding institution, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), has a wealth of guidance on the ethical requirements for researchers (including those targeted at specific research fields via the research councils). However, despite a discernible increase in the number of funding calls in this area (O'Brien et al. 2022) including the establishment of MSHT-specific Centres (such as Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC), there is no specific guidance for RECs relating to work involving survivors of MSHT.

A similar, overwhelmingly protectionist attitude among RECs has been noted and challenged in research involving other groups, notably children. Researchers are starting to challenge RECs' predominantly protectionist and risk-averse approach to child-related projects, which heavily prescribes the conditions under which children can participate (Okyere, 2018; Stalford and Lundy, 2022). Such challenges have pointed to advancements in law, research and practice which recognises and seeks to empower children as equal experts by experience (Abebe, 2009: 452; Alderson and Morrow, 2020). Indeed, they have stimulated more constructive collaboration between researchers and RECs in the co-production of bespoke ethics guidance on how to conduct research involving children (Horowicz and Stalford, 2023). There is, therefore, scope and a growing appetite for similar guidance to be developed that specifically supports ethical research in the MSHT space.

> *"I think guidance documents can be really helpful in areas where there is perhaps a lot of perceptions of vulnerability that those paternalistic, even traditional, kind of risk aversion kind of approaches I do think the development of guidelines…as collective modern slavery researchers…would be so important …"*
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

Our study revealed the importance of developing more flexible, iterative and supportive approaches to ethical scrutiny in MSHT research across the life cycle of projects and in their aftermath.

> *"As an outsider coming into a university, I was absolutely perplexed by the amount of focus before and nothing during or after. It just seems crazy to me…, the Ethics Committee is not learning from how things went to think about the next project and equally the researcher lacks sort of ongoing ethical support ethical sounding board to kind of go back and say, look, we're having this problem, what do we do about it? … ethics, committees can be seen as a little bit of like a thing you have to get through in order to be able to do the thing you want, rather than a sort of partner … who spend their time thinking about ethics, who can accompany you on your research journey. And I think that would be a nice way to change how we think about ethics committees".*
> **Researcher**

Our study pointed to the need to look 'upwards' - at the ethics of established institutional and administrative processes within and beyond universities and consider how they may need to be adapted to enable appropriate practice in the field of MSHT research. There is a vital role for funders to play here in imposing more pressure on HEIs to facilitate the governance of ethical project partnerships and participation. We consider these issues in more depth below.

3.2 Adaptive ethical responses

A key consideration for researchers working with lived experience participants is the need for the responses to ethical frameworks to be adaptive. Hampshire et al. (2012) pointed out this succinctly, stating that "[w]e should not expect that ethical guidelines drawn up at the start of a project will continue to apply unproblematically; instead, we should be prepared to re-visit and re-negotiate these as the often messy realities of people's lives unfold" (p.231). Such considerations have been echoed by other academic researchers: that rigid, pre-project ethical scrutiny by RECs can miss the nuances noted during and after research data collection has occurred (Muller et al. 2022).

> *"I used to go to a weekly meeting of practitioners where we talk about cases - you're actively discussing on a continual basis how you deal with certain issues that are coming up - whereas my sense in universities is that there's this sort of flurry of activity and then, like nothing, really. … When they're doing research, [some researchers] have supervisors or colleagues who they talk to regularly, but there's no [consistent] systems of support set up. … You know more like the sort of supervision you'd have as a therapist where you get…the critical friend who's helping you think through what's happening … I don't get the sense that that's a really regular part of what's [in research]… it's not part of the culture"*
> **Researcher**

Despite the expectation that ethics protocols and practice are reviewed and refreshed by project teams in response to issues as they emerge, there is scant evidence of this occurring in any proactive way, with little support to research teams from RECs and ROs during projects once ethics reviews have been completed. This points to the need for more reflective practice in relation to ethics, by RECs and researchers alike, and the real value that peer support spaces to think through ethical challenges could offer to researchers in real time as they conduct research so that good and problematic practice can be more easily identified, shared and remedied.

3.3 Ethics 'upwards': Institutional and funding practices

Funders, researchers and community groups alike are increasingly acknowledging the importance of co-production at all stages of research, from the point of its very conception (National Co-production Advisory Group, 2021). This has further been highlighted with reference to MSHT where FLEX (2021) highlighted the need for NGOs, funders and academic institutions working within the research and intervention space to move away from traditional, 'top down' prescription of research agendas, towards a model that starts with the priorities and needs of those with lived experience. Funders are starting to require as much in their research calls, with a growing emphasis on the developing of 'equitable partnerships'. Indeed, a number of centres and large programmes are now funded on this basis.[6] But the response on the part of HEIs – in terms of adapting their funding arrangements and administrative processes - is lagging behind. As Martin et al. (2022: p.5) point out "[a]cademic institutions pose significant logistical challenges to community-engaged research including cumbersome financial processes, large indirect cost rates, oversight requirements, copyrights and intellectual property disputes, and research ethics challenges."

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[6] See, for example, Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's organisational values and research strategy which include commitments to inclusivity, equity and survivor engagement: https://www.modernslaverypec.org/about-us

This was certainly borne out in our study, with one respondent questioning

> *"Are the principles of fair and equitable partnerships really being signposted?"*
> **Funder**

The equity of *funding* research partnerships between universities and external organisations was a particular issue identified by the charities we spoke to:

> ***"…Thinking about ethics in participatory research starts at the moment of conception of the project and making sure that a very healthy portion of that budget is allocated to…the participatory element. So a lot of the budget is absorbed into staff salaries into a research fellow or that sort of administrative support. If you're partnering with the university as a small charity, it's always very challenging because of the amount of money that is absorbed by the university itself….I just don't think that it's ever possible to do an ethical participatory piece of research on a shoestring budget."***
> **NGO Partner**

Similarly, the following charity representative noted:

> ***"I think…there is an inequity in the way that the funding is distributed between when you're partnering with a university and you're a very small charity…It does get to a point in which you're doing 3/4 times more work as a charity than was allocated in the budget, and you feel a little bit resentful just because you know that the budget could have been more generous to the charity had so much not been absorbed by the university. You're not resentful towards the PI or other fellow researchers, but towards the system in place that makes the partnership really unequitable."***
> **NGO Partner**

Smaller community organisations are commonly appointed as collaborators because of their direct contact with and capacity to engage lived experience participants. Some of our respondents also spoke of the significant yet invisible 'soft labour' that goes into managing these kinds of relationships, and also the time that goes into ensuring adequate support for, and feedback loops with participants by charities and researchers. This is labour that is rarely adequately reflected in the budget allocated or project schedule.

> *"…those skills are so important to the success of the project and to the experiences of the participants or peer researchers. [But] they are maybe under recognised and under accredited, both institutionally by funders etc… given the time funded. We're doing a lot of unpaid labour to make these projects work and that's not great, is it? That's unethical".*
>
> **Researcher**

Shorter-term or rapid-response funding calls can create particular challenges in terms of building the necessary relationships with and meaningfully involving lived experience experts and community groups in research. This has been shown to be a particular issue in contemporary anti-slavery research where an increasing drive for research co-produced with lived experience experts contends with time-sensitive pressures to address evidence gaps for policymakers and the prevailing need to demonstrate research impact. Building research teams and projects within a relatively short period of time inevitably impacts upon the diversity and depth of such collaborations (Such et al. 2023). Funders interviewed for our study acknowledged this:

> *"We've said short duration awards can be problematic but are a reality of the funding landscape. Some issues around that can be mitigated by… funding for research networking, community-building phases of larger programmes and centres. Programme managers…have fed back that where they have invested time in the network and community building [the project] has had greater success."*
>
> **Funder**

Researchers in our study expressed similar frustrations around the constraints of short turnarounds, which often necessitate cutting corners in terms of relationship-building and remunerating peer researchers. This, they point out, can severely undermine the ethical integrity of projects:

> *"I've seen quite a lot of these proposals in the last couple of years;…the whole rapid turnaround…With a budget that just doesn't actually allow for you to engage with peer researchers…You're being asked to do way more work than you can actually physically do in that amount of time, for "value for money", and it goes the same for peer researchers as well in terms of not allowing the time or the funds for them to be fairly compensated."*
>
> **Researcher**

> *"It's just not really a sustainable or ethical way of funding research and if it is that short term, it's not just that you won't get optimal outputs necessarily; it's that you might get misleading outputs that feed into public policy."*
> **Researcher**

The following researcher spoke of the implications of rapid response projects in terms of ensuring that peer researchers understand the issues at stake, particularly in research relating to complex areas of law or policy (such as MSHT):

> *"Immediately you go red flag because there's that six-month timetable is just a little bit crazy... Talking about peer researchers, there needs to be an investment in them in terms of their understanding of what the research is. It's a project around policy, so actually their understanding of the policy - their understanding of the subject matter."*
> **Researcher**

This confirms other studies that have shown the difference that embedding sufficient relationship-building time in at these crucial early stages can make to the quality and integrity of the research thereafter. Cordisco Tsai, for instance (2017: p.165) noted that "[p]articipants expressed directly to the research team that the extended nature of the study helped them feel more comfortable with the interviewers" and supported them in developing trust with organisations and individuals.

Linked to these issues are the methods of engagement (see section 4.0) and remuneration for persons with lived experience engaging with the research process.

3.4 Fair, appropriate and timely remuneration

One of the primary issues of project management consideration when engaging persons with lived experience in research is access to fair and appropriate remuneration. As many organisations move toward embedding lived experience within their organisational structures and projects, through consultation and co-production activities, the topic of how to remunerate lived experience experts has become increasingly important.

There is now a standard expectation among researchers and funders alike in the field of MSHT, drawing on work in many adjacent fields of research and practice, that all participants should be compensated for their involvement and time spent engaging on any research project (see for example: Hutchison et al. 2021; Mind, 2022; McClean, 2021; SCIE, 2023; BASNET, 2024). To do otherwise risks participatory research becoming another form of labour exploitation. Indeed, lived experience respondents on our study spoke strongly on this point, defining unpaid research involvement, that isn't clearly signposted as such from the outset, as a form of exploitation:

> *"They're re-trafficking us, I would say, in terms of doing research. You look forward to doing your research. You're looking forward to money and there's nothing. That kills our spirit. It's like, "Oh, no, you. You've been tricked again." So that's part of trafficking"*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

> *"You wouldn't ask someone to come on board and consult in a project with no end date. So why would you do that to a survivor? And actually, that survivor its boundaries as well. Like boundaries can get blurred. So, does that survivor think they have to participate every night, every day? And again, it's just it just echoes some of the tactics used in exploitation."*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

The rate of pay should be equal to that of academic researchers or in line with any expert consultancy service (Dang, 2013). This is particularly important given that those who have lived experience of MSHT are often in a place of financial disadvantage with limited access to other forms of employment. Survivors are often restricted to employment opportunities that can be organised flexibly around multiple appointments with, for example, support workers, legal representatives, health care professionals or therapists. In addition, it is important to ensure any extra expenses that have occurred through participation are also compensated to prevent even further financial disadvantage. Aside from costs relating to travel, accommodation and subsistence, our respondents spoke of the more hidden and often uncompensated costs associated with childcare, or the use of mobile data. This should be paid in advance so that participants are not left out of pocket by paying themselves and then having to reclaim the costs (Hutchison et al. 2021).[7]

Even bearing these remuneration issues in mind, there are government-imposed limitations on how or whether some lived experience experts can be paid, particularly if they are in receipt of welfare benefits, legal aid, asylum support or Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC) support. Despite the existence of some good guidance on how to approach the remuneration of such participants, within the Scottish system for example (McLean, 2021) our study revealed a prevailing lack of clarity within government departments' changing guidance

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7. MSPEC plan to publish a payments toolkit in 2024/25.

(notably the DWP and the Home Office) as to the impacts of remunerated research participation on benefits and other statutory support (McLean, 2021; Home Office, 2022; Hutchison et al. 2021).

This lack of clarity in government guidance underlies uncertainty within HEIs and exacerbates a lack of sectoral standardisation across the UK in terms of institutional processes and policies possible for lived experience remuneration, undercutting the possibility of clear communication about the potential implications of research participation by HEIs, ROs, funders and specific research teams. The following researcher's experience is not uncommon:

> ***"Whilst everybody should be paid for their time we have to think might it be detrimental for a person? So if somebody is perhaps now on Universal Credit, for example, taking a cash payment might impact upon them. [But]…often the ethical issues are not obviously explained, and I think there's an assumption made by researchers. [So] there's a real importance about communicating it in a really clear way."***
>
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

In 2004, the former Inland Revenue agreed principles on the compensation of 'research volunteers' and 'lay participants' taking part in social science and medical research with the British Universities Finance Directors Group, which were republished by HMRC in their Employment Income Manual in 2014. These recognise that it is routine for such participants to receive 'small sum[s] to cover out of pocket expenses and as compensation for the time spent' on activities including submitting to tests or taking part in interviews during the course of research. The published HMRC guidance states that it is 'unlikely' such amounts would be considered to fall within the definition of 'earnings' and that there would be no tax or NIC liability for the individual if the sums reimbursed cover 'reasonable' costs of participation. What the threshold for 'reasonable' and 'unlikely' are is left unclear here (HMRC, 2014).

This grey area has created a potential risk of financial harm insofar as it is uncertain whether those in receipt of benefits may have deductions made due to compensation for research participation being misconstrued as 'earnings', reimbursement of expenses considered 'unreasonable', or be sanctioned for overstepping their prescribed working hours whilst those in receipt of asylum support could potentially be accused of 'working illegally'. It is, therefore, important that organisations who engage with lived experience experts keep abreast of changing guidance and develop policies that are clear and transparent, particularly signalling the grey areas within government guidance, to support informed decision-making by researchers and participants alike around the limitations and conditions of payment (SCIE, 2023). It is imperative that government (particularly DWP, HMRC and Home Office) guidance makes plain whether there are remuneration thresholds and how payment of research participants by research teams should be classified in general and particularly in the field of MSHT to avoid misunderstandings and unintended harms to participants.

A related issue is the timeliness with which such payments are made to lived experience participants and charities, particularly where they are reliant on the income from the project. Again, HEI administrative processes are not sufficiently equipped to accommodate such arrangements in an equitable manner, as the following researcher explains:

> ***"…making the payment and particularly making it in a timely manner with the university processes [is]… really, really challenging [but] what do we do about that? Given the funding models and structures being as they are, there's a lot of recognition of the value of meaningful participation and of lived experience, you know inclusion. But the frameworks, the mechanisms, the processes and the funding, and mostly the timelines don't allow for that."***
>
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

3.5 The ethics of outputs

A final issue identified through our study relates to the outputs of research. Some identified the potential conflict between what HEI institutions assess to be good or high-quality research and how this may be aligned with achieving authentic and impactful co-production with external partners. The prevailing need to achieve outputs that can be included in the Research Excellence Framework[8], even when impact-focussed, means that some of the efforts to generate accessible outputs illuminating the experiences of participants may be undermined by pressure to produce more academic outputs that adhere to different evaluation criteria (Shaw et al. 2020: p.290).

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[8] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is 'the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions', such as universities. The results of this assessment are used to inform the allocation of government funding to HEIs over the period to the next REF assessment. The first REF took place in 2014 and 2021. The next exercise is planned for 2029 (UKRI, 2024)

3.6 Recommendations relating to research governance:

	Recommendation	Who needs to take action: 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
Immediate action should be taken to achieve these recommendations:							
1	Research Organisations (ROs) should offer accessible and transparent guidance to researchers and participants on payment processes at their institution, as well as clear and timely advice regarding the implications of remuneration for research participants in receipt of benefits and other statutory support drawing from current government guidance, so that expectations of payment or reimbursement for research participation can be set appropriately and all participating can feel empowered to engage with institutional processes.		🟠				
2	ROs and funders should exercise greater sensitivity and provide clear and timely legal/financial support to research teams when costing up projects and agreeing partnership arrangements as to how envisaged payments, and any related data collected and shared with third parties, might impact upon the legal status, welfare benefits or legal aid entitlements of lived experience partners/participants, so that expectations can be managed, informed consent assured, and work tasks defined appropriately. ROs should be primarily responsible and specialist funders should provide guidance on expectations of good practice.	🔵	🟠				
3	Specialist MSHT funders, researchers and RECs, alongside other stakeholders where possible, should collaborate in the co-production of bespoke ethics guidance notes on how to conduct research in the field of MSHT. These should include a focus on issues of governance and ethics review.	🟠		🔵	🔵		

	Recommendation	Who needs to take action: 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
Action should be taken in the medium-term to make these changes to research practice:							
4	Funders, ROs and research teams need to build in additional time and budget for research teams to engage in a period of relationship-building before the substance of research projects commence. Funders should give guidance on expectations to research teams.	🟠	🔵		🔵		
5	Payment policies and processes for those with lived experience could be expedited and more flexible so that payments might be made in forms appropriate to individuals' circumstances. More readily accessible options should be on offer beyond limited voucher payments or administratively cumbersome (and for many lived experience participants, unavailable) bank transfer options. ROs should be primarily responsible and specialist funders should provide guidance on expectations of good practice.	🔵	🟠				
6	Specialist MSHT funders, in collaboration with NGO partners where appropriate, should develop training for lived experience experts in reimbursement processes surrounding research participation and consultation including, where possible, access to an accountant or legal, tax and income adviser support to ensure that any implications or reporting obligations as a result of payment or reimbursement arising from research participation are understood by participants before engaging in research and guidance is tailored to individual circumstance.	🟠				🔵	

	Recommendation	**Who needs to take action:** 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
7	RECs and ROs need to dedicate resource to creating communities of support for ethical research practice within their institutions. These should offer drop-in support, advice and peer-sharing to researchers while projects are ongoing to be responsive to ethics challenges as they arise and to move away from a front-loaded approach to ethics review.		🔵	🟠			
Action should be taken over the longer-term to make these essential structural shifts:							
8	Review and reform of ROs' internal policies and processes (what Such et al, 2023 refer to as 'research within research') is needed to create the conditions for more ethical research practice in the field of MSHT research, particularly where that research involves participation of lived experience experts as is increasingly the case.	🔵	🟠				

4.0 Ethical inclusion of lived experience experts in research: Co-production and participatory methods

As practices of lived experience engagement and inclusion in MSHT research have rapidly evolved in recent years (see section 2.1) so too has the vocabulary to describe, discuss and regulate these modes of working together, with some frequent conflation of key terms. Predominant in the literature are the terms ‘co-production’ and ‘participatory research’ or ‘participatory action research’. These are often used interchangeably by stakeholders involved in MSHT research, and related fields, to signal modes of lived experience expert involvement in research that might range from one-off participation in a community consultation through to integral involvement in all aspects of a research project from design through to delivery and dissemination of outputs. Where these terms are used, there is often also an intention, desire or concerted effort to challenge hierarchical dynamics and power differentials between those working on projects as employed researchers and those involved in the capacity of lived experience experts.

There are important distinctions between these terms – co-production and participatory action research - that have implications for practice, particularly how stakeholders involved in research using these terms understand their roles, responsibilities and what they can expect from such projects.[9] However, reflecting the current state of the field, the below discussion of the ethics of lived experience involvement in research sometimes uses these terms interchangeably. What we do try to avoid is the flattening of lived experience expertise in a way that suggests one-size-fits all guidance could be offered here. Critically important for those partnering in MSHT research is to move beyond blanket guidance for lived experience inclusion and to distinguish clearly between opportunities to engage in research based on role type: i.e. peer-researchers or lived experience consultants who are part of research teams vs. lived experience advisory groups/panels offering a regular sounding board or steering function for research in-process vs. lived experience participants offering data input through interviews, surveys or focus groups. Only when the nature of the lived experience engagement opportunity is clearly defined can good ethical guidance – beyond general principles - be offered about issues such as scope for training, appropriate safeguarding protocols, EDI and remuneration amongst others.

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[9] Modes of participatory and action research or (PAR) have been devised fundamentally to challenge relationships of power and disrupt the hierarchies within academic knowledge production. Paulo Frerie’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed was a key catalyst here (Frerie, 1996 [c.1970]; Jenkins and Matthews, n.d.; Beebeejaun et al. 2014). The concept of co-production, on the other hand, has largely emerged out of increased LE community consultation or involvement in public service design and delivery (SCIE, n.d.; Parks et al. 1981). Seeking equity among stakeholders in these processes seems to have become a more central component over time.

4.1 Considering principles, methods and benefits of lived experience inclusion

To combat MSHT effectively, engagement with the expertise of survivors needs to be included in all aspects of modern slavery work (OSCE, 2023) including the research that underpins policy and practice. Possible modes of lived experience engagement in research vary widely. In recent years, a range of frameworks and toolkits have been devised, primarily by survivor-led collectives and coalitions, to define and measure the quality of lived experience engagement work occurring in research and in the anti-trafficking sector along 'spectrums' and 'ladders' from being 'informed' or 'consulted' through to 'collaboration' and 'leadership' (Ash and Otiende, 2023; Chevous, et al. 2019). Across all modes of research engagement, consideration must be given to the purpose of lived experience inclusion in order to ensure involvement is truly meaningful rather than symbolic and therefore tokenistic (Arnstein, 1969; Organizing Engagement, 2024a, 2024b). Consideration must be given to the benefits of lived experience inclusion and for whom, ensuring there is scope for survivors to exercise autonomy and influence (Perôt et al. 2018; Brotherton et al. 2020; Simmons and Burn, 2022).

In their co-productive study on child sexual exploitation, Pacheco et al. (2023) highlighted that "several participants reported experiencing therapeutic benefits by speaking out about their experiences and going through the co-productive process, knowing that the information could help advocates, professionals and children in the future" (p.18). Whilst lived experience experts interviewed for this report agreed that their engagement with the MSHT sector was driven by a desire to make positive change, many had rarely had positive experiences when sharing their stories due to the sense that their story was often 'taken' from them by organisations with their own agendas.

> ***"…you know it's just a business tool for them. It's a just a product for the organisation. Even I'm working with some of that kind of organisation as well, because I'm involving with them to fix them and try to make them realise. We are not a product that you can sell to us, buy to us, and do the business."***
> **Lived Experience Expert**

This finding resonates with critical commentary on extractive storytelling by NGOs or data collection by researchers in the wider fields of humanitarian, refugee and development practice. Here conventional approaches to engagement have been criticised for often leaving affected communities feeling excluded and disempowered. Questions have been raised about the distribution of benefits from such storytelling practices that raise funds for NGOs but can feel exploitative for affected communities (see for example Warrington and Crombie, 2017; Bunting et al. 2023).

In the MSHT sector, Ash (2022, 2023) similarly noted that methods of narrative collection with lived experience communities were often tokenistic. A tendency for organisations to cherry-pick 'singular survivor experiences' that fit with their own agendas was observed, which has a knock-on effect of over-burdening certain lived experience participants while excluding others (Paphitis and Jannesari, 2023; Omata, 2019). lived experience groups are leading efforts to promote ethical storytelling practised and led by a diversity of survivors themselves (Ash and Otiende, 2023; National Survivor Network, 2022). Yet, it's clear that lived experience experts still often experience harmful practice when sharing personal experiences or stories.

> ***"I have seen, basically, storytelling is seen as a form of currency and not so much about caring if they are actually damaging this person or these group of communities and taking away their story by telling it on their behalf."***
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Undertaking participatory research focused on sexual violence in conflict situations, Boesten and Henry asserted the importance of "identifying and preventing the negative effects felt by over-researched communities" (2018, p.572). The researchers noted lived experience participants' critiques of funders, the academic publishing industry, and the availability of data – both access and sharing. "Survivors and survivor organizations complained that the same questions had been asked but they could not understand why the analysis of the data had not been widely shared" (*Ibid*, p.582) Similar issues were raised by the lived experience experts interviewed for this project who suggested partnership-working with a range and diversity of lived experience-engaged or -led organisations could help to address negative impacts of engagement with over-researched communities:

> ***"… if the researchers made it clear. . our pool of survivors are very narrow, we don't want to do it again. Potentially the funder could go and look for a partner, and the researchers should say, shall we work with another trusted partner who may have different set of survivors that they haven't engaged with. So far either an organisation or university, .. I think I would do that otherwise the survivors will have fatigue about sharing their story and it may not add .. volume of quality to that particular research."***
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Within the research space, empowerment of those that have lived experience can be centred by intentionally selecting and implementing collaborative methods designed to address power dynamics, such as co-production or Participatory Action Research (Christopher et al. 2008). In doing so, research participants should be given clear onboarding information about where and how they can exercise choice during their involvement in research, so that those with lived experience are able to set boundaries and make informed decisions as to how much and what they are prepared to provide without feeling any obligation towards the researchers. Meanwhile, co-development of research methodology, data collection and analysis of findings will ensure that peer-researchers and lived experience consultants are meaningfully included in research teams as 'active agents' (Hutchison et al. 2021; Lockyer and Koenig, 2022: p.405; Keighley et al., 2023). These ways of working in partnership will require extra time and flexibility to be able to build trust and robust relationships with lived experience participants, to work around their availability and to redesign any aspects of the research project as necessary in response to lived experience expert feedback (FLEX, 2021).

> *"My positive experience is when survivors are involved in all aspects of research, so from start to finish and when actually there's …room made with survivors to lead that piece of research and so not be just a participant with a tick box, but also involved in understanding where that research goes and how it's going to make changes."*
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

We consider in more depth below ethical issues raised for various areas of research practice, resourcing and governance by each of these modes of lived experience engagement (as peer-researchers, consultants or research participants).

4.2 Training, resourcing and skills development

As part of co-development across teams of researchers inclusive of those with and without lived experience of the issue being researched, it is important that training is provided to ensure that all team members are well-equipped to undertake the planned research. Aiming towards skills equity in this way can contribute to addressing power imbalances within teams ensuring research is ethically produced to high standards. Training should cover topics relevant to the specific project to be conducted such as appropriate research methods and approaches, relevant theoretical concepts, data collection, analysis, and storage and research communication. To improve the long-term literacy of research teams in the ethical infrastructure of research, training on elements of research governance seemingly distanced from lived experience inclusion in particular projects could also be offered, such as an overview of the purpose of institutional ethics review processes and how these work (Such et al. 2023; Cordisco Tsai, 2017). Where there is scope to offer research participants more information and even training about research methods, approaches and outputs this will improve rapport and trust in the research process, as well as the scope of participants to exercise informed choice, as evidenced by Sorensson and Kalman (2018) in their research with migrant workers. Experts interviewed for this study expressed how a lack of investment in such onboarding processes for research participants, particularly in the context of short-term funding, can arouse feelings of distrust in researchers and research institutions:

> ***"we should be aware about the you know the data awareness, how it's used, it's not only like you take my data, take my stories, and just run away. …"***
> **Lived Experience Expert**

> ***".. So, I think there needs to be that sort of investment and obviously in the six months project there just isn't that .. time to build relationships to support them adequately to implement training and support around them"***
> **Researcher**

When identifying training and resourcing needs for those involved in co-productive or participatory action research, researchers with support from their institutions and funders, should consider how existing institutional policies and sectoral norms can exacerbate imbalances of power and explore how these might be addressed (Hutchison et al. 2021; FLEX, 2021). For example, while institutionally based researchers might access in-house training or specialist resources behind paywalls to address skills gaps, those involved in research as lived experience consultants will likely not be able to access the same materials. As one respondent to this study suggested, willingness to review and make changes to relevant policies and procedures would be perceived as a significant indicator of institutional commitment to equity in research practice:

> ***"I think as an academic, if I come across something, I would tend to learn about it. But I don't think I've received any specific training on modern slavery, but as an academic.. we're self-starting individuals, aren't we? If I need something then I tend to read about it."***
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

> *“They can go back to their books and whatever Google, but you’re never going to get that lived expertise from survivors. if you truly authentically want survivors on board, then you will make those adjustments. …”*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

It is important to note, that in seeking to make existing training resources within research accessible and welcoming to colleagues with lived experience of MSHT any adaptations should be carefully considered. Training should be holistically designed in-line with trauma-informed principles. This does not mean that elements of training considered to be potentially triggering should be automatically omitted for colleagues with disclosed lived experience of trauma to prevent ‘re-traumatisation’. With the best of intentions, such an approach may hamper lived experience colleagues’ professional development by making selected knowledge and skills inaccessible. Where sensitive or potentially triggering topics need to be covered this could be signposted for all colleagues in advance so that they can make an informed choice about how to participate, appropriate distress protocols and wraparound support can be put in place in the case that trauma is triggered, and any concerns can be discussed with instructors in advance. For more on adopting a trauma-informed approach within MSHT research see section 5.0).

4.3 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and lived experience expertise

A recent study commissioned by Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC noted that research in the field of MSHT has ‘broad equality-driven foundations’ (Such et al. 2023: p.4). Yet it recommends research stakeholders operating in this space make intentional investments in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to build on these intentions and effectively address issues of underrepresentation, discrimination and systemic injustice that hamper the wider research and social landscape (Gill and Redwood, 2013). In the UK, since the passing of the Equality Act of 2010, social (and particularly workplace) initiatives that seek to promote equality of opportunity, safety, a sense of belonging and protection from discrimination have grown in prominence. These have increasingly been formalised using the language of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion or EDI. Under the EDI agenda public and private sector organisations across the UK, including those involved in funding and conducting research, have brought together diffuse equalities strategies to try and holistically align their working practices with this new legislation and beyond legal compliance to promote fairness, safety and social justice.

Such et al. (2023) recommend research stakeholders in the field of MSHT focus attention on, 'bringing in a wider constituency of research-interested people into the field' – with an emphasis on lived experience experts and community organisations supporting them – as a priority to realise EDI aims. To do this ethically, requires not only attention to the equal inclusion of people with a diversity of protected characteristics[10], but also necessitates an adaptive approach to implementing ethical frameworks and protocols. Maguire (2005) argues that use of "one size model" codes of ethics to assess risks and benefits cannot do this and will inevitably create barriers to participation. Instead routine ethics review processes within research should be implemented with sensitivity to how each individual's different intersecting identities can advantage or disadvantage them. In the case of lived experience experts additional attention should be given to how the multiple forms of MSHT can also intersect with protected characteristics and facets of identity beyond that list (such as immigration status or first/native language) to impact upon access to fair treatment and opportunity (Miller et al. 2022).

When discussing the intersection of EDI and ethical issues in the context of MSHT research, extant literature and stakeholders interviewed for this study drew insights particularly from practice among MSHT service providers to reflect on challenges to inclusion of lived experience experts as *participants* in research. It was suggested that one way to mitigate against some risks to lived experience participants in research, including the risk of excluding a diversity of participants, would be to have peer-researchers involved in co-producing projects from the outset; though less attention was given to how EDI issues may impact upon lived experience peer-researchers and consultants themselves as they seek to engage in research.

> ***"..I think it's just having survivors involved … in and designing research and creating research in a way that's a friendly space for survivors. So, it's not us, a survivor versus the academic language and academia, but just making it .., approachable to those survivors as well of diverse backgrounds., …"***
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Reflecting the data we gathered, this section will focus attention on issues of inclusion and caring responsibilities, language accessibility and informed consent, linguistic diversity, rights to participation and the training of research teams in diverse cultural competencies.

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[10] The UKs Equality Act of 2010 makes it illegal for anyone to be discriminated against on the grounds of 9 protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

4.3.1 Caring responsibilities and inclusion

Associated with the protected characteristic of 'maternity' but still routinely unaccounted for in research planning is provision for lived experience (and other) participants to access childcare while taking part in research. This is particularly pertinent when research activities may involve those with lived experience of MSHT discussing potentially distressing topics in the presence of a child or other persons who they may not want to be aware of such experiences. However, the power of this choice should lie with the parent and flexibility from the researchers should accommodate parental choices to encourage inclusion of expertise from multiple lived experience perspectives. A useful set of guidelines on this subject has been put together by the Helen Bamber Foundation specially for those working with survivors of MSHT and includes robust consideration of safeguarding concerns (Witkin and Robjant, 2018; for more on ethics and safeguarding see section 4.4). Cordisco Tsai (2017: p.167) has also acknowledged in their research how "lack[sic] of access to childcare was a constant challenge" which led to "interviews with mothers [being] conducted with babies/young children present". Responsive, flexible protocols (e.g., rescheduling, withdrawing, making childcare available) should ensure all participants are able to make empowered and informed choices. The most common response was to provide access to childcare. For example, one researcher highlighted the need for additional ethical clearance if children were present and thus included childcare costs within the project budget.

> ***"We've offered reimbursement for childcare costs in the projects that I've done. ... You have to do like an entire other ethical review and ethical process to get it agreed if there's going to be a child involved."***
>
> **Researcher**

> ***"We could either cover the cost of the if they already had regular childcare provision with either a child minder or at a nursery, we could cover the cost of those hours under those budget lines. Or we could have somebody at our offices to to sort of, you know, care for the young children while the mothers were in a different room, participating in the workshop. So, all of those were possible."***
>
> **NGO Partner**

The ability to cover childcare for research participants was considered a priority among NGO interviewees to ensure lived experience participants could fully engage without distraction and ensure a cohort of intersectional lived experience expert data would not be lost from research findings.

4.3.2 Linguistic diversity and the right to participate

Given that MSHT is a global challenge, and one that often intersects with vulnerabilities created through migration or issues such as conflict and climate-induced displacement, the first language of those who have experienced MSHT is diverse and in many cases will differ from the official language of the country in which they were exploited. Resourcing to allow increased linguistic diversity of lived experience participants in research is therefore a necessity if studies in the field of MSHT are to offer robust and representative findings (Murphy et al. 2024). Maguire contends that multilingualism, when not considered within research activities, is an oversight of ethics (Maguire, 2005) and creates barriers to inclusion. Interviewees for this study emphasised that lived experience expert exclusion from participation in research on the grounds of linguistic fluency could reinforce wider experiences of social exclusion and impact upon the wellbeing of those not considered eligible to participate.

> ***"I can't speak well very much English, so that's why I've been ignored, and I was ignored is by choice."***
> **Lived Experience Expert**

> *"My experience was not being valued, because I was not very good in English …I feel that because of my situation my mental health (was affected)."*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Defining eligibility criteria for human participants in research is an integral part of institutional ethics review processes in the UK, with language accessibility routinely considered as part of this. Yet, constraints such as time and budget often play a role in delimiting eligibility criteria with (in the UK and other anglophone contexts) fluency in English often becoming a pre-requisite to participation where resourcing is low. A REC member participating in this study noted that trend and warned of valuable contributions to research that are likely to be lost where this is the case:

> ***"I have also noticed as well that sometimes there's also some issues in the inclusion and exclusion criteria. So, like people who don't speak English might not be included necessarily, and that isn't because they're being excluded like purposefully because people don't want to speak to them, but it's because of things like translation costs [yet] … the voices of those people are really important."***
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

In research reflecting on the ethics of exclusion criteria beyond the field of MSHT, principles of 'fair participant selection' are proposed as a touchpoint for guiding eligibility criteria. While the issue of language accessibility is not directly discussed here the potential wellbeing impacts of exclusion are. The study ultimately argues that researchers should, 'respect people's right to self-determination' and carefully consider their 'ethical responsibility to avoid harmful exclusionary practices' (McCall et al. 2021: p.176).

One way to heed these calls in relation to linguistic diversity of lived experience participants in MSHT research would be for funders to better support research teams in the resourcing of translator and translations costs so that, for example, data could be collected via interview in a language most relevant for participants and then translated into the research team's working language for analysis (FLEX, 2021; Cordisco Tsai, 2017). A range of stakeholders emphasised that procurement of translator and translation services was something that needs careful consideration.

> *"I would also consider .. who do we have as a translator? these needs to be planned because the translator may live in the same neighbourhood, maybe bias to the issues, right? So, you want to pick a complete different random spot, pay for their travel, pay for their time childcare..."*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Being able to recruit impartial translators who would also respect the self-determination of lived experience participants, and the confidentiality of their data, was considered an essential part of any ethical procurement process for translation services.

4.3.3 Translation, cultural competency and informed consent

Beyond the basics of language accessibility, it is important that both translators and research teams are skilled in cultural competency, to ensure usage of inclusive and considered language and avoid echoing culturally insensitive stereotypes when engaging with a diversity of lived experience participants. Analysing support systems for MSHT survivors in the UK and Albania, Murphy et al. (2024) contend cultural competency is currently given inadequate attention within these structures leading to miscommunication and discrimination; an insight that participants in this study also shared:

> *“..people who have no understanding of violence in general and exploitation, will come up with really harmful statements like “Ohh is that you know what … people do [is] this your culture, isn’t it beating up women?” No. My culture is my food. It’s music, you know, it’s the things we wear.”*
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Funders, advocacy groups and service providers in the MSHT sector – particularly those with survivor-leadership – emphasise that resourcing *both* linguistic and cultural competencies within research teams is also of critical importance to ensuring robust processes for obtaining *informed* consent (The Vavengers 2023; Ash and Otiende, 2023; FLEX, 2021; OSCE, 2023).

> *“In terms of informed consent, I think it’s very complicated when you’re potentially working across cultural and language barriers to really be sure that you have got informed consent, and that the person really understands what they’re being asked to do and what the risks might be”*
>
> **Researcher**

Clear communication and accountability should be a priority throughout the participatory research process, with decision-making explained, and clear routes for feedback from lived experience participants (Perôt et al. 2018; Ash, 2023; Azadi Kenya, 2023).

> *“So I think the addressing of these issues require protective communication from the research team and shall ensuring the participants are informed about the project progress … it helps maintain a good trust between the participant … [and] the research team [and]… get a good and healthy research at the end.”*
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

None of this is possible without clarity and ease of communication between the participant and the research team. Across linguistic and cultural boundaries this is enabled through adequate resourcing of translation costs and ensuring cultural competency of research teams.

4.4 Safeguarding and lived experience participation

Safeguarding in participatory research, like ethics, has perhaps been seen as primarily a concern to address during the planning phase of projects. This upfront work is vital to enable core safeguarding frameworks and norms – including processes and practices intended to anticipate, prevent and mitigate harm and ensure safe reporting and supporting of concerns as they might arise – to be integrated into individual research projects. However, a range of literature drawing from applied practice in the field of MSHT emphasises that robust safeguarding in participatory research also involves practices to be interwoven throughout the lifecycle of a project. This might include enabling research participants to choose when and/or where participatory activities occur during the data collection phases of a project or ensuring time is set aside to review and reflect on project outputs with lived experience participants before publication (Hutchison et al. 2021; Paphitis and Jannesari, 2023).

As with above sections on EDI concerns (see section 4.3) this study found that current conversations on safeguarding in the field of MSHT are primarily focussed on lived experience *participants* in research: highlighting a need for clearer differentiation of expectations to be set around any safeguarding implications of lived experience experts engaged in research as peers or consultants. Reflecting our data's focus on thinking through safeguarding implications of engaging lived experience experts as participants in research, in-line with insights on EDI, a key message from recent survivor-led literature was the importance of clarity and accessibility of information. Azadi Kenya (2023: p.7) a Nairobi-based CSO emphasised that organizations working with lived experience communities must have "clear and comprehensive policies that outline safeguarding principles, expectations and standards."

4.4.1 Safeguarding and data protection

In this vein, key issues raised by those interviewed for this study included the clarity of disclosure and distress protocols during data collection processes and the accessibility of broader data protection policies within research. **Disclosure procedures** include the reporting roles, requirements and processes researchers are obligated to fulfil in relation to safeguarding, potential harms and criminal activities when undertaking participatory research. Our findings emphasised the importance of not only making details of project disclosure protocols available to participants, but ensuring they are understood as part of informed consent processes (SCIE, 2019).

> ***"Making it clear, like our safeguarding duty and obviously, making it clear … this is confidential, but if there's anything that's said, we would have to disclose."***
> **Researcher**

Guidance offered by the British Society of Criminology (2015) in their statement on research ethics explains that in the UK context most researchers – like any other person – are required to report on three crime-related risks to participants if concerns are raised during research. These are: an act of terrorism; suspected instances of money laundering, and information about the neglect or abuse of a child or at-risk adults. Care should always be taken by researchers to be aware of any additional reporting requirements within their discipline (in medical or legal contexts for example) university or research partners have. Disclosure procedures are important to make clear to research participants, particularly in this field, as it is common for those with lived experience of MSHT to have ongoing and complex legal proceedings under MSVCC, asylum or other forms of support. Clearly communicating disclosure obligations and protocols minimises the risk of unintended disclosures and the potential implications of unsolicited social service or police involvement.

Relatedly, **distress protocols have a role to play in safeguarding** both lived experience participants and researchers collecting data on potentially distressing topics. These protocols offer guidance to researchers about how and when to intervene if a participant or fellow researcher appears to be distressed during research engagement such as data collection. Guidance often includes suggestions about how to sensitively pause activities, when to check-in with anyone potentially experiencing distress and signpost support. In the interests of transparency, it may be useful to share such protocols with lived experience participants in research, so that they are aware of the support processes you have in place prior to engaging in research. There are several examples in the field of qualitative data collection that should be considered and used for guidance when undertaking research on sensitive topics (such as Haigh and Witham, 2015; WITS HREC, 2021; Draucker et al. 2009).

Once data has been collected in research, **protecting the confidentiality of that data** – including careful consideration of access, usage, withdrawal protocols, storage and sharing rights – are important aspects of the research and ethics decision-making processes.

> ***"People have the right to change their mind. They have the right to see what they've shared. And how it's presented."***
> **Lived Experience Expert**

These details are routinely shared with participants via project information sheets before consent is given to take part in research. Yet, there are questions about the accessibility of these mechanisms for some lived experience participants in the field of MSHT research. After Exploitation (2020) have highlighted that in the wider context of MSHT service provision, the UK government have withheld data to the detriment of survivors. Concerns have also been raised by legal scholars, NGOs and lived experience expert communities about harms – including vulnerabilities to exploitation – created for survivor groups through the sharing of data between agencies such as the police and immigration enforcement (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2023; Thiemann et al. 2024). Given this broader context (for UK-based researchers) where data protocols among national agencies are creating issues of distrust among the MSHT survivor community, offering transparent and accessible information about data storage and protection within participatory research is key.

4.4.2 Safeguarding, partnership and gatekeeping

Many (Brotherton et al. 2020; Ash and Otiende, 2023; Asquith et al. 2023) active in the field of MSHT research recognise the value of partnering with trusted community-based – particularly survivor-led – organisations and NGOs to access lived experience expert communities when conducting participatory research. This is sometimes referred to as 'gatekeeping' – a practice whereby the 'gatekeeper' controls and at times limits access, in this case, to affected communities. Cited benefits of such partnering practices include effective trust-building and access-bridging with participants, particularly where timeframes for conducting research are limited, as well as robust processes for ensuring informed and continued consent (Stachowski, 2020). Stakeholders interviewed for this study, also highlighted that community-based organisations have specialist knowledge of potential implications for survivors of research participation due to their work in frontline support services, which can be factored into research partnerships to mitigate harms before they occur.

> ***"We've also got responsibility, I suppose, to try and hear from a wide range of voices, and I think there's always that tension that, particularly with the research that I've done, that I've recruited through charities through NGOs. So that you've got that …, protective shield around them so that you know that the young people have support pre, during and after."***
> **Researcher**

> *“I’ve seen a lot of survivors we work with, and other organisations or universities also work with. Coming to us for us to fix other organisations mistakes like yes, we will pay all this money but my, you know, taxes messed up and I lost my Council house and I look eligible for six months to hire a private landlord, but I’m not anymore cause I’m I’ve done that research piece, that documentary. What do I do? And we would have to get lawyers. Obviously, they are not eligible to legal aid because their income per year surpassed the legal aid eligibility amount, so they didn’t even realise by paying that tiny amount of money for six months, they caused further issues.”*
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Yet a tension has been noted between the potential protective benefits of ‘gatekeeping’ practices, which can limit some types of risk for associated lived experience experts while potentially exacerbating others. Among the latter is the potential for gatekeeping to become a barrier to inclusion through restricted scope for self-referral of lived experience participants into research (Bovarnick and Cody, 2021). Conversely, gatekeeping has at times been observed to result in fatigue and tokenistic engagement among lived experience participants where the same group are repeatedly nominated for research engagement (Hutchison et al. 2021; FLEX, 2021).

Partnerships between researchers and NGOs or other community-based organisations should be carefully considered. At the design phase of research, potential partners should take care to ensure that the values and agendas of organisations working together do align well, that the proposed research has clear benefits for all involved (including the lived experience communities taking part) and that understanding of safeguarding risks is not assumed but transparently discussed, respecting the specialist knowledge of those working in frontline support services.

4.5 Recommendations relating to co-production and participatory methods

	Recommendation	Who needs to take action: 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
Immediate action should be taken to achieve these recommendations:							
1	As part of onboarding for lived experience experts (and all external collaborators) working as peer-researchers or consultants within research project teams, researchers with support from ROs and funders should undertake a training needs assessment related to the specific activities of the project. Sharing knowledge of standard institutional processes (i.e. reimbursements & ethics protocols) should also be a routine part of onboarding for all, so that team members (including lived experience experts) can engage on an equitable footing.	🔵	🔵		🟠		
2	Specialist funders should work with NGO partners and ROs, and seek legal advice if needed, in order to offer research teams clear guidance on disclosure and reporting requirements relevant to the field of MSHT. This will enable researchers to offer clear and transparent information to participants in advance of engagement or data collection.	🟠	🔵			🔵	
3	Funders and RECs should ensure that costs associated with inclusion of those who have caring responsibilities (e.g. childcare costs) are routinely considered, and where appropriate, accounted for within project budgets.	🔵		🟠			

	Recommendation	Who needs to take action: 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
4	Distress and other relevant safeguarding protocols should be made available to research participants on request to increase transparency of reporting and supporting mechanisms within research. Researchers should be primarily responsible for making information available to participants. RECs should provide clear and responsive guidance on expectations of good practice in safeguarding relevant to their institution. Specialist funders should provide clear guidance on expectations of good practice in safeguarding relevant to the field of MSHT.	🔵		🔵	🟠		
Action should be taken in the medium-term to make these changes to research practice:							
5	To support onboarding for lived experience participants in research, funders should work with researchers and lived experience experts to develop tools for equitable discussion of how participatory approaches will work within the scope of specific projects. Issues for discussion should include: what level of information sharing is needed/acceptable? What research methodologies will be used, are these culturally-sensitive and are there alternatives? How will data be stored and who will it be accessible to? What will be the processes and timelines for sharing and offering feedback on findings before publication? Funders' resourcing of accessible participant information sessions, prior to data collection, should be trialled as a priority to address concerns around informed consent, particularly where participants are engaging in research across linguistic and cultural boundaries.	🟠			🔵		🔵
6	To avoid the artificial flattening or excluding of diversity among lived experience experts engaged in research, funders and ROs should offer additional resource to research teams as needed to work with translators. RECs should support research teams in thinking through the safeguarding implications of this robustly.	🟠	🔵	🔵			

	Recommendation	Who needs to take action: 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
7	To manage expectations around what participation in research might look like for lived experience experts engaging in research in different ways, specialist funders, ROs and researchers should collaborate in developing clear and accessible recruitment calls that differentiate between different types of opportunities – i.e. consultant, peer-researcher (embedded within a team), research participant – and transparently communicate the level of resourcing and benefits associated with these. Researchers should be primarily responsible. Specialist funders and ROs should provide clear and timely guidance on expectations of good practice in recruitment.	🔵	🔵		🟠		
Action should be taken over the longer-term to make these essential structural shifts							
8	ROs and funders should consider giving lived experience experts access to training and resources behind paywalls at their institutions while they are working on research projects through mechanisms such as honorary fellowships.	🔵	🟠				
9	Training courses and educational resources to support research participation should not be adapted only for colleagues considered 'vulnerable' as this leads to uneven knowledge and skills access and does not account for the trauma of undisclosed colleagues. Instead, where possible, training should be holistically designed in-line with trauma-informed principles to be accessible to all colleagues whether they have or do not have a history of trauma. Where sensitive or potentially triggering topics need to be covered this should be signposted for all colleagues in advance so that they can make an informed choice about how to participate, and any concerns can be discussed with instructors in advance.	🔵	🟠		🔵	🔵	

5.0 Adopting a comprehensive trauma-informed approach

5.1 Current understandings in the field of MSHT

There is increasing consensus within the field of MSHT research that for practice to become more ethically attuned to the needs and aspirations of PWLE, a move towards trauma-informed approaches is required (Paphitis and Jannesari, 2023; Lived and Professional Experience Movement-Building Working Group, 2023; Asquith et al. 2022). This shift in thinking has been prompted by the recent proliferation of frameworks for trauma-informed care and service delivery that have been developed in the anti-trafficking sector, drawing largely from toolkits in the public health context. Here trauma is defined as an overwhelming event or circumstance that can occur 'as a result of violence, abuse, neglect, loss, disaster, war and other emotionally harmful experiences'. In response, trauma-informed approaches have emerged as an innovative tool to support positive interactions with those experiencing lasting adverse impacts upon their lives as a result of traumatic experiences including MSHT (Samhsa, 2014; UK Trauma Council, n.d.).

Models of trauma-informed practice focus on the wholesale reshaping of institutional practices and organisational cultures to make spaces that are welcoming to all including those with lived experience of trauma. These models generally revolve around a set of key principles, including safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural consideration.[11] Thinking about how such learning could be applied to research with young people seeking asylum in the UK, Shankley et al. (2023) have explained that trauma-informed practice "entails becoming more astutely aware of how traumatised people have their life trajectories shaped by their experience and its effects, and developing policies and practices that reflect this understanding".

To date in the field of MSHT research, development of trauma-informed approaches has generally evolved out of work that leans on the care-focussed aspects of public health frameworks. There has been particular attention to creating a safe space for vulnerable research participants, so that Lockyer and Koenig explain "trauma-informed research prioritizes the safety and healing of participants and strives to avoid re-traumatizing vulnerable populations" (2022, p.391). Similarly, among focus group participants for this study considerations of trauma-informed practice were often folded into wider discussions of safeguarding, working in partnership with community-based organisations and

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[11] With Samhsa's framework remaining a key touchstone: Samhsa, 2014.

the building of trust with research participants with some attention to cultural context:

> *"they have their own safeguarding policies, we adhere to them and ... we don't necessarily interact with survivors without anyone from the organisations being there so all contact is kind of done with someone who has got full trauma-informed training for this particular set of survivors in that particular cultural and national context."*
>
> **Researcher**

> *"I need to understand the project and I need to have trust with the people I'm talking to. Who am I talking to? Who are they? What is the research for? What are they going to do about it? When am I going to get the results of that research because I'm putting in my all I'm putting in my life. My, my traumatic life. Which will affect me at the end of the day. So, what is the project going to bring for me?"*
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

MSHT researchers should be seeking to mitigate against harms and the re-triggering of trauma amongst lived experience participants and peer-researchers as an element of safeguarding and trust-building. However, concerns have been raised about how deficit-based understandings of trauma-informed approaches – that exclusively focus attention on vulnerable or 'traumatised people' – can pathologise and 'other' lived experience colleagues rather than creating spaces of inclusion. What's yet to feature as strongly in discussions about applying trauma-informed approaches to MSHT research are those strengths-based aspects of this framework – such as choice, collaboration, empowerment – that emphasise scope for agency among PWLE through participation in research. Innovative work in this vein is being pioneered by survivor-led collectives and organisations who emphasise a need to 'change the ecosystem of trauma' and 'disrupt harmful institutional approaches' to and through research in order that survivors can 'protect our rights to safety, freedom, and joy, and create new horizons' (Traumascapes, 2024; Survivor Research Framework, 2024).

5.2 Ideas of vulnerability, ethics review & inclusion of lived experience participants in research

The language of trauma and trauma-informed practice has gained increasing currency in the field of MSHT research, but the detail of what this means in practice and how this might help us move towards a more inclusive research culture has yet to be fully unpacked.

> *"I think [a] trauma informed approach can be seen in quite generic terms, you know I can do an interview and I can do it in a trauma informed way, which is possibly true, but I think we have to kind of dig a bit deeper really."*
> **Researcher**

> *"Institutional research panels need access to greater awareness of research ethics in relation to people with [lived] experience in order to best advise and work with applicants at the planning stage. So, there's a twin responsibility there."*
> **Funder**

Despite widespread agreement about the value of trauma-informed approaches, particularly for enabling greater inclusivity of lived experience participants in research, this potential hasn't necessarily been realised within current frameworks. Researchers seeking to work with a variety of lived experience groups from asylum seekers to youth survivors of sexual violence have noted that "even with [trauma-informed] protocols in place, it can be difficult to obtain ethical approval for research for fear that participants may be simply too vulnerable or susceptible to further traumatisation" (Shankley et al. 2023: p.2).

Evidence gathered for this study suggests such risk-averse responses may well stem from recognition among researchers and ethics committees that identifying and assessing the diversity of traumatic stress symptoms, trauma-specific disorders, and other symptoms/disorders related to trauma is a professional practice in its own right (Sweeney, 2021; Samhsa, 2014). It requires time, resource, a specialist set of skills and a support infrastructure that are beyond the reach of most research teams/projects.

> *"There also needs to be some sort of understanding of what trauma looks like and how it manifests and is displayed ... some people would think trauma should look like this. But actually, it can look a very different way ... So, I think there's something there as well about the understanding, the expertise ... this is quite a skilled thing to do and sometimes I think [repetition omitted] that can be lacking if there isn't that support put around that."*
> **Researcher**

Methods of ethics review that seek to assess the trauma or vulnerability of potential participants are often couched in terms of safeguarding, but where wholesale exclusion or limits on participation result, criticisms have been voiced about the barriers to (equal) participation and choice generated particularly for those with lived experience.

> *"the trauma informed part is about … understanding that research ethics has an obligation to evolve to develop to adapt … How we construct conflicts between harm and managing difficult experiences is an important part and I think research ethics has probably lagged a little bit behind because for the most part, those principles serve us quite well."*
>
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

> *"There will be young people who may want to talk about their experiences and that shouldn't be shut down or limited within the research capacity:- … The good thing about [our] project is that we had in-house therapy embedded in the project so that made that consideration a lot easier because we already had the support in place"*
>
> **NGO partner**

There is an ongoing debate in response about how researchers and the infrastructure supporting them can be resourced to strike the right balance between protection and participation (for more on lived experience expertise and EDI in research see section 4.3 and for more on how this relates to 'gatekeeping' practices see section 4.4.2). This includes arguments made about the need to 'put risk into perspective', which resonate with broader studies emphasising that vulnerability is a fundamental part of the human condition and pathologising it limits the potential for social justice. In more specific terms a pathologising of vulnerability within the field of MSHT research can limit the scope for positive outcomes through participation in research for those with lived experience of trauma, including protective benefits through empowerment (Bovarnick and Cody, 2021; Fineman, 2019).

5.3 From assessing trauma to assessing the trauma-informed approach

Where approaches to ethics review seek to assess individual trauma, these fail to acknowledge that we cannot neatly separate research stakeholders – from participants, to research partners to members of research teams themselves – into 'the traumatised' and 'the not-traumatised', just as we cannot and should not reduce the identities and capacities of disclosed lived experience colleagues and research participants exclusively to their trauma. Studies show that colleagues involved in research in a range of capacities will have undisclosed lived experience of trauma (Ash, 2022; Rouf and Waites, 2023). These partners in research may not want to disclose experiences of trauma for a variety of reasons, but an approach to safeguarding in research that requires individual assessment cannot account for the needs of these colleagues.

> ***"I think, you know, you should make the assumption that some of the people who are participants are going to have experiences of trauma. So how much should your practise differ here? … You know all research in a way, should be trauma informed because … we can't divide ourselves, and because anybody's experience of any issue is going to be influenced by all their other life experiences."***
> **Researcher**

Similarly, understandings of trauma-informed practice that rest on assessing lived experience individuals' vulnerability leave little, if any, space to recognise the many other professional skills, competencies, and facets of lived and learned experience (not involving trauma) that these colleagues and participants have. Disclosed and undisclosed people with lived experience of MSHT exist within every pillar of society, successfully taking up employment positions in a wide range of sectors including the founding of their own companies and pursuit of careers as judges, doctors and lawyers (OSCE, 2023). We need approaches to research ethics that recognise trauma can manifest in a variety of ways, does not exist in a vacuum, and does not define the entirety of a person's identity, experience or capacity.

Research design, including trauma-related assessment mechanisms integrated into funding and ethics review processes, could productively shift from an exclusive focus on the vulnerability of potential participants to evaluating the appropriateness of proposed research methods, frameworks and teams to address any traumas triggered and mitigate harms. Perôt and colleagues (2018) argue that within this consideration self-care for participants and research teams should be normalised within the funding application, a suggestion that was echoed by participants in this study:

> *“Trauma-informed principles could be applied to each stage of the research process. … it would be good if this consideration was added to funding applications to ensure all those involved are made aware of the ways in which trauma-informed approaches can be applied to research for both the participants and the research team.”*
> **Researcher**

Implementing these suggestions and integrating conversations around self-care into research onboarding conversations with team members and participants would contribute to the creation of a safer environment within MSHT research that, from the outset, prioritises relationships built on trust through collaborative approaches that include listening to help minimise the re-triggering of trauma (Perôt et al. 2018; Cordisco Tsai, 2017).

5.4 Resourcing support in case of re-traumatisation or vicarious trauma

In-line with sectoral norms integrated into research ethics review processes, literature reviewed for this study as well as focus group participants, agreed that in trauma-informed research on sensitive topics involving human participation – provision should be made for all participants to be able to access therapeutic care in case of distress (Dayal et al. 2018). In recognition that resourcing was often a perennial challenge to the provision of direct support within research projects, recommendations of the form this should take have varied. At a base level, studies have advocated for ensuring pathways to appropriate clinical or specialist support are clear for researchers and participants.

> *“A contingency plan should be put in place to protect participants wellbeing and ensure there is a clear path for them to follow in terms of support. The same should be put in place for researchers as data collection and analysis can be emotionally exhausting.”*
> **Researcher**

To ensure signposted services have been appropriate, of adequate standards and well-received by those who may have accessed them within the course of research projects the need for feedback loops has been highlighted (Gerassi et al. 2017; Dayal et al. 2018).

> *"What I'd like to see done better is ask if the participants have had therapy at least even once and if they would like to have therapy before the research or after the research. Cause sometimes some people are still going through traumas and they've not talked about their past experience."*
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Building on this, a range of stakeholders have called for the embedding of clinical or therapeutic support into project teams and budgets with the case made for significantly improved outcomes where this has been put in place (Hutchison et al. 2021; Dayal, 2018). Partners in research, particularly NGOs that have experience of frontline service delivery, are currently leading in this practice, but questions have been raised about where responsibility to underwrite and deliver this provision should lie:

> *"We're asking people to talk through their experiences, without necessarily the safety net around them … NGOs can provide some of that, but they're not expert kind of trauma practitioners, counsellors, therapists and we know the health service is falling apart, so I think I'd have a big question mark about whether as researchers, we need to be funding some of the support the participants may need."*
>
> **Researcher**

Studies also emphasise that researchers, research partners and particularly researchers that may be new to the field should not underestimate the potential to experience vicarious trauma when conducting research with survivors of MSHT or on the topic of MSHT itself (Cordisco Tsai, 2017).

> *"I've engaged with survivors, and on pieces of research with no expectations, no questions around them sharing their story …, you're speaking with them as a person with lived experience about this research topic. But if there's some rapport developed very often people with lived experience will share their personal story and their experience. And yes, as an experienced researcher, you will have an awareness of that going into it and you'll be somewhat prepared in that regard. But that happening multiple times over whatever duration like I say, can absolutely lead to compound vicarious trauma."*
>
> **Research Ethics Committee Member**

Just as it is important to apply trauma-informed practices to protect those who are participating in a project on the basis of their lived experience it's also important these practices are used to support those working in research to be aware of the risks of vicarious trauma, how these can be mitigated and addressed through self-care and specialist support (BMA, 2022; Eliasson and DeHart, 2022; Zschomler et al. 2023).

5.5 The importance of trauma-informed training

This rapid review has identified consensus around a few key issues that research stakeholders in the field of MSHT should focus attention on to move towards a fuller realisation of the empowering benefits of a trauma-informed approach and thereby a more ethical research practice. At the nexus of all of these is a need for greater resource dedicated to trauma-informed training: equitably training all stakeholders in MSHT research to better understand trauma, its range of impacts and the full potential of trauma-informed approaches including how they can be applied in practice.

> *"I think there's a danger here that [being trauma-informed] it's another word that's sort of bandied around without that understanding underneath it. So, I think as funders, as [ethics] committee members sort of looking beyond, "yes, we're going to do it in a trauma-informed way", is something that really needs to be sort of developed … But that involves them understanding what it means as well."*
>
> **Researcher**

Training MSHT research stakeholders in the application of trauma-informed practices is a key way to mitigate against biases or assumptions about what a 'victim' or 'vulnerable person' is, to avoid 'othering' lived experience colleagues, to cater for those with undisclosed experiences of trauma and to improve trust and the scope for research outcomes to be empowering for all involved.

5.6 Recommendations for adopting a trauma-informed approach to MSHT research

	Recommendation	Who needs to take action: 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
Immediate action should be taken to achieve these recommendations:							
1	Funders and ROs should dedicate additional resource to enable research projects in the field of MSHT to go beyond signposting and provide lived experience participants in research with the option of accessing relevant support services such as therapists, or clinical professionals with MSHT-relevant trauma training either before, during or after participation.	🟠	🔵				
Action should be taken in the medium-term to make these changes to research practice:							
2	RECs and Funders should focus attention on assessing the appropriateness of proposed research methods, frameworks and teams to address any traumas triggered and mitigate harms rather than attempting to vicariously assess the vulnerability of the broad diversity of MSHT survivors in order to limit barriers to participation.	🔵		🟠			
3	Funders should include considerations of trauma-informed practice within research applications to encourage research teams and ROs to better integrate these into project planning processes. This would include provisions around self-care for research teams and their partners to address issues of vicarious trauma.	🟠	🔵		🔵		
Action should be taken over the longer-term to make these essential structural shifts:							
4	ROs should work with relevant NGOs, lived experience networks and trauma-specialists to ensure that researchers working in the field of MSHT are adequately trained to understand the fundamentals of what it means to adopt a trauma-informed approach to research, so that they can realise the empowering aspects of this model.		🟠			🔵	🔵

6.0 Ethical legacies

6.1 Resourcing and empowerment

Research has the potential to offer transformative longer-term impacts. These opportunities are expanded when research is co-produced with lived experience experts and communities if robust ethical principles and supports are in place. Positive impacts of research participation can be – and have been – realised within the field of MSHT. Peer-researchers on the recent MSCOS project, for example, pointed to good practice where they have been empowered through skills development and supported in, "getting jobs and setting goals … [and gaining] confidence to apply for work and study opportunities" (Paphitis and Jannesari, 2023: p.34). The evidence is clear though, that to achieve these empowering impacts of research, sufficient investment is vital (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2022). Where resourcing and time constraints have been limited the opportunities to realise positive outcomes through participation in research for lived experience experts have often been undermined. Issues of path dependency also become more pronounced within the contexts of short-term funding and project durations. This often results in the same research partners, including lived experience experts, being approached to participate in projects with little scope to embed long-term career development opportunities and impacts on the diversity of data collected.

> *"There is some real risks I think around just delivering any projects within the stretches of research funding. It's time sensitive, the money's limited. Relationships like this take a long time to develop, and they can be under pressure by delivering things at pace. We're conscious of that … It's expensive to do this properly"*
>
> **Funder**

> *"When you look at an average activist, they've taken part in 100 research across 10 years, yet they are cash poor, yet they are still in destitution and their mental health is suffering because none of these were considered. I think research should be more quality overall. And think about the long-term effects and if you do it that way, you can get a much better result."*
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

> *"In terms of skill building, it's something that we highlight quite a lot in the projects that I've done... you are "skill-building" for future employment. But yeah, in terms of how you sustain that and build on that from a six-month project, I think it's an issue."*
> **Researcher**

Co-produced MSHT research should carefully consider the scope to benefit lived experience experts involved in the longer-term. Within an individual project this might include building in tailored skills development, ensuring acknowledgement within research outputs including co-authorship -where relevant and consent is given – and the creation of longer-term career development opportunities (Robson et al. 2009).

Beyond individual projects though, the sector needs to reflect upon what investment in lived experience expertise looks like. To move from an extractive to an empowering model of engagement, rather than an exclusive focus on exploitative experiences, those designing MSHT research should always consider how lived experience strengths and achievements can also be celebrated so that these colleagues are valued and can be supported to look forward with hope, imagination, and creativity when engaging in research (Perôt et al. 2018). The potential filter-down impacts of an empowerment-focussed model of engagement are far-reaching for both lived experience colleagues and the quality of research produced. Purdam (2014) explored how empowered community-based researchers can democratise research and highlight important areas of concern that may not have been addressed without their insights. Radically rethinking research practice to centre "collaborative knowledge production within a robust and ethical social science framework" could, overtime, contribute to a significant rebalancing of power dynamics within the field (p.386).

6.2 Data sharing and dissemination

Existing ethics frameworks embedded within research organisations increasingly have a strong focus on matters relating to data storage and associated issues of confidentiality and safeguarding (see more on this in section 4.4.1). Adding to this conversation, material reviewed for this study focussed attention on the ethics of research dissemination, with some particular consideration in the literature to sharing findings on politically sensitive topics such as irregular migration, which is closely intertwined with many cases of MSHT. Duvell et al. (2008), highlight the importance of sensitively considering how participants and their data are portrayed. Researchers and those commissioning or publishing research should give due attention to taking precautions that can mitigate against impacts of unintended downstream misuse of published research. While such misuse may be beyond the direct control of researchers, it's clear that this can still undermine trust in them, related media outlets and can jeopardise future study related to the affected research topics (Dempster et al. 2022; McLaughlin et al. 2021; Ross Arguedas et al. 2023).

A related set of questions around the ethics governing analysis and publication of data were raised by several lived experience experts interviewed for this study:

> *"When you read the report, it's well intended, but you can see it has that white saviourism. It's written by a privileged white people and it literally translates across to your soul. And I think it's especially painful to children of those communities. So young people reading those reports, university educated young people, I feel really sad that my aunts and my mum, my grandparents, are reflected in a poor mannerism, although they don't realise."*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

> *"I think quotes are really important. I have seen where I've said a quote, but it's just been used in the wrong context. So again, it's it goes back to glorifying and glamorising. We've got survivors onboard so we can manipulate what they say to fit into our agenda."*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

> *"Potentially, if the deadline is 12 months, for example, two months pre-launch, there should be a meeting where you showed the final design. You know all the data included the overall work, how it will be presented to the members of the public, or whoever is it is being present to, so [survivors] get an idea and there's always final input from [them] … it makes it better to basically do it together."*
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Inclusivity in research analysis, research writing and proofreading processes before publication are much more squarely within the reach of research stakeholders to address. Reflexive positionality practices can help in accounting for biases and avoidance of the potential to exclude or marginalise underrepresented groups, particularly those with lived experience of MSHT in this context. Yet these can only go so far. Careful consideration of processes put in place to receive feedback from research participants – and particularly lived experience experts – in the lead up to publication of research is one-way scope can be created to ensure greater research integrity, transparency and accuracy before data is published. As the testimony above suggests though, at the sectoral level a focus on EDI in MSHT research is critical if findings, publications and their presentation are to be empowering for lived experience experts and affected communities, rather than well-meaning but alienating (see more on EDI in MSHT in section 4.3).

6.3 Sharing learnings, best practice & innovation

The publication and dissemination of findings is a standard part of all research projects and the main mechanism via which learnings are shared. However, there was wide agreement among stakeholders interviewed for this project that sharing learning from ethical obstacles and challenges encountered while conducting research was not yet a well-established practice in the field of MSHT.

> ***"How much do we really report back on sort of the ethical challenges at the end of a project. I do think there's still far too much sort of front loading of ethics and we're kind of not required to sort of return to that and reflect on it. Certainly not in the same amount of detail at the end of research, which I think is quite important for the sort of the, the learning."***
>
> **Researcher**

> ***"It's also very important to facilitate, you know, international collaboration to share insights and learn from them, giving them lessons, for the best practise and ethical guidelines for the modern slavery ... some UK based research, we just keep close our eyes."***
>
> **Lived Experience Expert**

Evidence suggests there are a range of reasons for caution observed among various stakeholders in sharing learnings from ethics-related challenges encountered. Concerns raised in interviews for this project included the potential for damaging trust built with research partners including affected communities, unintended negative impacts on research participants, the weakening of arguments or undermining of recommendations based on findings within a project that highlights failings, or the undercutting of future funding prospects.

Research has also raised particular concerns about lived experience experts being over scrutinised in the workplace. In recent MSHT research on survivor engagement in international development policymaking and practice, lived experience interviewees based in North America highlighted that "continuing expectation[s] to be seen as a success story puts professionals with lived experience "under the microscope," and they may be held to a different standard than other professionals in the field" (Ash, 2022: p.2). This resonates with recent work by the Survivor Research Network, which offers a map of 13 principles for 'research led by people with lived experience of neglect, abuse, violence, and/or trauma'. While this sets a framework for best practice by capturing what the collective, '*strive* to achieve' in areas such as being 'intersectional and complex', 'accountable and non-coopting' or 'timely and responsive', it also acknowledges, 'we are [all] imperfect humans who do mistakes and are limited by the structures we operate within' (2024, n.p.).

Across the board stakeholders interviewed for this project shared similar sentiments, whilst also agreeing that the scope to address challenges is much greater where those leading and partnering in research feel able to share struggles and failings with each other, their institutions and funders.

> *"If I can understand what the problems are at the university level or for a peer researcher, or for a member of a LEAP, if I can understand what those problems are, then I can try and do something that can trickle down, hopefully top down to try and help fix it. … [To] breakdown the idea that we'd need to be perfect and all be saying that everything's going really well all the time is a bit more of a cultural shift in the way that we talk about research, but actually I think it'll be to everyone's benefit."*
>
> **Funder**

> *"The best outcomes have been where there's been really open, honest, gritty, painful sharing of experience where things have gone right and where they've gone wrong. And it can be painful even when it's gone right because … the reason it's gone right is because it took more effort … and you had to fight for it, and you had to convince your institution, or you had to convince your research director that you know, no, this we want to do it this way, and it's going to take more resource, and it's going to take more time"*
>
> **Funder**

Participants in this study agreed that there was real value and potential for research innovation through creating supportive spaces and mechanisms for learning from mistakes, or struggles against the tide of institutional norms to implement best practice:

> *"It would also be good to create a Research Ethics Forum which welcomes research funders, researchers and research organisations to attend and learn from one another and have discussions on issues which need addressing. The committee could have sub-groups to make it more manageable and good practice could be shared or individuals could work together to create guides/provisions centred around research ethics."*
>
> **Researcher**

> *"I think when you're working in policy brief linked research there can be more of a resistance to say, this didn't do what we wanted it to, and it didn't necessarily go that well, because I think people worry understandably about it weakening their policy arguments or recommendations that they're making. And I get it. We all really care about what we're doing. And we don't want to weaken our arguments. But actually, I think especially in this area, it could be a very strong thing to be able to sort of build a bit of community and put support around this."*
>
> **Funder**

6.4 Recommendations for ethical legacies in research

	Recommendation	Who needs to take action: 🟠 indicates primary responsibility 🔵 indicates secondary responsibility					
		Funders	ROs	RECs	Researchers	NGOs	LE experts
Immediate action should be taken to achieve these recommendations:							
1	Researchers should put clear processes in place to share findings and receive feedback from research participants – and particularly lived experience experts – before the publication of research outputs. Specialist funders could provide guidance on best practice examples.	🔵			🟠		
Action should be taken in the medium-term to make these changes to research practice:							
2	Researchers should carefully consider with research design and budgeting, the scope for research involvement to benefit lived experience experts in the longer-term. This might include building in tailored skills development, co-authorship - where appropriate and consent is given – and the creation of longer-term career development opportunities.				🟠		
2	Funders, Research Organisations and Ethics Committee Members should work together to resource the set-up of a supportive mechanism for sharing honestly and learning from the ethical challenges and obstacles faced at an institutional and sectoral level by researchers and lived experience experts in conducting research.	🟠	🔵	🔵			
Action should be taken over the longer-term to make these essential structural shifts							
4	ROs and Funders need to reflect at strategic and institutional levels about what an equitable package of investment in lived experience expertise looks like, to move from an extractive to an empowering model of research engagement. ROs and funders together have primary responsibility to address this crucial shift in sectoral practice.	🟠	🟠				

7.0 Conclusion

Acting in an ethical manner to produce research in the field of MSHT requires action beyond research teams' engagement in routine ethics review processes. Active engagement is needed from a range of stakeholders – including funders, research ethics committees, research organisations (such as universities), NGO partners and lived experience experts – to address current challenges, open spaces for innovation and to ensure that the conditions are in place to enable ethical research practice.

The recommendations outlined in this report are devised as a starting point for dialogue and action with the hope that this prompts a range of stakeholders' greater openness to sharing experiences of undertaking or being involved in research – both challenges and examples of promising practice.

Adapted takes on the recommendations made here will be required – for countries other than the UK (on which this study is focussed) and – as new concerns and opportunities for improvement present themselves. Crucially, clearer and more standardised guidance on expectations of good ethical practice from specialist funders, RECs and NGOs with relevant specialist expertise could instil research teams and lived experience experts with a greater degree of confidence as they engage together in the co-productive and participatory forms of research that are essential to inform good policymaking in this area.

At the end of each chapter above, we have provided a series of actionable recommendations (disaggregated into short-, medium- and longer-term activities) targeted to particular stakeholder groups engaging in MSHT research. A selection of achievable priority recommendations in the short to medium term can be found below:

For Research Organisations:

- ROs should offer accessible and transparent guidance to researchers and participants on payment processes at their institution, as well as clear and timely advice regarding the implications of remuneration for research participants in receipt of benefits and other statutory support drawing from current government guidance, so that expectations of payment or reimbursement for research participation can be set appropriately and all participating can feel empowered to engage with institutional processes.

- ROs and funders should exercise greater sensitivity and provide clear and timely legal/financial support to research teams when costing up projects and agreeing partnership arrangements as to how envisaged payments, and any related data collected and shared with third parties, might impact upon the legal status, welfare benefits or legal aid entitlements of lived experience partners/participants, so that expectations can be managed, informed consent assured, and work tasks defined appropriately. ROs should be primarily responsible and specialist funders should provide guidance on expectations of good practice.

For Researchers:

- As part of research onboarding for lived experience experts (and all external collaborators) researchers with support from ROs and funders should undertake a training needs assessment related to the specific activities of the project, so that all team members can engage on an equitable footing.
- Distress and other relevant safeguarding protocols should be made available to research participants on request to increase transparency of reporting and supporting mechanisms within research.
- Researchers should put clear processes in place to share findings and receive feedback from research participants – particularly lived experience experts – before the publication of research outputs.

For Funders:

- Specialist MSHT funders, researchers and RECs, alongside other stakeholders where possible, should collaborate in the co-production of bespoke ethics guidance notes on how to conduct research in the field of MSHT. These should include a focus on issues of governance and ethics review.
- Specialist funders should work with NGO partners and ROs, and seek legal advice if needed, in order to offer research teams clear guidance on disclosure and reporting requirements relevant to the field of MSHT.
- Funders and ROs should dedicate additional resource to enable LE participants to have the option of accessing relevant support services, such as therapists or clinical professionals either before, during or after participation.
- Funders, Research Organisations and Ethics Committee Members should work together to resource the set-up of a supportive mechanism for sharing honestly and learning from the ethical challenges and obstacles faced at an institutional and sectoral level by researchers and lived experience experts in conducting research.

For Research Ethics Committees:

- RECs and ROs need to dedicate resource to creating communities of support for ethical research practice within their institutions. These should offer drop-in support, advice and peer-sharing to researchers while projects are ongoing to be responsive to ethics challenges as they arise and to move away from a front-loaded approach to ethics review.
- To limit barriers to participation, RECs and Funders should focus attention on assessing the appropriateness of proposed research methods, frameworks and teams to mitigate harms and address any traumas triggered during research projects rather than attempting to vicariously assess the vulnerability of the broad diversity of MSHT survivors.
- Funders and RECs should ensure that costs associated with inclusion of those who have caring responsibilities (e.g. childcare costs) are routinely considered, and where appropriate, accounted for within project budgets.

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