

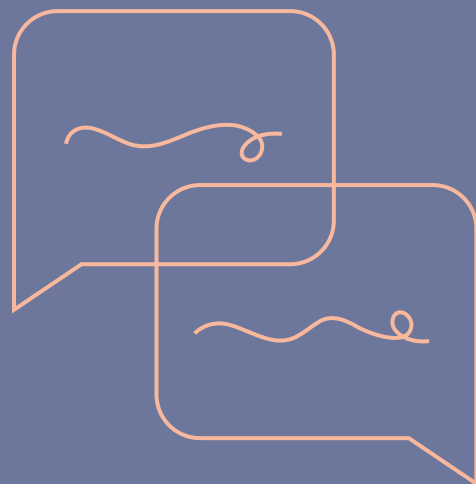
# Framing modern slavery

A messaging guide

July 2024

Based on the research by James Robertson

**PIRC**  
PUBLIC  
INTEREST  
RESEARCH  
CENTRE



## What this is and what it's for

This is a messaging guide on framing modern slavery to increase the public understanding of it. It's based on research conducted by the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) in close collaboration with the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC), which commissioned the project. Alongside this guidance, the project also produced a report, which can be found on the Modern Slavery PEC website at [modernslaverypec.org/resources/framing-modern-slavery](https://modernslaverypec.org/resources/framing-modern-slavery).

The project aimed to identify frames and narratives that would be more effective in increasing the understanding of modern slavery by the British public, enabling a more evidence-based and survivor-informed public debate, as well as developing language in collaboration with survivors of modern slavery in the UK that resonates with them, enabling better and more meaningful engagement with authorities, support services, research and other areas of work addressing modern slavery.

This framing guidance is for communicators, campaigners, press, spokespeople, or anyone else who is seeking to help the British public gain a more nuanced understanding of the issue and how it could be addressed. Although based on research of British audiences, we hope parts of this guide will be useful for people around the world.

Due to its size and the limited number of people consulted, it's important to note the limitations of this project. It is therefore important to note that this guidance should be taken more as a starting point for in a conversation about frames that are potentially effective in increasing the public understanding of modern slavery. Different frames could work for different audiences and more research needs to be carried out to gain a comprehensive picture on effective framing of it.

The Modern Slavery PEC is funded and supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The Modern Slavery PEC has closely collaborated on this project. However, the views expressed in this guidance and the full report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery PEC.



# Framing principles

**Open with a shared value of the importance of everyone being free or safe to pursue a better life for themselves and their loved ones**



Modern slavery is not an issue the majority of the public are actively engaged with. Therefore, most will be reading or hearing about the issue passively and will tend to tap into their emotions and pre-existing beliefs to make sense of it. In this context, the emotionless, procedural language sometimes used in the sector, likened by [Freedom from Torture](#) to a doctor diagnosing a patient, is unlikely to connect and therefore improve understanding.

One way to help bridge an issue like modern slavery, one that feels remote for most people, is opening your message with a shared value. Values are a way to speak to people's emotions and build affinity. Start your message with the universality of either security values like safety or self-direction values such as freedom and opportunity.

It is important to choose either security values (e.g. safety) or self-direction values (e.g. freedom) as combining the two risks evoking a cognitive dissonance and ambivalence in the audience. So, for example, you might remind people how normal it is to want to ensure our loved ones have what they need *or* ensure all children are supported to thrive. This helps the public understand why people sometimes work "off the books" or migrate if they have no other way to provide for their loved ones, or why it's important to support rather than expel children with special educational needs.

## Example message

- No matter who you are or where you're from, wanting to guarantee the health and wellbeing of our loved ones is as ordinary as breathing.  
(Value: **Safety/ Security**)
- Most of us believe that with the right support, all children can thrive.  
(Value: **Opportunity**)
- Regardless of our background, we all deserve a life free from harm and exploitation.  
(Value: **Freedom**)

## Talk about a specific form of exploitation rather than broadly about 'modern slavery'. Spell out its prevalence in the UK and who is affected

Our findings echoed previous research, showing that the term 'modern slavery' most commonly raises associations with criminal gangs trafficking foreign nationals, in particular 'vulnerable' or 'uneducated' women, into sexual exploitation. The public recognise modern slavery happens in the UK, but don't think they come into contact with it or that it's happening much in their local area.

To avoid reinforcing these narrow associations and instead broaden the public's understanding of modern slavery, name a specific type of exploitation, who it affects, and its prevalence in the UK. For example, talk about forced labour and the thousands of men from the UK and overseas paid little or nothing in our factories, shops and fields. Or, criminal exploitation and how the vast majority of young people forced to move drugs across the country are British. In order to then connect these examples back to modern slavery, refer to this exploitation as modern slavery later in the message.

When communicating the scale of the problem, remember that when it comes to large numbers, human beings are better at comparing than counting. Large numbers can feel abstract, so help people to visualise them by comparing the scale to something else, such as the population of a city.

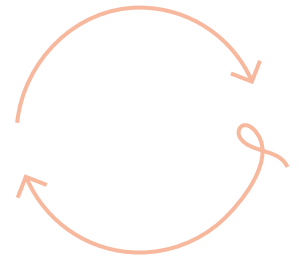
People with lived experience stressed that the thread that draws every form of modern slavery together is exploitation and preferred the use of the term over modern slavery. The term exploitation was commonly associated with 'unsafe work for poor or no pay' in our focus groups, which is arguably applicable to different types of modern slavery. However, communicators should also be mindful that, amongst some focus group participants, exploitation is also associated with individuals "exploiting the state" by abusing the benefit system.



### Example message

- Picture a packed concert arena filled with thousands of people – that's about how many British children and young people are being forced to transport and sell drugs in the UK. These are often kids who've been expelled or suspended from school and cast adrift in the streets, where they're swept into a current of criminal exploitation.
- In 2019, the Low Pay Commission estimated that nearly half a million (420,000) workers received less than the national minimum wage - that's comparable to the entire population of a major city like Bristol.

## Explain the specific structural drivers of exploitation and make it clear that they are institutional choices



The public accepts that modern slavery is a problem in Britain needing to be addressed. However, there is a tendency to focus on an individual's personal characteristics making them vulnerable to modern slavery, such as 'being uneducated', having 'a low IQ', low self-confidence, or mental health. While some recognise how more immediate environmental factors such as a 'poor upbringing' or 'growing up in a deprived area' with 'a lack of quality education or healthcare' contribute to this, few call to mind the broader social determinants and structural drivers of exploitation.

People with lived experience of modern slavery explained that these determinants and drivers should be framed as putting individuals 'at risk' of exploitation, rather than describing them as 'vulnerable people'. Calling someone a vulnerable person is making it part of their identity, whereas saying someone is 'put at risk' emphasises the environmental factors at play. So in your messages make sure to name specific policies which contribute to the conditions that enable modern slavery, who has made this decision (for example, this government, or a specific department), and what the impact is.

Framing policies as a choice is important as it helps people understand that there are other options, that modern slavery is not inevitable, and that a different policy choice could stifle, rather than enable, exploitation. One way to help explain this relationship is to say how the policy 'sets up' conditions which enable or put people at risk of exploitation. This could be describing the situation as 'a set up', 'set up for exploitation' or 'a stage set for exploitation'. As a person with lived experience explained, a 'set up is intentional", a problem driven by a whole range of policies around immigration, education, labour regulations, and social security. Policies are not here by chance - they're not natural or inevitable. They can be changed and improved in order to reduce the risk of harm.

### Example message

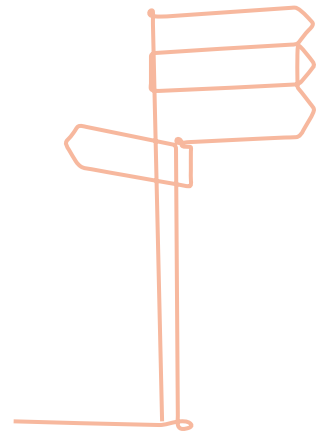
- The government has chosen to withhold the right to work from those seeking to rebuild their lives in our communities after being forced to leave their homes overseas. With no wage to support their families, people often resort to working off-the-books in car washes, construction, and agriculture for less than minimum wage.
- The government's choice to tie visas to specific employers is a set up for exploitation because unlike everyone else, it's extremely difficult for workers invited from overseas to seek other jobs in the UK even if they're mistreated.
- Children in the UK have been put in harm's way by our government's decision to cut school budgets and social services for those with additional needs.

## Spell out specific, proportionate solutions

Perhaps due to the focus on 'vulnerable individuals' rather than broader social drivers of exploitation, a common solution to modern slavery offered by the public is educating those at risk to be able to 'spot the signs' and avoid exploitation. Tougher sentences to deter perpetrators are also commonly mentioned. However, structural drivers and solutions can be brought to mind by outlining how specific policy changes can help to reduce harm.

In our focus groups, solutions that were too broad and vague such as 'needing a schooling system that ensures every child gets the support they need' tended to be met with either ambivalence (e.g. 'I don't really get the sense of the proposed solution') or fatalism (e.g. "Boring, I've heard it all before, and still nothing has changed").

Conversely, messages with clear specific solutions, especially around regulation and enforcement of welfare and labour policies, were well received on the basis that 'it's more positive and feels like it's advocating change' and 'outlines solutions to the treatment people are facing', which some focus group participants reported feeling comforted by. Couple a short-term solution with a longer-term solution which feels proportionate to the problem, whilst still feeling provisionally feasible.



### Example message

- Together we can begin to stop modern slavery in the UK by allowing those who've been invited to work and live in our communities to switch jobs like anyone else. Long term, we must ensure there are enough workplace inspectors to weed out exploitation.
- We can begin to prevent modern slavery in the UK by placing a firewall between immigration and labour market rule enforcement, so that people who are exploited can speak up and get support without worrying about being put back into harm's way. Long term the government must create a fair and effective asylum process which allows families seeking sanctuary to safely reconstruct their lives in our communities.
- To begin to stop modern slavery in the UK, we have to make sure that children with special educational needs get the support they need within the government's 20-week limit. Long term, we need a schooling system that is sufficiently resourced to support every child and ensure no one is expelled from the classroom into harm's way on the streets.

## Evoked respect and empathy, not pity and sympathy

In our focus groups, referring to those who'd experienced modern slavery as 'victims' was met with pity and sympathy, evoking responses such as, 'I feel sorry for them' and 'it's heartbreaking in this day and age'.

For some, the term also elicited an element of culpability, either because the individual was unaware of the risks or had put themselves in harm's way. For example, one participant said, 'I do feel that they may be complicit to some degree, if an illegal immigrant, but don't deserve that'.

In contrast, using the term 'survivor' or phrase 'person with lived experience' tended to evoke more respectful and empathic responses like 'it tells me about their strong character and persistence'. For some, 'person with lived experience' also elicited a leadership role, as 'someone who could advise what to look for' and 'help to drive change and educate society'.

In both workshops, people with lived experience stated a clear preference for using the phrase 'person with lived experience' over disempowering terms like 'victim' or 'slave'. The term survivor was less clear cut. As one participant with lived experience explained, 'I don't like being a victim, it makes you feel you don't have power, or feel more alone. I prefer lived experience, it's more appropriate. Survivor: it's a positive word, but I don't feel that confident when using it'. Some felt the term survivor came with an unwelcome obligation to share their story. Others pointed out that it became their identity, explaining 'I went to an event and was introduced as "here's a survivor". No, sorry, I have a name, ask me about solutions.'

Not only is it essential to articulate modern slavery in a way that is informed by and resonates with those who've experienced it, but terms evoking pity rather than empathy risk further dehumanising those being exploited in the public's eyes. The cultural effect is to subtly reinforce the misunderstanding that modern slavery primarily affects people who've migrated to the UK who are already dehumanised in the press when described as '[a swarm](#)', conjuring images of '[an invasion](#)' of insects or animals or '[cockroaches](#)'.

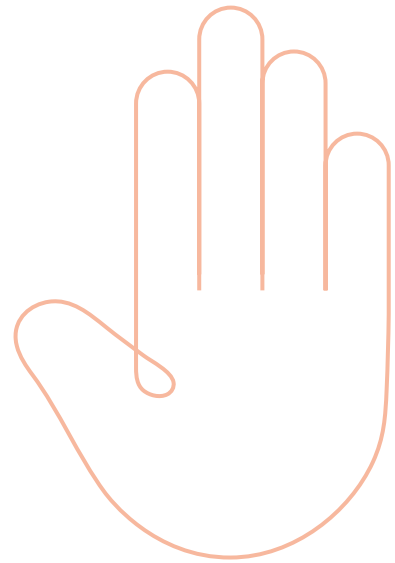


## Ensure people with lived experience are in control of their stories

Previous research found that personal narratives, told by those with lived experience, connected with the public and evoked an appetite to engage and develop a less reductive understanding of the issue. However, this has to be balanced with the best practice of ensuring engaging people with lived experience is underpinned by the principles of being non-exploitative, trauma-informed, and preventing harm.

People with lived experience who participated in our workshops made it clear that the way to balance the potential benefits of utilising their stories to deepen public understanding, whilst not causing further exploitation and harm, is to ensure they are in control.

This control must extend to what is told and not told, how long the story takes to write, when the story is shared, how long the story is shared for, and what it gets used for. As workshop participants explained,



*‘If you want an interview, or want me to write, send it back so I can check. Now I have control of my story. It’s courtesy and dignity.’*

And,

*‘If I use my story to change, I’ll do it, but I choose.’*



# Core message and structure

Your message should be tangible and relatable, avoid jargon, and follow the 'value, problem, impact, solution' structure outlined below. Open your message with a shared value to build affinity with the reader, then outline the problem that gets in the way of that value being realised. Spell out the human impact of this problem, before outlining short and long-term solutions. These solutions will feel more achievable if you provide an example of the solution working elsewhere. The closer to home this example is (culturally and geographically) the more likely people are to believe 'that could happen here.'

## Value

**No matter who you are or where you're from, everyone deserves a chance to make a better life for themselves and their loved ones.**

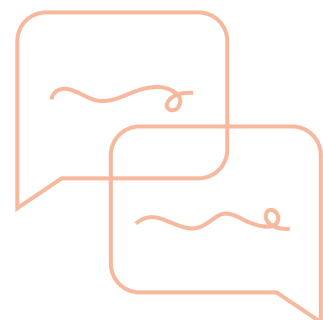
## Problem (and impact)

**But picture a packed football ground with around 17000 people from Britain and abroad - that's how many are estimated to be stuck, controlled, and exploited in the UK.**

**People have been put at risk by the government's choice to [INSERT SPECIFIC POLICY]. This sets the stage for [NAME THE SPECIFIC FORM EXPLOITATION] by [EXPLAIN HOW THE POLICY PUTS PEOPLE AT RISK OF EXPLOITATION]. As a result, [SPELL OUT THE HUMAN IMPACT].**

## Solution (and example)

**We can begin to prevent modern slavery by [INSERT SPECIFIC SHORTER-TERM SOLUTION] just like they did in [INSERT EXAMPLE]. Long term, the government must [INSERT MORE AMBITIOUS SOLUTION].**

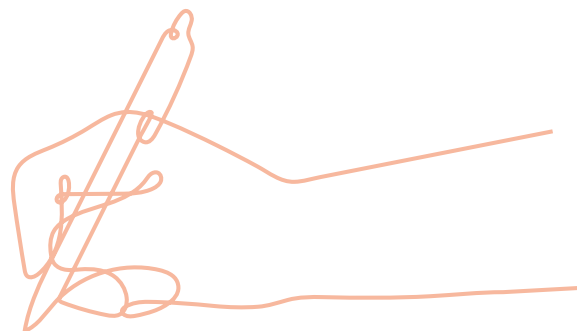


# Stats for your story

Stats on their own are not enough, but within the context of a broader narrative they're a powerful tool, providing an evidence base for your argument.



1. In 2023, 17,004 people believed to be experiencing modern slavery were reported to the government. This is enough to fill a football ground. ([NRM stats for 2023](#))
2. In 2023, the most prevalent form of adult modern slavery reported was labour exploitation, while the primary form of child modern slavery reported was criminal exploitation involving county lines. ([NRM stats for 2023](#))
3. Last year, UK nationals were the most common nationality among those believed to be experiencing modern slavery. ([NRM, 2023](#))
4. Children with special educational needs (SEN) are up to five times more likely to be expelled from school than those without, placing them at increased risk of being targeted for exploitation. ([Gov.uk 2023](#))
5. The Low Pay Commission estimates that over 420,000 workers received less than the national minimum wage in April 2019. This is around the same size as the population of Bristol. ([Gov.uk 2020](#))
6. The government agency in charge of checking on employers and employment agencies in the UK has only 19 inspectors. With a team this small, British employers might only face checks that they're paying the minimum wage once every 500 years. ([TUC, 2020](#))



# Dos and don'ts

Try to use...	Try to avoid...	Why...
<p>Person with lived experience or 'survivor' (carefully)</p>	<p><i>Victim</i></p>	<p>People with lived experience of modern slavery found the term 'victim' disempowering. It defines who they are in relation to their exploitation. Amongst the public 'victim' evoked sympathy rather than empathy, whereas 'survivor' evoked respect for the individual's strength and resilience. 'Person with lived experience' also elicited that such a person had a role in leading change. Be mindful that the term 'survivor' can be gendered and associated with particular forms of exploitation (particularly sexual exploitation) and an obligation to share traumatic stories.</p>
<p>People at risk of exploitation</p>	<p><i>Vulnerable people</i></p>	<p>Labelling someone a 'vulnerable person' risks mischaracterising them as somehow intrinsically or fundamentally unable to protect themselves due to a personal characteristic or trait. 'At risk' helps to locate the reason they're in harm's way outside of the individual by placing a greater emphasis on the social conditions they're in, whilst also leaving space for more complex stories that explore individual agency and choice.</p>

Try to use...	Try to avoid...	Why...
<p>Name the specific type of exploitation people are experiencing and describe what it means.</p>	<p><i>'Slavery', 'slave labour' or 'modern slavery' - without qualifying what type first.</i></p>	<p>For people with lived experience, the thread that runs through different forms of modern slavery is exploitation. This term was therefore preferred to talking about 'slavery', 'slave labour' or 'modern slavery' which were felt. Furthermore, by utilising a metaphor based on the brutal capturing and transporting of African people across the Atlantic to the Americas and Europe, 'modern slavery' risks reinforcing the inaccurate perception that the majority of those exploited in the UK are from overseas. Instead, name the specific type of exploitation and describe what it means, such as 'forced labour where people work in harsh conditions for no or little pay.'</p>
<p>Use examples that fill knowledge gaps, broadening the public's understanding of modern slavery.</p>	<p><i>Use 'women trafficked into sexual exploitation by gangs' as the primary example when explaining modern slavery.</i></p>	<p>Often you can't give an exhaustive account of every type of modern slavery. Therefore, try to broaden the public's understanding of modern slavery beyond 'gangs trafficking women from overseas into sexual exploitation' by talking about the 'thousands of British young people forced into criminal activity growing, selling or moving drugs' or the 'adult men from the UK and abroad paid less than the minimum wage by bosses in the mainstream economy like food and agriculture'.</p>

Try to use...	Try to avoid...	Why...
<p>Metaphors like 'set up' or 'set the stage for exploitation' to explain structural drivers</p>	<p><i>Representing modern slavery as free floating</i></p>	<p>Try to use metaphors illustrating that the social conditions which enable or 'set up' modern slavery are the result of intentional policy choices by people in institutions like government or businesses. If these are choices we can make different choices. Without this explanation, modern slavery is a free floating phenomenon, like an evil beast roaming the streets, attacking those unable to defend themselves. If modern slavery is a beast then it must be captured by the authorities.</p>
<p>Stuck in exploitation</p>	<p><i>Trapped in modern slavery</i></p>	<p>Describing the threats and violence that are used to coerce someone experiencing modern slavery is key to countering the perception that you can just fight back or walk away. Survivors felt like 'trapped in modern slavery' was too strong, like there was no way out. It was also felt to evoke the image of animals trapped in cages. In comparison, 'stuck' recognises the power of coercion, whilst feeling less permanent.</p>
<p>Specific examples highlighting the public's proximity to modern slavery</p>	<p><i>Talking in technical general terms about where exploitation is taking place in our economy.</i></p>	<p>Help to dispel the myth that exploitation is a remote phenomenon by spelling out specific examples of where it's taking place and our relationship to it. So rather than talking about modern slavery in 'agriculture, the service industry and social care' talk about how the people being exploited are 'picking our crops, painting our nails, washing our cars, cleaning our hotel rooms, and caring for our loved ones.'</p>

Try to use...	Try to avoid...	Why...
<p>Metaphors to convey the scale of the problem</p>	<p><i>Just using large numbers</i></p>	<p>Human brains struggle to comprehend large numbers. We're built to compare - not to count. In order to help people comprehend the scale of modern slavery in the UK, try to use metaphors or compare it to the size of something in our daily lives. However, make sure that this comparison is sensitive to the seriousness of modern slavery.</p>
<p>People seeking to rebuild their lives in our communities after being forced to leave their homes overseas</p>	<p><i>Asylum Seekers, refugees</i></p>	<p>Messages involving immigration and the exploitation of foreign nationals in the UK can be divisive. They tend to be well received by more liberal audiences and those with lived experience, but for more authoritarian audiences questions are quickly raised as to people's legality. Make sure to highlight the conditions that pushed people to move, under circumstances that put them at risk. It is also important to explain the positive motivations (rebuilding their lives, having a better life), as people are motivated by positive solutions more than simply ameliorating harms.</p>
<p>People invited from overseas to fill holes in our workforce or people building a better life in our communities</p>	<p><i>Economic Migrants</i></p>	<p>As above, but in addition to these considerations, framing work visas as 'an invitation' by the state helps construct a duty of care on behalf of the government to ensure the safety of the worker. However, it is also important when using this framing to explain why there are 'holes in our workforce'.</p>
<p>Temporary shelter</p>	<p><i>Safe House</i></p>	<p>Survivors highlighted that safe houses are not as they proclaim to be and therefore shouldn't be referred to as such.</p>

# Public perceptions

## 1. What is modern slavery?

The majority of the public believe human rights should be protected and are concerned about modern slavery. They think of it as the removal of choice and freedom and an inability to control their own lives. They commonly associate modern slavery with trafficking women into sexual exploitation and to a lesser extent with forced labour.

## 2. Where is modern slavery happening and to who?

The public recognise modern slavery happens in the UK, but don't think they come into contact with it or that it's happening much in their local area. They believe it primarily affects foreign nationals, that children are more at risk than adults, and women are more at risk than men.

## 3. Why is it happening?

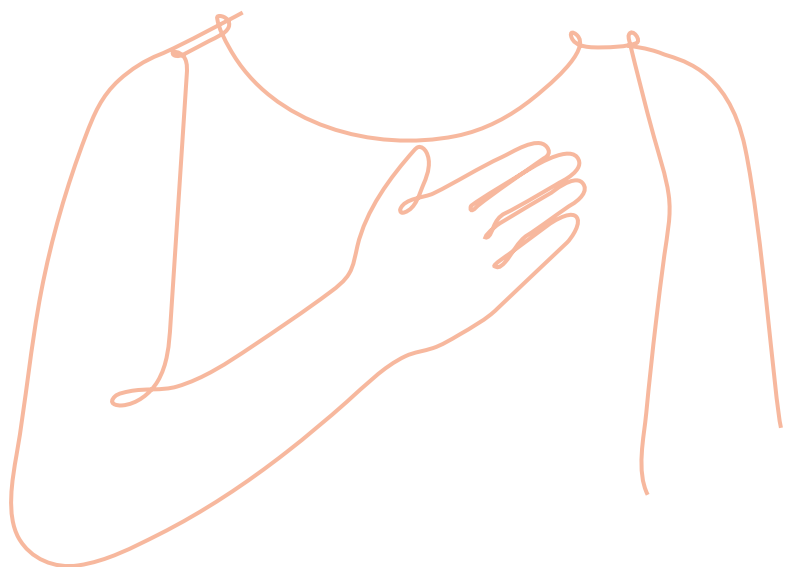
Alongside age and gender, the public also tend to believe other individual characteristics such as 'being uneducated' and 'having low self confidence' puts people at greater risk. To a lesser extent, they also recognise social conditions such as poverty and homelessness as factors - these inform the perception that people make a 'calculated risk' to enter modern slavery. Modern slavery is commonly thought of as being driven by evil, organised criminals seeking to make money quickly. They see the perpetrators as taking a calculated risk, weighing up how much money they can make versus the likelihood of being caught, and severity of the potential punishment. More broadly, some connect modern slavery with the capitalist system fuelling greed, materialism, cheap disposable goods, and the normalisation of low wages.

## 4. What should be done about it?

The public tend to feel that the responsibility of tackling modern slavery is external to them; that the UK government, the police and businesses should do more; and that those at risk should be educated in order to avoid it happening to them. They recognise their responsibility to raise the alarm if they suspect someone is stuck in modern slavery, but sometimes don't because they think it could make matters worse, don't trust the police, don't want to be discriminatory or make assumptions, fear repercussions from traffickers, or are unsure who to tell. Many feel other countries should do more to increase standards of living in order to lessen migration to the UK. They believe those who've experienced modern slavery should be provided with state assistance, but that foreign nationals should be deported after a recovery period.

# Resources

- [Changing the Conversation on Asylum: A Messaging Guide \(2021\)](#)  
*Freedom From Torture*
- [Communicating About Young People at Risk of Educational Exclusion in England  
A FrameWorks Strategic Brief \(2021\)](#)  
*FrameWorks Institute*
- [How to Talk about Poverty in the UK \(2018\)](#)  
*FrameWorks Institute*
- [Public Perceptions and Responses to Human Trafficking \(2019\)](#)  
*Anti-Trafficking Review*
- [Reframing Crime and Justice - a Handy Guide \(2017\)](#)  
*Transform Justice*





# MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC) works to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of law and policies designed to address it. The Centre funds and co-creates high-quality research with a focus on policy impact, and brings together academics, policymakers, businesses, civil society, survivors and the public on a scale not seen before in the UK to collaborate on solving this global challenge.

The Centre is hosted by the Humanities Division at the University of Oxford. The Centre is a consortium of three universities consisting of the Wilberforce Institute at the University of Hull, the University of Liverpool, and the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights at the University of Oxford. Between 2019 and March 2024, the period when this project was awarded funding, the Centre was led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law (part of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law (BIICL)) and was a consortium of six organisations consisting of the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, the Wilberforce Institute at the University of Hull, the University of Liverpool, the Bonavero Institute on Human Rights at the University of Oxford and the Alan Turing Institute.



The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre is funded and actively supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Read more about the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC at  
[www.modernslaverypec.org](http://www.modernslaverypec.org)