

Readiness to work as prevention of re-trafficking: an evaluation of the Sophie Hayes Foundation Employability Programme

Research summary

June 2026

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Research by:

This is the summary of the report *Readiness to work as prevention of re-trafficking: an evaluation of the Sophie Hayes Foundation Employability Programme*.

The research was conducted in partnership between the University of Nottingham Rights Lab, the Sophie Hayes Foundation, and King's College London.

This project was commissioned by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC) led by the University of Oxford, which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The full report can be accessed [here](#).

The Modern Slavery PEC has actively supported the production of this Research Summary. However, the views expressed in this summary and the full report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the funders.

Background

Modern slavery, including human trafficking, forced labour, and debt bondage, remains a significant global and national issue, with survivors often facing ongoing social, economic, and structural vulnerabilities that can increase the risk of re-trafficking. Prevention extends beyond stopping initial exploitation to promoting individual and community strengths, and interventions that address economic, legal, social, and educational needs are crucial to supporting sustainable recovery.

Few studies have examined risk and protective factors associated specifically with re-trafficking. There is limited focus on the economic, social and institutional capabilities that enable survivors to achieve sustained recovery, autonomy and reduced vulnerability to exploitation. Existing evidence suggests that many factors influencing initial vulnerability, such as limited social networks, insecure housing and homelessness, mental health difficulties and substance misuse, continue to shape risk post-exit (IOM, 2010; Garbers, 2021a). Survivors are often most vulnerable immediately after leaving exploitation, during return or transition, or within the first two years. From a capabilities perspective, these conditions constrain survivors' practical freedom to make safe choices, even where formal exit from exploitation has occurred (Sen, 1999). Conversely, interventions addressing economic, social, legal and educational needs may reduce reliance on risky work, limit precarious journeys and strengthen survivors' autonomy and decision-making (Garbers, 2021a).

Employment, when safe, meaningful, and supported, can play a key protective role by providing stability, autonomy, and opportunities to rebuild lives. Through their Employability Programme, The Sophie Hayes Foundation (SHF) supports

adult women survivors in England to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to progress towards employment and financial stability. To achieve this the programme, integrates personal development and practical work skills within a hybrid delivery model. Evaluating this programme offers an opportunity to explore its potential in preventing re-trafficking and supporting survivors longer-term recovery. This research therefore sought to examine the Employability Programme's immediate-, short-, medium- and long-term effects upon survivors vulnerability to re-trafficking; and to complete an exploratory analysis of the costs and consequences associated with its delivery.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods evaluation approach to examine the processes, outcomes, and economic implications of the SHF Employability Programme.

These methods were:

1. a rapid review of the literature to identify and synthesise evaluative studies of employability programmes
2. a longitudinal cohort study of programme attendees to examine short- and longer-term changes in employability outcomes (as measured by the Work Star™, a structured, multi-domain outcomes framework).
3. qualitative interviews with 25 previous programme attendees to assess longer term experiences and outcomes.
4. a cost-consequence analysis to explore the economic implications of the programme alongside its outcomes; and
5. the development of a logic model as a visual representation of the programme and the pathways through which its activities are expected to lead to short- and longer-term outcomes and impact.

Lived experience was central to the study's design and conduct, and two complementary strategies were employed to ensure meaningful involvement. The research team included a peer researcher; and a Lived Experience Advisory Group contributed to study design, pilot testing, development of the logic model and interpretation of findings. In addition, a Project Advisory Group including sector experts and representatives from policy, business, and academia, provided strategic input and guidance.

Key findings

This study highlights the value of the SHF Employability Programme as an intervention supporting meaningful progress for survivors of modern slavery through strengthening capabilities closely associated with reduced vulnerability to re-trafficking. Rather than progressing directly into employment, participants moved along a pathway of gradual, non-linear development. Employability Programme attendees experienced improvements in emotional stability, confidence, literacy, agency, social connection and future orientation: all essential precursors to safe and sustainable economic participation in structurally constrained contexts. The consistency and magnitude of improvements observed across outcome domains, alongside strong qualitative evidence of stabilisation, increased agency and future orientation, suggested that outcomes met, and in several respects exceeded, what could reasonably be expected for a structurally constrained survivor population.

The findings further indicate that employability support is most effective when delivered through a holistic, trauma-informed model that emphasises relational safety, peer connection and wrap-around care. While individual capability development cannot fully offset structural barriers such as restricted Right to Work or housing insecurity, Employability Programmes such as SHF's play a vital role in strengthening protective factors, supporting recovery and progression towards safe and sustainable employment.

1. Employability as a capability, not just employment

Survivors in the UK often face structural barriers, including immigration restrictions, welfare rules, childcare constraints and housing instability, that make immediate entry into paid work challenging. Findings from both the rapid literature review and qualitative interviews show that, in this context, employability is best understood as a capability rather than an employment outcome, with progress typically occurring in a gradual and non-linear way. Across the dataset, the programme supported progress in:

- emotional stability.
- confidence and self-worth.
- English, digital and rights literacy.
- communication and self-advocacy.

- safe decision-making and boundary-setting.
- agency, motivation and hope.

These capabilities are essential precursors to safe labour-market participation and key protective factors against re-trafficking.

2. The programme activates key prevention mechanisms

Drawing on quantitative, qualitative and literature-review evidence, the SHF Employability Programme functions as a multi-layered intervention, rather than a narrowly defined job-readiness model. The capabilities cultivated included psychological stability, knowledge and literacy, confidence, agency and social connectedness. These map onto key prevention mechanisms and align with the wider literature on the importance of de-stigmatising services (Such et al., 2024; 2025). Reduced isolation emerged inductively as an additional protective factor. These mechanisms operate together to enable participants to engage, build capability and progress towards employment over time.

3. Survivors experienced meaningful progress across practical and psychosocial domains

The longitudinal cohort study demonstrated consistent improvements across a range of evaluated domains. Qualitative interviews corroborated these findings, with survivors reporting:

- improved mental wellbeing and daily functioning.
- increased stability, safety and routine.
- strengthened social connection and peer support.
- enhanced ability to navigate systems and avoid unsafe work.
- clearer goals and future orientation.

These changes align closely with trauma-recovery theory and capability-based models of employability.

4. Programme impacts are shaped by wider structural conditions

Despite substantial capability development, both the rapid review and qualitative interviews highlighted ongoing structural constraints that affect survivors' employability trajectories, including:

- lack of Right to Work due to immigration status.
- welfare conditionality.
- insecure or unsuitable housing.
- labour-market discrimination.
- immigration-related fear and uncertainty.
- inadequate childcare provision.

Taken together, these findings suggest that employability support alone cannot compensate for structural barriers; progress is most meaningful when embedded within a supportive statutory environment. The rapid review also identified the limited availability of robust evaluative evidence on employability interventions, representing an important evidence gap.

5. Cost-consequence analysis shows the programme requires substantial organisational investment to sustain its holistic, trauma-informed model

The cost-consequence analysis (CCA) summarised the resources required to deliver the programme alongside observed outcomes. Key outcomes included consistent improvements across all Work Star™ domains and qualitative evidence of increased stability, confidence, skills, agency and social connection. These costs reflect SHF's holistic, trauma-informed delivery model, in which relational safety, peer support, stabilisation, and wrap-around services are integral to participant engagement and capability development. Whilst the evaluation did not assess cost-effectiveness; the CCA offers transparency about the range of inputs required to support stabilisation, capability-building and prevention.

Key recommendations

For policymakers

- Ensure employability support is integrated within modern slavery service provision, including within future commissioning arrangements such as the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract, to support progression from recovery to employment.
- Consider options to enable access to employment for survivors in the asylum system, alongside safeguards and supported, trauma-informed pathways into safe and sustainable work.
- Strengthen collaboration between the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions to support development of trauma-informed employment pathways and improve transitions from welfare to work.
- Improve national data on re-trafficking and repeat vulnerability, including mechanisms to identify and record repeat entry into the National Referral Mechanism.

For employers

- Support the development and use of guidance on inclusive and trauma-informed employment practices, led by sector bodies and informed by lived experience.
- Strengthen collaboration between employers and frontline support organisations to develop supported pathways into employment and improve job sustainability.

For organisations supporting survivors

- Strengthen co-ordination across the sector, including mapping employability provision, identifying gaps and overlaps, and developing clearer pathways between services.

For funders of organisations supporting survivors

- Provide long-term, flexible and needs-responsive funding that reflects the non-linear nature of recovery and progression towards employment.
- Ensure funding approaches reflect the diversity of survivor populations, including British nationals, and respond to varied and intersecting support needs.

For funders of organisations supporting research

- Invest in research to strengthen the evidence base on re-trafficking and repeat vulnerability.
- Support longitudinal research to understand longer-term outcomes, including progression into employment, wellbeing and safety.
- Prioritise survivor-centred, mixed-methods research approaches to improve understanding of how and why interventions contribute to reduced vulnerability.

A message for those with lived experience

Our peer researcher shared the following message for others with lived experience:

“Take up your place as active advocates for the unique skills and experiences of survivors and how significantly they can contribute to the UK economy and society. In doing so, you can strengthen pathways by sharing your insights on success, barriers and highlight the type of support needed to enable safe and sustainable work. Peer support, encouragement, and practical advice for others with similar experiences can help reduce isolation and build confidence. Be the change and don’t hold back. By sharing honest feedback with organisations about what support is helpful and what challenges remain, people with lived experience can also contribute to improving programmes and strengthening wider efforts to prevent re-exploitation.”

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC) at the University of Oxford exists to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of laws and policies designed to address it. The Centre funds and co-produces high quality research with a focus on policy impact, and brings together academics, policymakers, businesses, civil society and survivors to collaborate on solving this global challenge.

The Centre is a consortium of three Universities of Oxford, Liverpool and Hull, and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on behalf of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

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Published by: Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, University of Oxford.

Publication date: 2026

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This work was supported by Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, University of Oxford [reference number: R90817/CN009] from its grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/T012412/2].

Identification number of the publication: PEC/2026/05

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