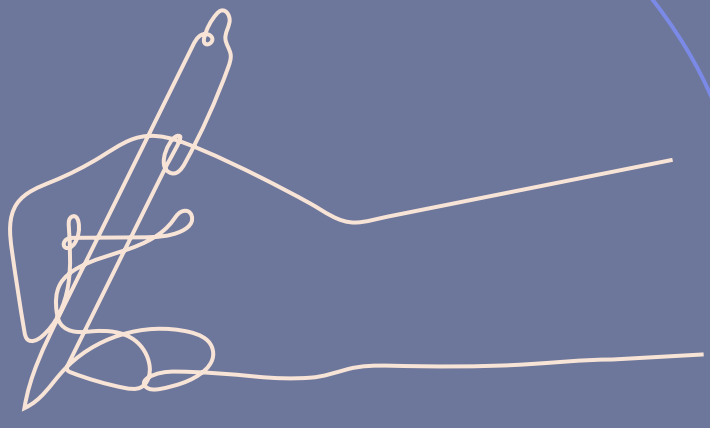
MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS | POLICY & EVIDENCE CENTRE

Led by the University of Oxford

# Conducting co-productive research ethically

## Guidance note 2



November 2025

Authors: **Wendy Asquith, Edmira Bracaj, Adam Burns, Helen Stalford; University of Liverpool. Bethany Jackson and Kimberley Hutchison; University of Nottingham.**

Research by:

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

University of Nottingham Rights Lab

# Who is this document for?

In this document we offer guidance to those designing, implementing and delivering research on modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) together with lived experience (LE) researchers: often known as peer researchers or independent LE consultants. It is designed to help you reflect on your practice; address some practical challenges and consider how to work in partnership across organisations, sectors and role types. You may be based within a university, other organisation (e.g. NGO), or work as an independent consultant. Whilst primarily focused on MSHT research, this guidance can be applied in other community-engaged research contexts.

# What is this guidance based on?

This guidance note draws on the findings and recommendations of a study commissioned by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre, which are available to read in full within the project's published report. This project examined approaches to ethics in the field of modern slavery research. It aimed to identify good practice in embedding ethical survivor engagement within projects asking what is currently working well and where can improvements be made. It focussed on practice in the UK context.

This guidance note (GN2) is accompanied by two others – 'Promoting ethical governance of MSHT research' (GN1) and 'Navigating the ethics of research participation' (GN3).

**Content Notice:** This guidance note 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.

This work was supported by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

# 1. What do we mean by co-production in research?

We use the term co-production to mean the concept of sharing power and working in equitable partnership from idea generation to research design, data collection, analysis, write-up, and dissemination of findings. In research with partners and particularly with affected communities, we believe co-production is the 'gold standard' and there are many ways to put this into practice. When bringing together diverse research teams with varied expertise and perspectives, centring the values of ethical research is crucial.[1] Ethics frameworks within research should be focused on maximising benefits and minimising harms. They should be adaptable and promote opportunities for all involved to exercise choice and be treated fairly.

> ***"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**

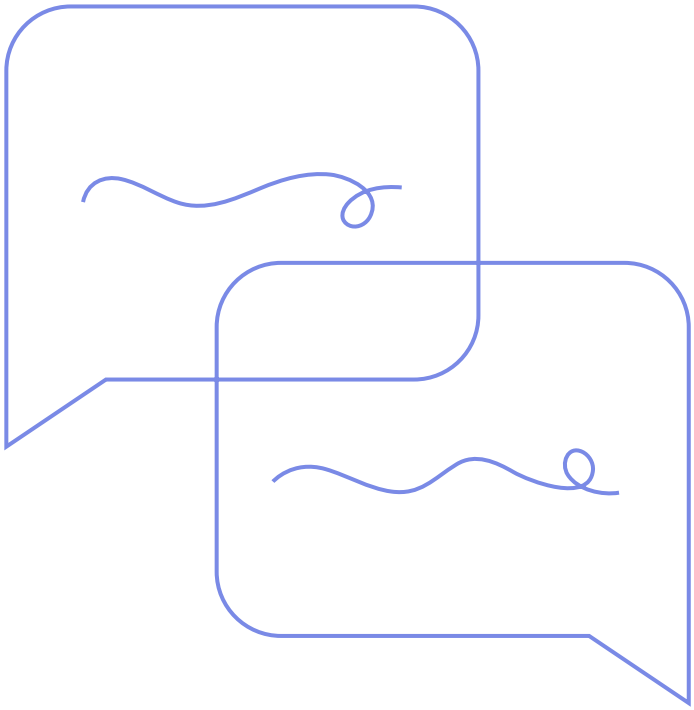
# 2. Recruitment and onboarding

To break down power dynamics and ensure mutual collaboration throughout projects, carefully considering recruitment and onboarding practices is key. During this phase, a team skills assessment (including LE consultants and partner organisations) should take place to identify training needs and to enable optimisation of the strengths of team members. Activities related to project set-up should be rooted in transparent and clear communication.

1. Survivor Research Framework: Mapping our vision, values and principles (2024).

## Key recommendations:

- Recruitment practices should be varied and include working with a range of established partners as well as creating space for new partnerships to support diversified engagement with peer-researchers and LE consultants within projects.
- Onboarding processes should include clear expectations, timelines, and institutional processes for all working together to design and deliver research.
- Ethics applications including project protocols (e.g. distress protocols, disclosure protocols, mechanisms of trauma-informed support) should be discussed and co-designed at the outset of the project with all research team members. Protocols should be publicly available to increase transparency.
- Guidance on participant paperwork and related protocols should be completed during onboarding (e.g. supplier set-up; HR and payroll forms). Who is required to complete these and who will be the contact point for any issues should be agreed among the team.
- An independent point of contact (e.g. safeguarding lead, report and support tool) should be provided for anyone that feels they are being excluded or discriminated against. Any actions taken as a result should be reported to the parties concerned, the institution and funder.



# 3. Inclusion of multilingual researchers

MSHT is a global challenge that often intersects with vulnerabilities created through migration, conflict and 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. Interpreters, translators and multilingual approaches in research are needed to promote inclusivity, ensure participants are genuinely able to provide informed consent before research begins and to strengthen research outcomes for all involved.

> *"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**

## Key recommendations:

- Researchers should be supported with funding to work with interpreters/translators throughout the research process as relevant to the research project to ensure diversity of voice.
- LE participants should be advised on potential interpreters to ensure impartiality. Once agreed these services should be made available for participants, as proportionate, throughout the research process.
- Confidentiality agreements, including compliance with GDPR, should be made with interpreters/translators/transcription services to ensure participants, researchers and their data are protected.

# 4. Timely and secure payments

Payment practices differ across organisations, but issues are common across the MSHT sector. Processes for payment should be clearly communicated to everyone at the point of recruitment. Responsibilities of the Research Organisation (RO), research project lead, and the person being paid (as an employee, consultant or partner organisation) should be outlined as part of onboarding processes. This would include detail of expected timelines, invoicing and expense claim procedures. Support should be provided to consultants related to income generated from the project, including the potential for impact of taking part in projects occurring across multiple tax years.[2] Signposting to financial advice services should be provided during the onboarding process for relevant team members.

Additionally, all team members should be informed of participant compensation policy, procedures and paperwork – or work with institutions to establish them. For more guidance on best practice in university payment policies see GN1. For more on implications of payment policies for participants see GN3.

## Key recommendations:

- Clear guidance on the conditions, procedures and limitations of payment options and processes should be communicated to consultants during recruitment.
- Research organisations should provide information on their consultancy and participation payment policies/timelines. Details on the potential impact of different payment types/methods should be provided to researchers by ROs and shared with the project team, partners and participants; including tailored guidance, in line with the most up-to-date government policy, on payment implications for those with varied legal status, welfare benefits, or legal aid entitlements.
- Flexible payment options should be available (e.g. direct monetary payments or payments in advance to cover transport, childcare, or mobile data costs; or offering alternative compensation if requested e.g. access to university training courses).
- Payment of partner organisations (e.g. NGOs) should be transparently discussed within the team including processes for contract set-up, supplier set-up, purchase orders/invoices.

2. MSPEC Payments Toolkit (forthcoming).

# 5. Addressing inequities across research teams

A meaningful co-productive approach to working with colleagues who have lived experience in research will acknowledge and openly negotiate power imbalances. This can be done by intentionally selecting collaborative research methods designed to address power dynamics and using onboarding tools designed to promote (peer-)researcher wellbeing and boundary setting.[3] Such an approach will move away from tokenistic practices of survivor engagement that simply seek to extract or amplify survivor 'stories' or 'voices'. Creating spaces of meaningful co-production involves including peer-researchers and LE consultants in co-development of all aspects of research from methodology to data collection, analysis and write-up. Working in partnership can require extra time and flexibility to function effectively and may require redesign of some aspects of the project.

> ***"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**

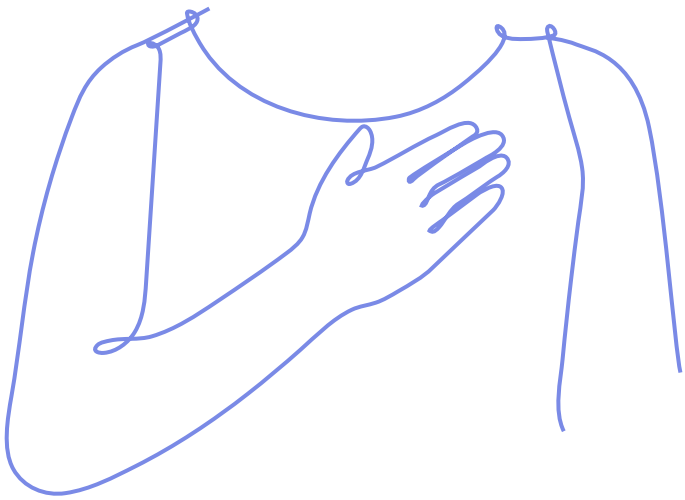
Employed, university-based researchers often have access to training and resources that are inaccessible to consulting peer-researchers (i.e. behind paywalls) creating an imbalance in skills equity across the sector. If not addressed, there is a risk of consulting researchers making financial sacrifices to gain access to essential resources. For LE consultants, resulting financial hardships may increase vulnerability to being re-trafficked or exploited.[4] Investing in skill equity within teams will promote protective factors that guard against vulnerabilities to re-trafficking as well as research that is ethically produced to high standards.

3. Survivor Alliance (2023) Peer Researcher Development Program Curriculum. Accessed 5 March 2025; Zschomler et al. (2023) A Toolkit to Support Researcher Wellbeing (RES-WELL). Accessed 5 March 2025; Boyd and Ash (2023) Survivor Storytelling Workbook. Accessed 12 March 2025.

4. ATMG (2021). Access to work for survivors of slavery to enable independence and sustainable freedom.

## Key recommendations:

- A training needs assessment related to project activities should be undertaken during onboarding for all team members, including LE researchers and external consultants. Access to training on research methods and approaches, relevant theoretical concepts, data collection, analysis and storage and research communication should be provided as necessary.
- Teams should work with funders and LE experts to develop tools focused on participation in MSHT research (e.g. recruitment, remuneration, support offerings) to promote greater transparency about ethical standards and best practices in research.
- LE researchers engaging with LE participants, like all other team members, should have access to training in trauma-informed practice and safeguarding.
- Flexible working patterns should be available to peer-researchers and LE consultants to allow for unforeseen delays or interruptions because of legal or systemic obligations and/or emotional toil not necessarily connected to project work.



# 6. Trauma-informed practice

Trauma-informed practice is integral to safeguarding and protecting those that have experienced trauma from further emotional distress. Yet, concerns have been raised about some interpretations of trauma-informed practice placing continual focus on victim vulnerabilities, or the pathologizing of people with LE of trauma. When applied to people working in the capacity of LE in research contexts this approach can create a deficit-based lens that fails to recognise these colleagues' professional skills. Such an approach also fails to acknowledge the value in application of a trauma-informed practice for persons involved in a project who have not disclosed trauma; nor the risk posed by vicarious trauma through learned experience.

LE experts have emphasised the need to disrupt harmful institutional practices. True trauma-informed practice has benefits for the whole research team as it empowers individuals to have their voice heard and respected and enables informed choice throughout the project life cycle. The deficit-based approach should be replaced with an asset-focused approach to prevent the reduction of a person's identity, experience, or capacity to their trauma.

## Key recommendations:

- Research teams working on MSHT should be supported by funders to allocate resource within their budgets to be able to offer participants access to at least one session of therapeutic or counselling support from an accredited provider.
- All team members should have received trauma-informed training[5] which should include attention to self-care and vicarious trauma.
- Trauma-informed practice should be applied to everyone involved in the project regardless of whether they have disclosed having LE of trauma; and those that have disclosed having LE should not be treated, or communicated with, any differently than the rest of the team.
- Those that do not have LE of trauma should be mindful of unconscious bias when engaging with LE experts.

5. For examples of trauma-informed training and advice see: Witkin and Robjant (2018) The Trauma-informed Code of Conduct – Helen Bamber Foundation. Accessed 17 December 2024; Zschomler et al. (2023) A Toolkit to Support Researcher Wellbeing (RES-WELL). Accessed 5 March 2025; Skinner we al. (nd) The Researcher Wellbing Project – University of Bath. Accessed 17 December 2024.

MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS | POLICY & EVIDENCE CENTRE

Led by the University of Oxford

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD HUMANITIES DIVISION

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (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).

office@modernslaverypec.org

www.modernslaverypec.org

Author(s): Wendy Asquith, Edmira Bracaj, Adam Burns, Helen Stalford, Bethany Jackson, Kimberley Hutchison.

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

Publication date: 2025



This work was supported by Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, University of Oxford [reference number: R90817/CN008] from its grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/T012412/2].

Identification number of the publication: PEC/2025/12

Our partners:

UNIVERSITY of HULL | Wilberforce Institute

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Bonavero Institute of Human Rights

Funded by:

UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council