

A rapid, realist-informed review of safehouse provision for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking

Research summary

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Research by:



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Nottingham
Rights Lab



This is the summary of the report *A rapid, realist-informed review of safehouse provision for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking*, a research project conducted by Dr Nicola Wright (University of Nottingham) and Dr Elizabeth Such (King's College London), in partnership with Naeema Ahmed and Debbie Ariyo from BASNET BME Anti-Slavery Network, and AFRUCA Safeguarding Children. This research was commissioned by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC) led by the University of Oxford. The full report can be accessed here [MSPEC Safehouses Full Report](#).

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Background

Adequate housing is a human right enshrined in international law and relevant to all states (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). The right to adequate housing encompasses both freedoms and entitlements, including protection against forced eviction, security of tenure, and equal and non-discriminatory access. Bonnefoy (2007: 413) summarises this by defining adequate housing as:

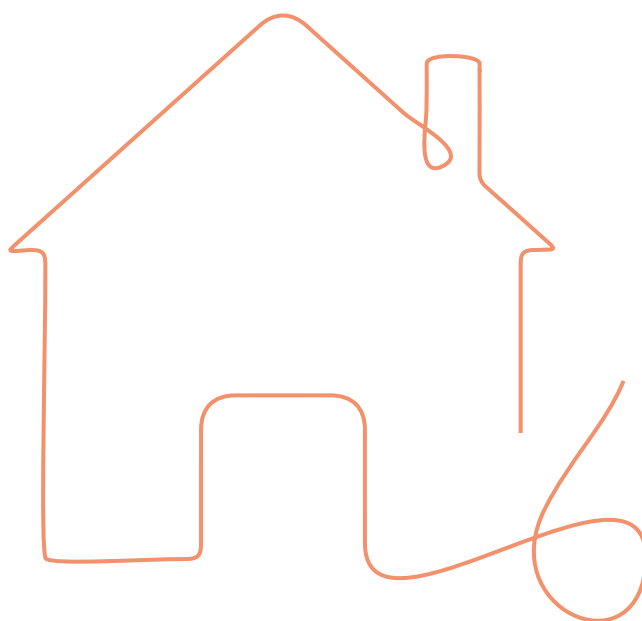
“a home, a place which protects privacy, contributes to physical and psychological wellbeing and supports the development and social integration of its inhabitants.”

The health-promoting and protective role of housing is a recurring theme across multiple policy areas. Research on preventing intimate partner violence (IPV), for example, highlights how safe and accessible housing options – ranging from emergency shelters to permanent supportive accommodation – form a crucial component of holistic response strategies (Yakovovich et al., 2022). Similarly, Housing First interventions have been associated with improvements in outcomes for people with serious mental health problems (Barnett et al., 2022). Studies of asylum accommodation in the UK demonstrate that poor living conditions can adversely affect mental health, with some accommodation types proving more harmful than others (Spira et al., 2025).

For survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking, the experience of exploitation often involves the denial of a safe and secure home. In many cases, sites of exploitation are also places of residence, where individuals experience severe physical and psychological abuse. Leaving exploitative situations can, therefore, result in homelessness, destitution, and heightened vulnerability to re-trafficking (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2018; Jannesari et al., 2024; Raby et al., 2023).

Given the established relationship between housing and wellbeing, access to safe and supportive accommodation following exploitation is critical. Internationally, safehouses are commonly understood as the primary means through which survivors access crisis accommodation and support prior to securing longer-term housing. Previous research suggests that appropriate, supportive, and secure safehouse provision can promote recovery, stabilisation, community integration, and post-exploitation identity reconstruction. However, experiences are not universally positive, and some survivors report feeling isolated, vulnerable, or unsafe within safehouse environments.

This research therefore sought to examine for whom, and in what circumstances, safehouses promote recovery for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking. Specifically, it aimed to understand how safehouses provide safe and appropriate support, and to identify the contexts in which they are most likely to facilitate recovery.



Methodology

A rapid realist-informed evidence synthesis was undertaken. Relevant literature was identified via electronic database searches, grey literature sources and a call for evidence. A total of 25 documents were included in the synthesis dated between 2008 and 2025.

This literature review was supplemented by stakeholder engagement, including consultations with lived experience advisory groups, lived experience focus groups, and conversations with policy, practice and lived experience stakeholders. Thirteen participants took part in the focus groups, and 18 stakeholder conversations were conducted. Data were analysed to identify contexts, mechanisms and outcomes (CMOs) associated with safehouse provision. Findings were first thematically analysed and then synthesised into a proposed programme theory which was subsequently translated into stakeholder-specific recommendations.

Limitations to this study included an overall scarcity of robust evidence and inconsistent reporting across studies, particularly in relation to survivor characteristics and types of exploitation experienced. These gaps made it difficult to draw firm conclusions about which safehouse models are most effective for specific survivor groups.

These limitations highlight the need for:

1. improved reporting within research studies, particularly in relation to sample characteristics;
2. larger-scale empirical research examining safehouse accommodation and the effectiveness of different models for different groups of survivors;
3. improved access to anonymised, routinely collected data from safehouse providers to support the analysis of longitudinal trends and outcomes for different groups of survivors; and
4. the co-design of trauma-informed research approaches that enable sensitive exploration of survivors' experiences of exploitation, including the type of exploitation experienced.

Key findings

The review highlights that safehouses are not a single, uniform intervention, but rather a set of diverse accommodation models operating within complex organisational and policy contexts. A typology of seven safehouse models was identified, ranging from traditional group homes, to hosting schemes, scatter flats, and alternate accommodation. However, the existing evidence base overwhelmingly focuses on traditional safehouse models, with limited evaluation of other approaches.

Across the dataset, four interrelated themes emerged as central to how safehouses function:

Safety and security: Physical protection and confidentiality are essential, but overly restrictive or punitive practices can undermine autonomy and replicate dynamics of control experienced during exploitation.

The therapeutic milieu: The physical and relational environment of the safehouse plays a critical role in recovery. Trauma-informed, culturally responsive and accessible environments support emotional regulation, dignity and agency, while poorly maintained or discriminatory environments can exacerbate harm.

Staff capacity and support: Consistent, trained and well-supported staff are central to building trust and relational security. Workforce instability, high caseloads and lack of supervision undermine the quality and continuity of care.

Community connections and transitions: Recovery is shaped not only by the time spent in a safehouse but also by the support provided to build social connections and transition into the wider community. Abrupt or poorly planned exits represent significant risk points for renewed vulnerability.



These findings informed a proposed programme theory, providing a potential explanation of how a safehouse could work in practice to support survivor recovery. The theory highlights that safehouse provision is not uniform; instead, different configurations of accommodation, workforce skills, and wider systemic conditions interact to activate, or inhibit, key mechanisms associated with recovery.

In enabling contexts, characterised by rights-based safety, trauma-informed and culturally appropriate practices, and consistent workforce support, mechanisms such as felt safety, trust, agency, relational security, and belonging are activated. These mechanisms facilitate short-term stabilisation, medium-term skill development and emotional regulation, and long-term recovery, characterised by autonomy and social inclusion.

Conversely, in constrained contexts marked by resource scarcity, restrictive practices, workforce instability and unplanned transitions, these mechanisms are weakened or disrupted. Under such conditions, safehouse accommodation may stall recovery or, in some cases, even reproduce harm.

A fuller exploration of the proposed programme theory and access to the typology matrix can be found as part of the full report https://files.modernslaverypec.org/production/assets/downloads/MSPEC_Safehouses_Full-Report.pdf?dm=1777638512.



Key recommendations

Safehouse providers and service managers

Rights-based safety and autonomy: Apply restrictions only when necessary and proportionate; communicate clearly to survivors.

Impact: Strengthens safety, trust, and autonomy.

Trauma-informed, culturally appropriate environments: Design accessible, therapeutic spaces and embed trauma-informed, culturally responsive practices into routines, activities, and skill development.

Impact: Enhances agency, engagement, emotional regulation, and future orientation.

Early, transparent transition planning: Begin survivor-led transition planning at entry with clear communication.

Impact: Reduces anxiety, vulnerability, and disruption at exit.

Co-design and lived experience leadership: Meaningfully involve survivors in the design, delivery and evaluation of services, including through advisory groups, governance roles, and co-design of rules, routines and training.

Impact: Enhances relevance, acceptability, and effectiveness of services, supporting mechanisms of agency, trust, and belonging.

Frontline practitioners

Prioritise relational consistency and trust: Ensure survivors receive consistent, trauma-informed support by promoting continuity in staffing, behaviour and support models, embedding clear and consistent communication practices, and establishing structured processes for transferring case responsibility when staff changes occur.

Impact: Strengthens relational security and engagement with recovery mechanisms.

Trauma-informed practice in daily work: Apply rules and safeguarding practices that preserve dignity, choice, and collaboration.

Impact: Promotes agency, trust, and meaningful participation.

Policy-makers and system leaders

Rights- and trauma-informed inspection and regulation: Include autonomy, therapeutic design, workforce support, and survivor experience in accountability frameworks.

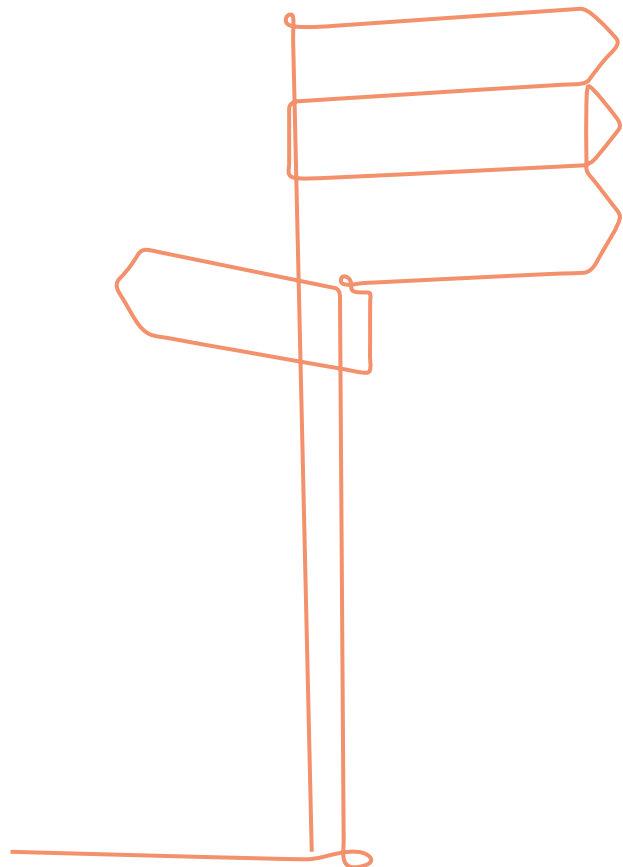
Impact: Encourages survivor-centred practice and a recovery-oriented culture.

Sector-wide governance and accountability: Develop collaborative structures for shared learning, benchmarking, and lived experience input.

Impact: Promotes consistent trauma-informed practice and rapid dissemination of effective approaches.

Research funders, researchers

Prioritise production of more **granular data on impacts** of safehouses for different groups, **longitudinal** approaches and **systematic evaluation** techniques to better capture both intended and unintended outcomes.



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.

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