



# Identifying modern slavery and human trafficking in the context of child criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland

## Research report

June 2025

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Research by:

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## Disclaimer

The project was co-funded by the Northern Ireland Department of Justice (NI DOJ) and the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) at the University of Oxford, which in turn is funded and supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and persons interviewed or surveyed during the course of the research, and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the NI DOJ, or Ulster University (UU). This publication was issued without formal editing from IOM. The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the publication do not imply expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers or boundaries.

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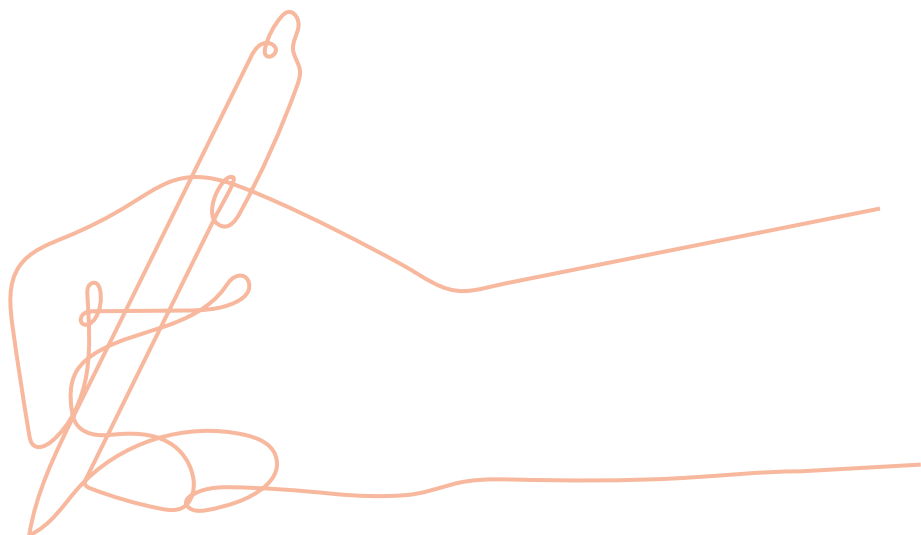
## Acknowledgements

This report was made possible due to a partnership collaboration between the Modern Slavery PEC, the NI DOJ, IOM mission in the United Kingdom (IOM UK), and UU. Special thanks to stakeholders and key informants, who offered first-hand experiences on key issues and provided an evidence base for key findings of the research.

This final Research Report on “*Identifying Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking in the Context of Child Criminal Exploitation in Northern Ireland*” is based on research conducted by the authors, Dr Gillian Kane of UU and Andrew Chisholm of IOM UK.

The Modern Slavery PEC and the NI DOJ have actively supported the production of this Research Report. However, the views expressed in this report and the report summary are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery PEC or the NI DOJ.

Many thanks are due to Desiree Birinci for research analysis and contributions, and to Dr Patrick Burland and Caoimhe McKay for their contributions and technical advice in drafting the report.



## List of acronyms

<b>BGFA</b>	Belfast/Good Friday Agreement
<b>CCE</b>	Child Criminal Exploitation
<b>CG</b>	Conclusive Grounds
<b>COE</b>	Council of Europe
<b>CPSOG</b>	Child Protection Senior Officials Group
<b>CSE</b>	Child Sexual Exploitation
<b>CVS</b>	Community and Voluntary Sector
<b>DOE</b>	Department of Education
<b>DOH</b>	Department of Health
<b>DOJ</b>	Department of Justice
<b>DtN</b>	Duty to Notify
<b>EPPOC</b>	Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime
<b>ECAT</b>	Council of Europe Convention on Against Trafficking in Persons
<b>ECHR</b>	European Convention on Human Rights
<b>ECtHR</b>	European Court of Human Rights
<b>GB</b>	Great Britain
<b>GLAA</b>	Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority
<b>HSCNI</b>	Health and Social Care Trusts Northern Ireland
<b>HTE NI Act</b>	Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015
<b>IECA</b>	Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority
<b>IGS</b>	Independent Guardian Service
<b>IHRL</b>	International Human Rights Law
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>MLA</b>	Member of the Legislative Assembly
<b>MSA</b>	Modern Slavery Act 2015
<b>MSHT</b>	Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking
<b>NCA</b>	National Crime Agency
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organisation

<b>NI</b>	Northern Ireland
<b>NIAC</b>	Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
<b>NICCY</b>	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
<b>NRM</b>	National Referral Mechanism
<b>OCGs</b>	Organised Criminal Groups
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>PPS</b>	Public Prosecution Service
<b>PSNI</b>	Police Service of Northern Ireland
<b>SBNI</b>	Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland
<b>RESWS</b>	Regional Emergency Social Work Service
<b>RG</b>	Reasonable Grounds
<b>SCA</b>	Single Competent Authority
<b>SOCA</b>	Serious Organised Crime Agency
<b>UASC</b>	Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UKDS</b>	United Kingdom Data Service
<b>UKHO</b>	United Kingdom Home Office
<b>UKBF</b>	United Kingdom Border Force
<b>UKVI</b>	United Kingdom Home Office – Visas and Immigration
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNOCINI</b>	Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
<b>UU</b>	Ulster University

## Note on terminology

In the UK, the term ‘modern slavery’ is used as an umbrella term that encompasses human trafficking, slavery, servitude, and forced labour. Even though human trafficking is deemed to fall within the scope of the umbrella term of modern slavery, the term ‘modern slavery and human trafficking’ or MSHT, is often used in UK policy and practice. For this reason, the study adopts this terminology, although human trafficking is deemed as one of the components of modern slavery.



# 1. Introduction

In recent years across Northern Ireland, there has been increasing acknowledgement of the need to understand child criminal exploitation (CCE) and the nature of the harms that contribute to it (Walsh, 2023; Action for Children, 2023; NICCY, 2023).<sup>1</sup> The criminal exploitation of children has “transitioned from an ‘emerging concern’”, to an increasing policy priority throughout the UK (Action for Children, 2024, p.6). In Northern Ireland, a range of public and private actors have called for a more coordinated approach to CCE; one that is informed by the nature of the harms occurring. Notably the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has consistently called for action on CCE, while a Member of Northern Ireland’s Legislative Assembly (MLAs) has also publicly characterised children’s involvement in violence, such as rioting as criminal exploitation.<sup>2</sup> Against this backdrop, key Northern Ireland government departments have taken action, most notably with the recent launch of a cross-departmental multi-agency two-year Action Plan to address the issue (NI DoJ, DoH, DoE, 2024).

‘Criminal exploitation’ has been recognised within the framework of modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) more widely in the UK for over a decade (SOCA, 2011). Home Office (UKHO) guidance on county lines was updated in 2023 to include more detail, including acknowledgement that, “criminal exploitation is a form of modern slavery” (UKHO, 2023).<sup>3</sup> Additionally, at the time of writing, the Crime and Policing Bill contains a proposed offence of CCE. Internationally, there is also increasing acknowledgement that exploitation for the purposes of forced criminality can fall within the scope of the ‘purpose’ element of the internationally-accepted trafficking definition (UNODC, 2022).<sup>4</sup>

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK’s framework for formally identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery.<sup>5</sup> Since records began in 2014, until the end of 2024, there have been 15,094 children identified as potential victims of criminal exploitation (CCE) across the UK, of which 9,415 are UK male children (UKHO, 2025). In comparison, only *four* children have been referred as potential victims of criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland since

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1. The full definition of CCE is available in Annex 1. This definition is taken from Northern Ireland multi-agency two-year action plan to address CCE is defined. The action plan is available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-cce-action-plan.pdf>

2. Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are elected by, and represent the people of, Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly, often referred to as Stormont, comprises of 90 democratically elected MLAs. More information is available at: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/your-mlas/>. See APNI (2024).

3. The Jay Review on Criminally Exploited Children states that “The Home Office guidance on child criminal exploitation focused almost exclusively on county lines in its 2018 edition. This was updated in October 2023 to include a far fuller and more nuanced picture of the ways in which children may be exploited”. Available at: [https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Shattered\\_Lives\\_Stolen\\_Futures\\_Report\\_-\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Shattered_Lives_Stolen_Futures_Report_-_Full_Report.pdf)

4. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, 2000. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>

5. A full definition of the NRM and its provisions is available in Annex 1.

2014 and there has *never* been a UK or Irish<sup>6</sup> male child referred to the NRM for any type of exploitation (IOM UK, 2024).

The extraordinarily low numbers of NRM referrals for CCE in Northern Ireland are particularly stark given the legacy of the past and continued presence of paramilitarism (NIAC, 2024), and the increasing policy and practice focus on addressing CCE.<sup>7</sup> Paramilitaries and organised crime groups are known to exploit children and young people in Northern Ireland, a problem that has received attention from state and non-state actors (Walsh, 2023; Children's Law Centre, 2025). Yet, despite increasing attention, framings of such conduct as modern slavery or human trafficking (MSHT) have remained largely absent in Northern Ireland.

## 1.1. Aim and objectives

Against this backdrop, the scoping study aims to enhance the understanding of why, given the increased focus on addressing harms experienced by children in the context of criminal exploitation, the formal identification of MSHT within the NRM is largely absent.<sup>8</sup>

The objectives of this scoping study are to:

1. Identify why risks and harms experienced by children in Northern Ireland in relation to criminal exploitation are not framed as MSHT or reflected in the level of referrals to the NRM.
2. Consider if the current law impacts on the identification of CCE in Northern Ireland and analyse if the law (international and domestic) could be more effectively implemented to assist in identifying MSHT among children in Northern Ireland.
3. Through examining early intervention and identification mechanisms in place for children, enhance understanding of how 'first responder' organisations perceive, recognise and identify child victims of MSHT in Northern Ireland, specifically in the context of CCE and paramilitarism.
4. Utilise research findings to inform law, policy and practice around addressing CCE as a form of MSHT, to improve identification and support of children.

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6. In Northern Ireland under the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement and Northern Ireland Act 1998, citizens are entitled to British Citizenship and/or Irish Citizenship.

7. The concept of 'paramilitarism' is complex and contested. Paramilitary groups originated as terrorist organisations and were regarded as such during the 'Troubles'. Paramilitary groups continue to hold a presence in Northern Ireland, 25 years after the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Paramilitaries seek to control communities through the use of extreme violence up to and including murder and by intimidation. The activities of paramilitaries range from minor to serious criminality, drug dealing, extortion, fuel laundering and murder. Terms such as organised crime gangs can fail to capture the complex historical and political context which leads to these groups remaining embedded in communities. More information is available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43124/documents/214542/default/>

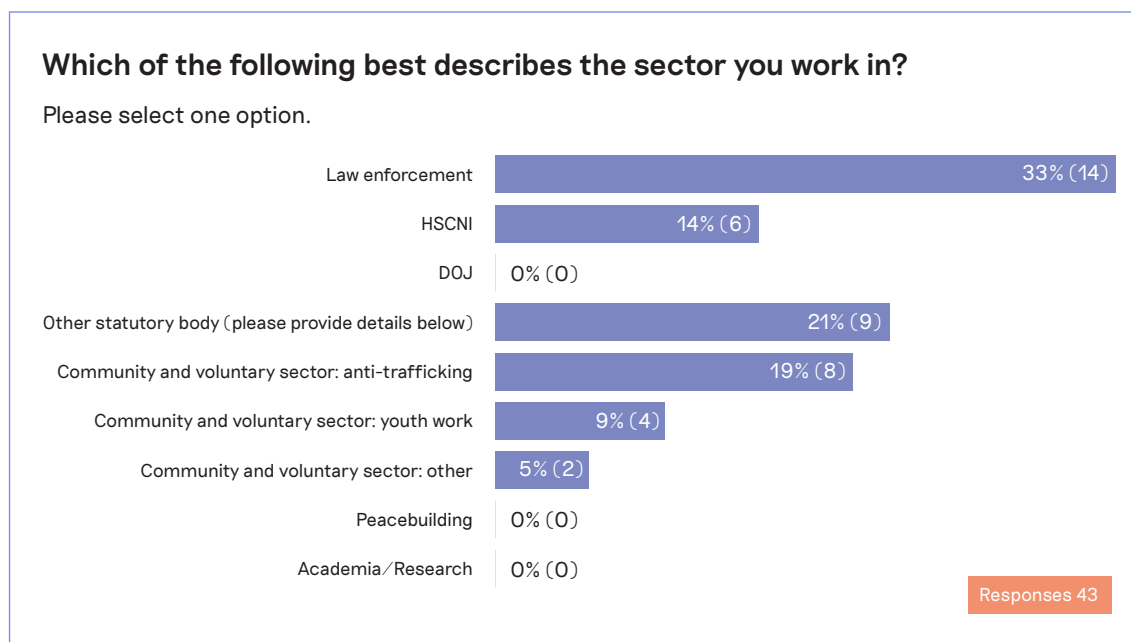
8. The terminology associated with modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) can be complex and contested. Annex I contains a list of key definitions for terms used within this report. Some of these definitions are also unpacked in the legal context section and the findings.



## 1.2. Methodology

The overarching methodological approach is a sociolegal one. Such an approach requires an analysis of the law in the context within which it operates (Wheeler and Thomas, 2000). Contextually, this study assesses the law – especially positive obligations to identify human trafficking in international, regional and domestic law – in the unique geographical and cultural context of Northern Ireland as a transitional society, one in which the legacy of ethno-national conflict impacts upon a range of socio-political issues (McManus, 2016).

Research methods were both qualitative and quantitative and included: (a) doctrinal legal analysis, exploring the content, scope and interpretation of key international and domestic norms; (b) 14 semi-structured interviews, between December 2024 and March 2025, with 15 key informants<sup>9</sup> based in Northern Ireland (n=11) and Great Britain (n=4), interview participants are anonymised and referenced as NI-01 to NI-15; and (c) a survey carried out between December 2024 and March 2025, and completed by 43 key stakeholders based in Northern Ireland comprising representatives from statutory bodies (35%, n= 15)<sup>10</sup>; law enforcement agencies (33%, n=14); and the community and voluntary sector (33%, n=14).<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 1: Research survey respondents represented per sector.**

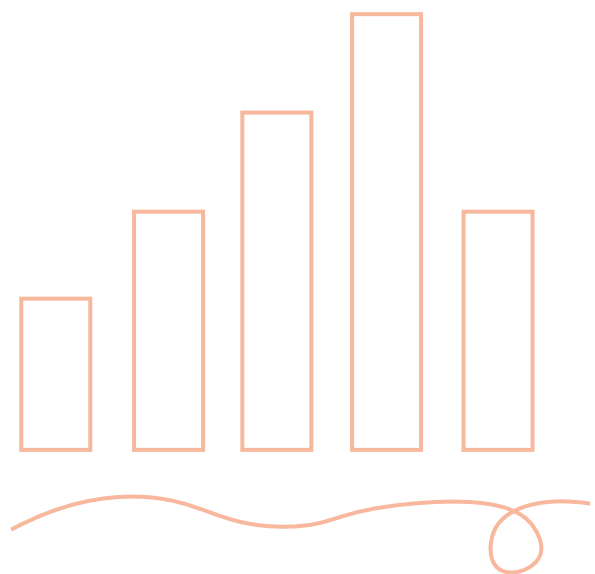
9. 15 key informants from organisations, statutory bodies or law enforcement agencies. The interviews took place between December 2024 and February 2025.

10. This included HSCNI, Education Authority, Department of Health, Probation Board of Northern Ireland, Safeguarding Board of Northern Ireland. Note: although 44 individuals completed the survey, one response did not have a complete set of consent questions and had to be excluded.

11. This included those working in dedicated anti-trafficking organisations, as well as youth work organisations.

Interviews and surveys were complemented by a desk-based review of relevant literature (academic and grey), legal and policy documents, and existing data sets, namely the NRM statistics disaggregated from the UK Data Service (UKDS).<sup>12</sup> Using both purposive and snowball sampling methods, interviewees were selected based on the nature of their work in relation to both MSHT and CCE. Participants included those responsible for policymaking and law enforcement, practitioners working directly with at-risk children as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in both Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Interview data was coded thematically analysed and through the use of NVivo data analysis software.

Potential limitations of this scoping-study, given the six-month timeframe, concerned the potentially small sample size of key informants, the purposive and snowball sample techniques, the risk of non-generalisable findings, and possible selection bias. However, analysis revealed a level of data saturation, with similar themes emerging from across the range of interviewees. A second potential limitation relates to the absence of research participants with lived experience of MSHT for the purpose of CCE, which posed ethical and logistical challenges to include as part of this project, as there has never been a UK or Irish male child referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland, who might consider themselves to have lived experience. Further, the focus of the research is on formal identification, and as such, the experiences of those tasked with undertaking this work is embedded in the study.



12. The study was approved by Ulster University's Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Filter Committee in October 2024.

## 2. Background and context

### 2.1. Situating the research

#### 2.1.1. Child criminal exploitation in the UK and Ireland

Alongside the publication of a cross-departmental CCE Action Plan in 2024, the Northern Ireland Departments of Health, Justice, and Education set out a definition of CCE, as follows:

*Child criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse which occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity. The exploitation may be through violence or the threat of violence but may also appear to be transactional and in the context of perceived relationships and friendships. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears to be consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact. It can also occur through the use of technology and social media. The criminal exploitation of children and young people can include being exploited into storing drugs or weapons, drug dealing, theft, violence, intimidation, vandalism, forced labour and other forms of criminality through grooming by people that children and young people trust or look up to. (NI DOJ, DOH, DOE, 2024)*

Existing research explores the nature of CCE harms experienced by children in Northern Ireland, and incorporates the views of young people themselves, highlighting the pervasive nature of paramilitaries and organised criminal groups (OCGs) and the contextual risk facing young people (Walsh, 2023; Walsh, 2023b).<sup>13</sup> Walsh's research with young people highlights a range of distinctive features of CCE in Northern Ireland, including the fact that paramilitaries may exert much more influence and control over communities than organised crime groups in other settings. This research also reveals that some young people perceive paramilitaries as protective. Further, emerging research in Ireland explores the perspectives of Irish young people on CCE in their contexts, shedding light on the social structures that enable it and the limited choices available to young people (Sheehan et al., 2024). Alongside this, in 2025, the findings of a landmark study on Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland, provided

13. This research was funded by the Northern Ireland Executive's Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality & Organised Crime Programme.

unique insights on the trauma that many in Northern Ireland experienced as children, and indicates that young people (18-24) who participated in the study “were not immune to ongoing paramilitary violence” (Walsh et. al, 2025, p.9). While the existing research sheds light on the nature of the harm experienced by children and provides important insights into the distinctive characteristics of CCE in Northern Ireland, it does not typically frame CCE as MSHT.

Research on CCE in the rest of the UK often focuses on the phenomenon of ‘county lines’, where gangs or organised crime groups are engaged in the transportation of drugs between areas of the UK.<sup>14</sup> This activity often involves the exploitation of children (UK Government, 2025). Innovative research on county lines explores the phenomenon in different cities in the UK (Robinson et al., 2019); the lived experiences of parents caring for exploited children (Maxwell, 2023); the impact of Covid-19 on the nature of county lines (Brewster et al., 2021); and youth justice processes in the context of county lines type exploitation (Stone, 2018).

## 2.1.2. Modern slavery, human trafficking and criminal exploitation

Across scholarship on MSHT, there are at least three themes of significance for the current work. First, research on identifying human trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation in other contexts points to the challenges of identifying this type of trafficking, given the challenges associated with “telling victims from criminals” (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2019). Villacampa and Torres’ (2017) study explored the challenges of identification in the Spanish context and highlighted a lack of awareness among criminal justice practitioners, calling for additional training, and a more strategic police response. Second, there is a growing body of work on the content, scope and application of the ‘non-punishment principle’, which broadly exists to ensure that trafficked persons are not punished for crimes committed in the context of their exploitation (Rodriguez Lopez, 2024; Niezna and Jovanovic, 2023; Piotrowicz, 2020). Third, legal scholarship on human trafficking often addresses the conceptual boundaries of both the definition of trafficking, and related obligations (see Gallagher, 2010; Stoyanova, 2017; Kane, 2021).

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14. A full definition of ‘county lines’ is available in [Annex 1](#).

### 2.1.3. Exploring the intersection of child criminal exploitation and modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland

The current project sits at the intersection of research on CCE in Northern Ireland, and research on MSHT more broadly. It is the first study of its kind that explores barriers to identifying CCE *in the context of MSHT in Northern Ireland*. Through an analysis of the international legal definition of human trafficking, and the scope of related obligations, this research explores understandings and framings of CCE in Northern Ireland, primarily through the lens of those who have a responsibility to refer children into the NRM or other safeguarding pathways. Hence, the findings speak to both the Northern Ireland context, while also providing insights for responses in the rest of the UK, and beyond.

## 2.2. Existing policy frameworks and support structures

The existing legal and policy framework, and support structures relating to child protection in Northern Ireland are vast. Alongside this, MSHT is the subject of dedicated law and policy and a range of support mechanisms. This section provides an overview of the instruments, policies, and actors of most relevance to identifying CCE in the context of MSHT in Northern Ireland.

MSHT is addressed primarily by the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.<sup>15</sup> The UK NRM also operates in Northern Ireland. In 2024, the Northern Ireland DOJ also launched a new three-year strategy to tackle MSHT. This Strategy (2024-2027) is the first three-year commitment, building from previous single-year strategies and taking a more sustained approach to identifying and eradicating the issue, under the strands of Pursue, Protect and Prevent. The strategy also refers to the role of the Department of Health in both addressing CCE, and supporting children who have experienced MSHT (DOJ, 2024). Whilst the Northern Ireland DOJ holds responsibility for the policy and legislative framework for MSHT in Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) oversee the operational response, in coordination with relevant international and domestic partners. Within the PSNI, the Organised Crime Branch holds responsibility for MSHT investigations, whilst the Public Protection Branch hold responsibility for adult and child safeguarding matters including serious sexual offences which could include child sexual exploitation (CSE).

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15. See also the more recently adopted Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

In addition, first responder organisations are authorised to refer a potential victim of modern slavery into the NRM. First responder organisations in Northern Ireland include:<sup>16</sup>

- Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)
- Home Office (UK Visas and Immigration, UK Border Force, UK Immigration Enforcement)
- Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA)
- Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCNI)
- Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid
- Independent Child Guardian Service (Barnardo's)
- Youth Work Alliance

Despite the Northern Ireland institutions holding devolved responsibility for policy and legislative framework of MSHT, the NRM decision making process is undertaken by the Home Office Single Competent Authority (SCA) and Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority (IECA).

The Child Protection Senior Officials Group (CPSOG) was established in 2018<sup>17</sup> and has played a key role in child protection in Northern Ireland. CPSOG was a cross-departmental strategic forum providing direction on existing or emerging child protection issues which require cross-departmental consideration and coordination (DoH, 2024).<sup>18</sup> In recent years, it has taken action to address CCE, adding it as a priority area to its workplan in 2022. Most notably, in September 2024 the Departments of Justice, Health and Education published a two-year "Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) Action Plan" for Northern Ireland, and a CCE definition (NI DOJ, DOH, DOE, 2024). The Action Plan was developed by a cross-departmental working group established by CPSOG. It contains actions to increase awareness and understanding of CCE as child abuse, prevent CCE, ensure there is effective prevention and intervention mechanisms for victims of CCE, and pursue and bring to justice those responsible (NI DOJ, 2024). A number of actions under the plan will be led by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) to ensure a trauma-informed multi-agency approach.<sup>19</sup> The CPSOG was initially charged with monitoring progress of the CCE Action Plan. Notably, in 2024, the CPSOG was subsumed within the Department of Education's Children and Young People's Strategy Monitoring Board. The CPSOG subgroup – now called

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16. A definition of first responders is available in [Annex 1](#).

17. CPSOG members included representatives from key government departments, such as Health, Justice and Education, as well as members from the PSNI, Health and Social Care Board, Youth Justice Agency.

18. For additional information, see the CPSOG 2018 -2022 report, available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-cpsog-report.DOCX>

19. The SBNI is made up of key member organisations from the statutory, community and voluntary sectors who together make up the child protection system (SBNI, 2025).



the CYPS Child Protection Group – will continue to monitor the implementation of the CCE Action Plan.

“Cooperating to Safeguard Children and Young People in Northern Ireland” (DOH, 2024) is the overarching policy framework addressing child protection and safeguarding in Northern Ireland. Social workers can be accessed through the Gateway Service for Children’s Social Work, the Family Support Service and Intensive Adolescent Support, and the Looked After Children’s Service or the Regional Emergency Social Work Service (RESWS) for urgent situations. Children’s needs may be assessed through the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) Framework which requires those working with children to holistically assess need and enables referral into different pathways, including ‘child protection’, ‘looked after child’ and ‘family support’.<sup>20</sup> Northern Ireland Department of Health data reveals that as of 31 March 2024, 2,334 children were listed on the Child Protection Register. 81% of these children were added to the register for either neglect or physical abuse. Further categories of abuse include sexual abuse and emotional abuse. While CCE may involve some of these forms of abuse, it is not a stand alone category within the Child Protection Register. Further, between 2023 and 2024, there were 1414 Child Protection Referrals to social services in Northern Ireland (DOH, 2024).

In addition, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 places a duty on the state to make arrangements to enable an ‘independent guardian’ to be appointed to assist, represent and support a child in certain circumstances, including in *some* situations of potential trafficking or where a child is unaccompanied or separated (NI Assembly, 2015).<sup>21</sup> The Independent Guardian Service (IGS) in Northern Ireland is managed by Barnardo’s and supports separated children, including those who are confirmed or potential victims of human trafficking. The Service is regional, working with the PSNI, Health and Social Care Trusts, Border Control, and Legal Services.

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20. UNOCINI Guidance is available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/understanding-needs-children-northern-ireland-unocini-guidance>

21. The Independent Guardian Service is discussed further in Section 4.4

## 2.3. An analysis of National Referral Mechanism (NRM) data

This section provides additional context through an analysis of NRM data between 2014 and the end of 2024, in Northern Ireland and in comparison to the rest of the UK.<sup>22</sup> It highlights both the extent to which the NRM is utilised, and the stark difference in NRM referrals for CCE between Northern Ireland and Great Britain (IOM UK, 2024). Despite being an increasing policy priority across the UK, there is limited reliable data to inform the overall scale of CCE. Due to the hidden nature of the issue of human trafficking in general, and a possible misunderstandings of CCE, many cases will go unreported and therefore NRM data will always be an undercount on the true number of victims (ONS, 2022).<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, even when criminal exploitation *has* been recognised it may not always have been documented or recorded in official statistics. As far back as 2011, a baseline assessment on human trafficking in the UK was disaggregating data on 'criminal exploitation' yet it was not until 2019 that NRM data stopped counting such cases as "labour exploitation" (SOCA, 2011). Thus, while there is no one data source measuring CCE, the NRM can still be considered as the most significant data source in number to understand the issue of CCE in relation to MSHT.

Since data collection began in 2014 through to the end of 2024, 45,502 children have been referred to the NRM in the UK as potential victims of MSHT (UKHO, 2025).<sup>24</sup> Of these, 15,094 (33%) were referred specifically for 'criminal' exploitation only, with the vast majority (11,489 or 75%) being UK nationals (10,762 *male* and 727 *female*) (UKHO, 2025). It is important to highlight that almost half of UK nationals referred for CCE are also noted as 'county lines' cases (5,726).<sup>25</sup> Of all 15,094 CCE referrals, the vast majority were identified in England (13,710), with 964 in Wales and 274 in Scotland (UKHO, 2025).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, if "UK children referred for criminal exploitation" was a grouping, it would be the third largest grouping of referrals, only behind Albanian nationals and UK nationals (including adults) (UKHO, 2025).

Statistics in Northern Ireland differ significantly to the rest of the UK. The first child NRM referral in Northern Ireland was made in 2015 and in total, between 2014 and 2024, 486 children have been referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland (1% of child referrals across the UK) (UKHO, 2025). Furthermore, of this number,

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22. A full definition of the NRM and how it operates, including referrals from first responder organisations is available in Annex 1 – Definitions.

23. See also Merry (2016).

24. This analysis considers the total number of children referred to the NRM as "Age group of exploitation – Child 17 or under" and does not differentiate by "Age group of referral". As such, it takes into account both children who are referred as a child and as an adult.

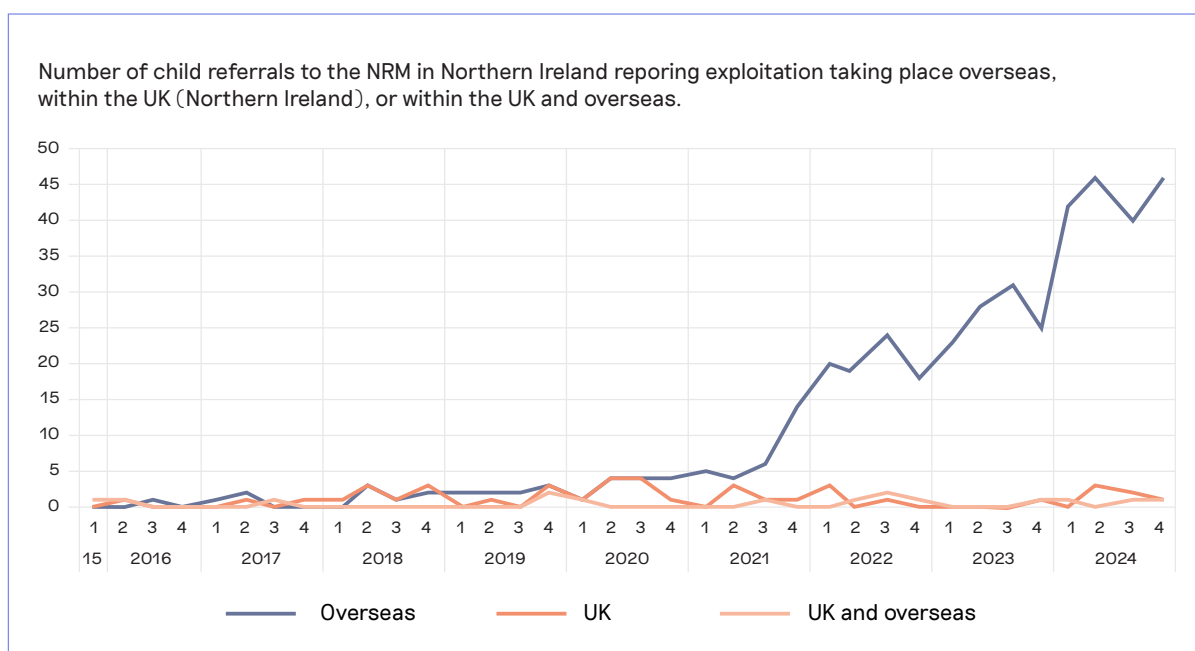
25. Prior to October 2019, county lines referrals were classified as a sub-type of labour exploitation.

26. The remaining cases were identified by the British Transport Police (BTP) and seven cases have an unknown location.

only 153 children were referred to the NRM as children, meaning 333 people were referred as adults reporting exploitation taking place as a child, highlighting the low number of potential victims of MSHT identified as children.

Only four of the 15,094 (0.03%) children referred for criminal exploitation, were referred in Northern Ireland (UKHO, 2025). While 10,762 *UK male* children have been referred to the NRM for CCE across the UK, there has never been a UK or Irish<sup>27</sup> *male* child referred to the NRM for *any* form of exploitation in Northern Ireland (UKHO, 2025).<sup>28</sup>

Despite an increase in the number of referrals from Northern Ireland in recent years for children, the majority relate to exploitation that took place outside of the UK, as outlined in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Number of child referrals to the NRM in Northern Ireland reporting exploitation taking place overseas, within the UK (Northern Ireland), or within the UK and overseas.**

Of all 486 child referrals to the NRM, the majority (87%) reported exploitation overseas, while fewer cases (n=53, 11%) relate to exploitation within Northern Ireland or remain unknown (2%).

27. In Northern Ireland under the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, citizens are entitled to British Citizenship and/or Irish Citizenship.

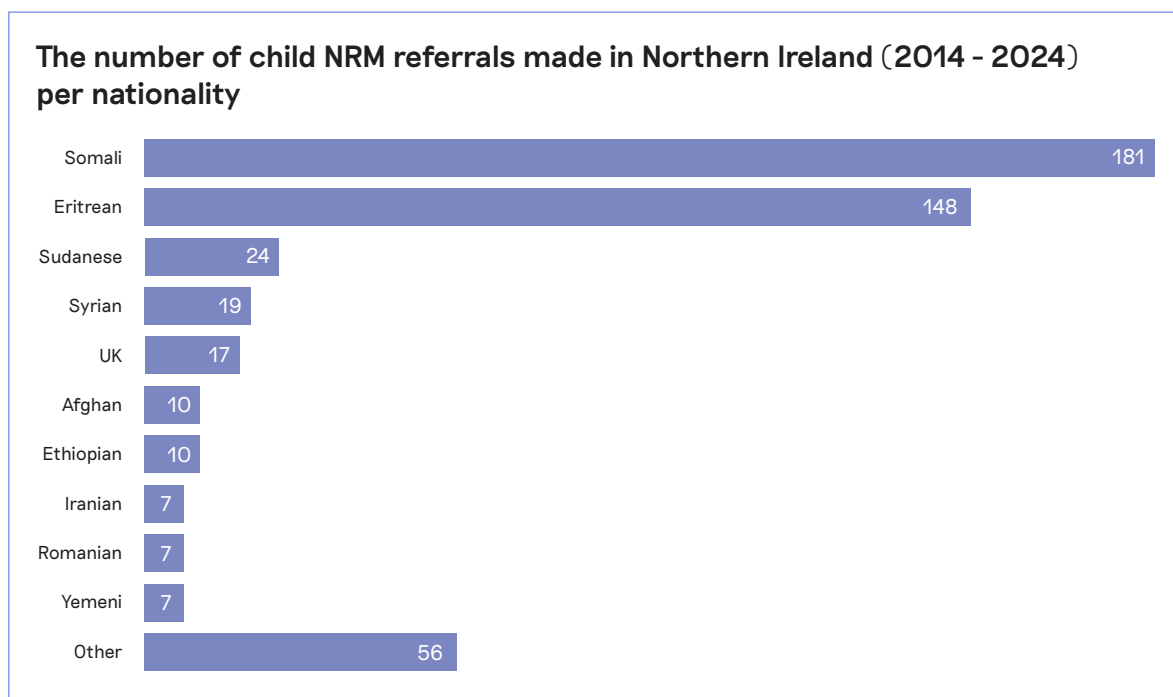
28. NRM data from the UKDS states that there has been one UK male child referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland, however after investigation Statutory bodies noted that this entry was in error and indeed incorrect to include.

Reported location of potential child exploitation referred in Northern Ireland	Overseas		UK		UK and Overseas		Unknown
Type of exploitation	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Criminal			1	4			
Domestic	9	4					1
Labour	39	182	4	2		5	1
Labour & Criminal	1	1					
Labour & Domestic	26	22	1				
Labour, Domestic & Criminal				1			
Not specified or unknown	9	22	4	4	4	2	8
Sexual	25	8	14		1	2	
Sexual & Criminal		1					
Sexual & Domestic	8	1			1		
Sexual & Labour	27	10	2		1		
Sexual, Labour & Criminal	2	1					
Sexual, Labour & Domestic	24	1					
<b>Total</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>

**Figure 3: Child NRM referrals in Northern Ireland since 2014 by exploitation type, gender and reported location of exploitation.**

Since 2014, there have been 17 UK children and one Irish child (all female) referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland, highlighting the low number of indigenous children identified in Northern Ireland in comparison to other nationalities as illustrated in Figure 4.

The low number of children identified as potential victims and referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland is dramatic in comparison to the rest of the UK, particularly for CCE. In Wales, 49% of all child referrals reported CCE. This percentage was 35% in England and 20% in Scotland. Yet, only 1% of child referrals reported CCE in Northern Ireland.

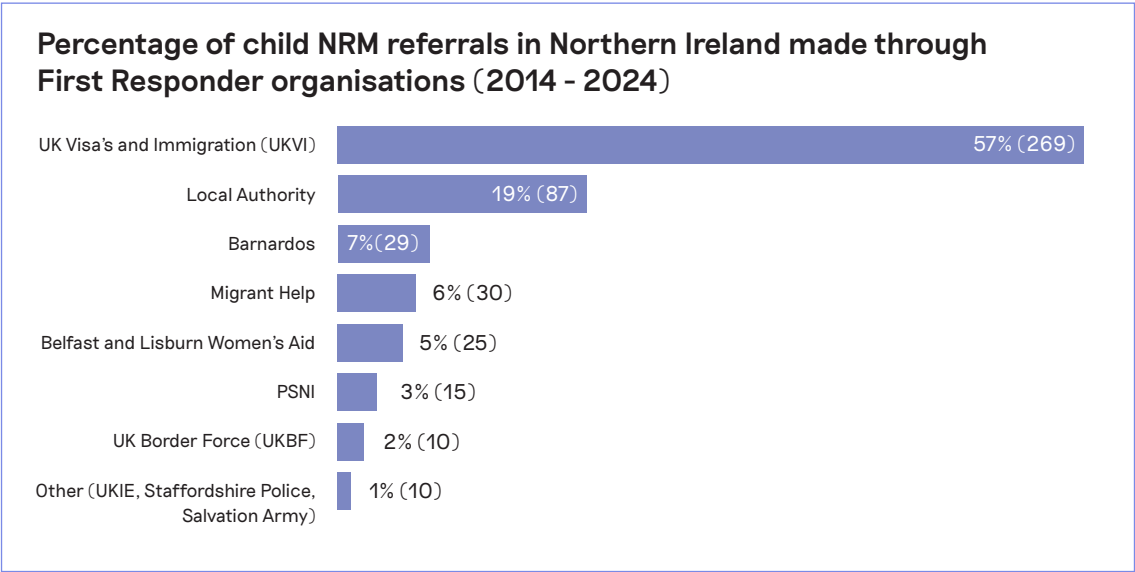


**Figure 4: The number of child NRM referrals made in Northern Ireland (2104-2024) per nationality.**

Of all children identified as potential victims of MSHT in Northern Ireland, the majority of NRM referrals (273) are made through UK Home Office – Visas and Immigration (UKVI) suggesting these children are identified through a formal immigration process (UKHO, 2025). Other significant first responders referring children to the NRM include Local Authorities (90), Barnardos (31) and Migrant Help (30),<sup>29</sup> as illustrated in Figure 5 (UKHO).<sup>30</sup>

29. Migrant Help is not a recognised first responder organisation within Northern Ireland. NRM referrals made by Migrant Help are made from Migrant Help in Scotland.

30. A full definition of first responders and their role is available in Annex 1 – Definitions.



**Figure 5: Percentage of child NRM referrals in Northern Ireland made through first responder organisations (2014-2024).**

The underrepresentation of UK and Irish nationals in general, and of CCE referrals specifically, in the NRM data for Northern Ireland is particularly notable given the scale of the issue and comparative number of referrals across the rest of the UK. This could suggest: (a) a limited knowledge among wider stakeholders of the indicators to look out for in relation to identifying exploitation among indigenous populations in Northern Ireland, (b) a lack of awareness and understanding of CCE in Northern Ireland, the interpretation of this harm and its framing as MSHT, and (c) a lack of recognition of the NRM among stakeholders or its perception as a relevant or useful resource.



## 3. Unpacking international and regional obligations

The UK's approach to MSHT is governed by a range of international legal obligations within both dedicated anti-trafficking instruments, and international human rights law. The term 'modern slavery' is not defined in international law. In the UK, it is used as an 'umbrella' term to include human trafficking, slavery, servitude, and forced labour, all of which are defined in international law. As such, if conduct falls within the scope of any of these definitions, it will be considered as a form of modern slavery in the UK. Human trafficking is defined in range of international instruments, most notably the Palermo Protocol and the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Persons (ECAT). There are a range of prevention, protection, and prosecution-related obligations relating to conduct that falls within this definition.<sup>31</sup> Alongside this, international human rights law prohibits slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour.<sup>32</sup> Further, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child contains a number of important rights for children. For example, Article 3 requires the best interests of the child to be a "primary consideration" in all actions concerning children.<sup>33</sup> This section lays the groundwork for the research analysis, by exploring the international definition of human trafficking and the related concepts of slavery, servitude and forced labour. The aim is to establish the scope of each of these harms under international law. It will also unpack the related obligations for the State, against the backdrop of CCE-related harms in Northern Ireland. It provides clarity on the relevance of using a MSHT framework to address CCE, as well as the necessity of identification not only as an obligation in itself, but also as a gateway to additional rights.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.1. International definitions of human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced labour

In order to explore: (a) the extent to which the harms experienced by children in the context of CCE in Northern Ireland may amount to human trafficking or related concepts (as defined by international law), and (b) the implications of such conduct falling within the scope of any of the relevant definitions, it is first necessary to turn to the definitions themselves.

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31. For a comprehensive analysis see, Gallagher (2010).

32. In the UK, modern slavery is framed as an 'umbrella term', encompassing human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced labour. Other potentially relevant instruments include the International Labour Organisation's Forced Labour Conventions: C029 Forced Labour Convention, 1930; C105 – Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957; C182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999

33. Note also: Article 12 UNCRC requires the child's views to be given 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Further, the first and second Optional Protocols to the UNCRC are of note. These are: Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography; and Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

34. The focus in this section is on human trafficking, since modern slavery is not defined in international law.

### 3.1.1. Slavery, servitude and forced labour

First, slavery is defined in the 1926 Slavery Convention as, “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” This definition is the starting point of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in interpreting slavery under Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The standard is a high one, connected with a form of legal ownership. Indeed, in the case of *Siliadin v France* (2005), it became clear that having to work seven days a week without pay or days off would not amount to slavery. Servitude, within the scope of Article 4 ECHR has been defined as “a particularly serious form of denial of freedom” (para. 123).<sup>35</sup> According to the ECtHR servitude necessitates not only a requirement to perform service, but the affected person must also be obliged to “live on another person’s property”, and there must be evidence of “the impossibility of altering [one’s] condition” (*Siliadin v France*, 2005, para. 123). Forced or compulsory labour is defined in the International Labour Organisation Convention No 29 as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.” The ECtHR draws on this definition to define the same concept within Article 4(2) of the ECHR. In *S.M. v Croatia* (2020), the Court refers to “serious exploitation” (para. 300). In so doing, the concept of ‘force’ is defined broadly to encompass more subtle forms of coercion (para. 301). Likewise, the ‘penalty’ may be both physical or psychological, i.e. threats to inform the authorities (*C.N. and V. v France*, 2012, para. 77).

When analysed in the context of CCE, it is likely the thresholds of both slavery and servitude are too high for much of the harm experienced by young people in Northern Ireland. However, CCE may, in some circumstances, fall within the scope of forced labour as defined in international law. For example, if young people are coerced to sell or transport drugs, under some threat of punishment, harm to family, or exposure to authorities, it may be that this conduct could be deemed to fall within the scope of forced labour. However, it may also be the case that some CCE-related activity may not fall within the definition of forced labour. For example, some criminal activity such as engaging in rioting, or even more infrequent engagement with the transportation of drugs, or shoplifting, may not always be viewed as “work or service”. For these reasons, as outlined below, human trafficking for the purposes of criminal exploitation may be a more appropriate categorisation for CCE within the harms that in the UK are deemed to fall within the scope of modern slavery.

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35. Here the Court referred to *Van Droogenbroeck v. Belgium* (1982) para 58, which in turn referred to the Commission’s report of 9 July 1980, Series B no. 44, p. 30, §§ 7880,

### 3.1.2. Human trafficking

With the adoption of the Palermo Protocol<sup>36</sup> in 2000, States agreed the first internationally accepted definition of human trafficking. The definition is set out in Article 3(a) of the Protocol and contains three elements:

- **Act:** “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt”;
- **Means:** “the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person”;
- **Purpose:** “exploitation”.<sup>37</sup>

This definition is replicated in Article 4 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT) and has been affirmed by the ECtHR in its jurisprudence on Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights (*S.M. v Croatia*, 2020, para 296). It has also been incorporated – in whole or in part – into the domestic law of many countries.<sup>38</sup> Admittedly, 25 years on, debate still persists as to its limits, and variance between the approach of different states is observable (UNODC 2018; Allain, 2014). Nevertheless, much is clear about the scope of human trafficking, and as will be apparent, its breadth means it can capture much of the harm experienced in the context of CCE.

In light of the current research, four points are of note. First, the impact of Article 3(d) removes the ‘means’ requirement for children. *Thus, the presence of the ‘act’ and ‘purpose’ elements is sufficient for conduct to amount to child trafficking.* In the context of CCE in Northern Ireland, existing research reveals that the means element is often present, (where young people are threatened or coerced) but it is not required for human trafficking to be established. Second, the range of ‘act’ elements is notable: two of the actions – transportation and transfer – require movement between and across locations, while others do not. If a young person is recruited within their neighbourhood, for the purpose of criminal exploitation, they may continue residing at home with exploitation amounting to human trafficking occurring. Third, the definition is broad enough to

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36. Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children.

37. Article 3(a) defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs; (b) The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used; (c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered “trafficking in persons” even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article; (d) “Child” shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.”

38. In the UK, the Human Rights Act 1998 implements the ECHR, while dedicated MSHT legislation is in place to implement, in part, the ECAT. In our analysis in section 4.2, we explore the extent which this definition has been incorporated into domestic law in the UK, with a focus on Northern Ireland.

capture a breadth of conduct, including exploitation that may not have been fully foreseen at the time of its adoption, such as online exploitation (see, e.g. Sarkar and Shukla, 2024). With the words “at a minimum”, the drafters did not put limits on the conduct which could be classed as exploitation. Fourth, the purpose element, namely ‘exploitation’ does not actually need to occur for conduct to amount to trafficking. Rather, it is sufficient that it was intended (Gallagher, 2010).<sup>39</sup>

An open-ended approach to exploitation is helpful, since the definition is broad enough to capture a range of known and unforeseen harms, as well as exploitation that is unique to distinct cultural contexts. Yet, precisely what falls within the scope of exploitation remains contested.<sup>40</sup> A 2018 UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) study revealed that understanding of exploitation is not “uniform” across a range of domestic contexts (UNODC, 2018), but exploitation tends to be understood as existing on a continuum. (UNODC, 2018; UNODC, 2014). While debate continues, criminal exploitation is increasingly acknowledged as falling within the scope of the definition’s purpose element. Indeed, in the EU context, Directive 2011/36 EU explicitly listed “forced begging” and the “exploitation of criminal activities” within a definition of exploitation.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, research in other European contexts indicates that trafficking for the purpose of criminal exploitation is often under-identified or misidentified as solely criminal activity (Villacampa and Torres, 2017; RACE, 2014; Rodriguez-Lopez, 2019; Burland, 2019).

A key question in light of the present study is whether and to what extent CCE in Northern Ireland may amount to human trafficking? The answer is important, since the UK has a number of international obligations relating to the prevention and protection of those who experience trafficking, and the prosecution of conduct amounting to trafficking (Palermo Protocol, ECAT, ECHR). Not only do States have an obligation to identify trafficking where it has occurred,<sup>42</sup> but identification is crucial for other obligations – including those relating to prevention and protection – to have any meaningful impact. Indeed, “[t]he stakes for definitional clarity are high because to characterise certain conduct as ‘trafficking’ has substantial and wide-ranging consequences.” (UNODC, 2018, p. 2).

Much is still unknown about the dynamics of CCE in any context, including Northern Ireland, but emerging research by Walsh (2023) and others is shedding more light on the dynamics of CCE. At present, there is certainly some knowledge of characteristics of CCE in Northern Ireland. The Executive Programme on

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39. For a more thorough discussion, see Gallagher (2010).

40. Note the intention of the drafters as set out in UNODC 2018, p.15: “The final text- comprising an undefined umbrella concept and an open-ended list of examples, only some of which are subject to international legal definition in other treaties – appears to chart a middle course between two positions: ensuring maximum breadth of coverage while also providing sufficiently clear indication of the nature of exploitation being addressed”.

41. This Directive has now been replaced by EU Directive 2024/1712, but the addition of criminal exploitation related wording has been in place since the adoption of 2011/36/EU. The UK opted into Directive 2011/36/EU at the time. Notably, in Northern Ireland, Article 2(1) of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (part of the EU Withdrawal Agreement) states that ‘The United Kingdom shall ensure that no diminution of rights, safeguards or equality of opportunity, as set out in that part of the 1998 Agreement entitled Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity results from its withdrawal from the Union’. For more on the human trafficking context, see Harvey (2022).

42. See below at Section 3.2.

Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPOC)<sup>43</sup> created a public awareness video which depicts a case of child criminal exploitation. The video charts a story of a young girl who explains that paramilitaries always controlled her community, it was all she had ever known. Then, “one day they gave me some gear”, which led to demands for money and an offer to “work it off”. The young girl then had to carry drugs for this group, including by pushing drugs in a pram (Ending the Harm, 2024).<sup>44</sup> The facts of this simple vignette would likely contain both the ‘act’ and ‘purpose’ elements required to establish trafficking of children in international law. The act here is recruitment in that the young girl was offered ‘work’ from the gang (albeit to pay off a debt). The purpose is criminal exploitation, in that she was recruited to conduct criminal activities (i.e. transportation of drugs). While coercive means are present, they need not be established for conduct to amount to child trafficking.

While exploitation undoubtedly occurs across a continuum, and while each case is distinct, the analysis presented here demonstrates not only the breadth of the human trafficking definition, but how such conduct can fall within the act and purpose elements of the human trafficking under international law, and trigger obligations under the Palermo Protocol, the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

## 3.2. Obligation to identify

Identification of MSHT enables adherence to a range of obligations. Without identification, the related protection obligations will be rendered moot for those who are un- or mis-identified. The ECtHR, for example, in *V.C.L. and A.N. v UK* (2021), held that: “[i]n order for the prosecution of a victim or potential victim of trafficking to demonstrate respect for the freedoms guaranteed by Article 4, his or her *early identification is of paramount importance*” (para. 160).<sup>45</sup> Without early identification, any consideration of whether Article 4 rights might preclude prosecution will simply not take place. Similarly, without identification, trafficked persons and those who have experienced slavery, servitude, or forced labour, would not be able to access the specialised support or potential avenues for remediation available to those formally identified as having experienced any of the aforementioned harms. Identification is therefore fundamental to the enjoyment of the protections in the Palermo Protocol, ECAT and Article 4 ECHR.

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43. The Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime is jointly funded by the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government. It has a public awareness element, entitled Ending the Harm. For more information, see: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/articles/executive-programme-tackling-paramilitary-activity-and-organised-crime#toc-1>

44. While the story is fictitious, it is based on the research conducted by Walsh (2023).

45. Emphasis added.

Even more significantly, identification of human trafficking is a standalone obligation in Article 10 ECAT which requires States to “adopt such legislative or other measures as may be necessary to identify victims”. Under Article 10, identification is a formal process that “leads to the conferral of the status” of potentially or actually trafficked persons (such as the NRM) and is distinct from recognition of trafficking by NGOs and other informal processes (Stoyanova, 2020, p. 133). Article 10 places a duty on the State to ensure that competent authorities are provided with “persons who are trained and qualified in preventing and combating human trafficking”, and to “ensure that the different authorities collaborate with each other as well as with relevant support organisations.” This means that compliance with Article 10 requires not only the establishment and maintenance of a formal identification system, but investment in adequate training and collaborative approaches.

### 3.3. Protection obligations

Beyond identification, there is a range of protection-related obligations within the applicable international and regional instruments in focus. Many of these obligations relate specifically to human trafficking, while international human rights law contains obligations relating to human trafficking *and* the related harms of slavery, servitude and forced labour. The effectiveness of these provisions hinges, to a large extent, on identification. Some provisions are primarily applicable to those who are subject to immigration control: Article 7 Palermo Protocol and Article 14 ECAT relate to the issuance of residence permits for trafficked persons. However, several protections are owed to – and have the capacity to assist – *all trafficked persons, including those who remain in their home country*. Of particular note is Article 4 ECHR’s role. At least four positive obligations have been identified in the ECtHR’s jurisprudence on Article 4 and human trafficking.<sup>46</sup> This includes a duty in certain circumstances, to take “operational measures to protect victims, or potential victims, of trafficking”. This duty arises where authorities are “aware, or ought to be aware, of circumstances giving rise to a credible suspicion that an individual has been trafficked” (*V.C.L and A.N. v UK*, 2021, paras. 152, 159).

When it comes to material assistance and support for trafficked persons, Article 12 ECAT is key. The assistance includes, among other things: ensuring an adequate standard of living, that is “appropriate and secure accommodation”, “psychological and material assistance” and “counselling”.<sup>47</sup> Article 12(2) requires the state to “take due account of the victim’s safety and protection needs” and

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46. These are: (1) The duty to put in place a legislative and administrative framework to prohibit and punish trafficking; (2) The duty, in certain circumstances, to take operational measures to protect victims, or potential victims, of trafficking; (3) A procedural obligation to investigate situations of potential trafficking; and (4) A more recently articulated obligation (2023) to “enable the victims of trafficking to claim compensation from their traffickers in respect of lost earnings” as held in *S.M. v Croatia* (2020, para 306) and *Krachunova v Bulgaria* (2024, para 173).

47. Similar obligations are found in the Palermo Protocol and ECAT frameworks.



Article 12(7) requires States to take “due account of the special needs of persons in a vulnerable position and the rights of children.” This indicates that assistance ought to be individualised and context specific. A key question, then, in light of the current research, relates to the particular protection needs of those who experience CCE-related harms in Northern Ireland.

### 3.4. Non-punishment provisions

Particularly pertinent in the context of criminal exploitation of any kind, is the emergence of the ‘non-punishment principle’. The complexity of the non-punishment principle requires States to “balance the interest of justice with the protection of victims of trafficking” (Schloenhardt and Markey-Towler, 2016, p.17). This principle was set out in the 2002 OHCHR’s Principles and Guidelines for Human Rights and Human Trafficking,<sup>48</sup> and has since been codified in Article 26 ECAT:

*Each Party shall, in accordance with the basic principles of its legal system, provide for the possibility of not imposing penalties on victims for their involvement in unlawful activities, to the extent that they have been compelled to do so.*<sup>49</sup>

While this binding provision is not as broad as the OHCHR Guideline – since it only requires states to provide for the “possibility” of “not imposing penalties”, and as such is not a blanket ban on prosecution – it still has significance. Indeed GRETA, ECAT’s monitoring body, has also emphasised its importance (GRETA, 2021). Further in 2021, the ECtHR addressed the question of non-punishment in the context of Article 4 ECHR and held that prosecution of (potentially) trafficked persons may be “at odds with” the operational duty to protect within Article 4.<sup>50</sup> It noted that “[i]t is axiomatic that the prosecution of victims of trafficking would be injurious to their physical, psychological and social recovery and potentially leave them vulnerable to being re-trafficked in future.” (V.C.L. & A.N., v UK, 2021, para 159). While the Court stopped short of holding that prosecution of potentially trafficked persons should *never* occur, “compliance with the operational duty requires prosecution to proceed only after a number of specific safeguarding measures have been undertaken” (Trajer and Kane, 2021, p. 310). Thus, identification is of paramount importance, as reflected by the Court:

48. The OHCHR Guidelines state: “Trafficked persons shall not be detained, charged or prosecuted for the illegality of their entry into or residence in countries of transit and destination, or for their involvement in unlawful activities to the extent that such involvement is a direct consequence of their situation as trafficked persons”.

49. See also, in the ASEAN context, the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons – Article 14(7): “Each Party shall, subject to its domestic laws, rules, regulations and policies, and in appropriate cases, consider not holding victims of trafficking in persons criminally or administratively liable, for unlawful acts committed by them, if such acts are directly related to the acts of trafficking.”

50. For further analysis see Trajer and Kane (2021) and; Ewing (2021).

*[A]s soon as the authorities are aware, or ought to be aware, of circumstances giving rise to a credible suspicion that an individual suspected of having committed a criminal offence may have been trafficked or exploited, he or she should be assessed promptly by individuals trained and qualified to deal with victims of trafficking (V.C.L. and A.N. v UK, 2021, para. 160).<sup>51</sup>*

The scope and application of the non-punishment principle, within and beyond the Council of Europe, continues to be interrogated. While it is beyond the scope of this study to address such questions, it is clear that for a non-punishment principle of any kind to apply, identification of trafficking is crucial. The principle is particularly relevant in CCE contexts, since if children and young people encountered in the commission of criminal offences for the purpose of exploitation are not identified as trafficked persons, they cannot benefit from any non-punishment provision, no matter how widely or narrowly it is interpreted.

### 3.5. Summary

In summary, by unpacking key international obligations, this section reveals that the international and domestic anti-trafficking framework along with international human rights law contains a range of robust protections that, if properly understood and implemented, can provide significant protection for those at risk of or experiencing MSHT. To fully comply with these obligations, however, it is crucial that the international definitions of human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced labour are adequately reflected and implemented in domestic settings. Further, the potential of many of the provisions is contingent upon identification, and some of them relate specifically to human trafficking. As such, identification is of crucial importance since many of these protections, including those relating to assistance, support, and non-punishment, are rendered meaningless if identification does not take place.

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51. The Court went on to state that: "Given that an individual's status as a victim of trafficking may affect whether there is sufficient evidence to prosecute and whether it is in the public interest to do so, any decision on whether or not to prosecute a potential victim of trafficking should – in so far as possible – only be taken once a trafficking assessment has been made by a qualified person. This is particularly important where children are concerned. The Court has acknowledged that as children are particularly vulnerable, the measures applied by the State to protect them against acts of violence falling within the scope of Articles 3 and 8 should be effective and include both reasonable steps to prevent ill-treatment of which the authorities had, or ought to have had, knowledge, and effective deterrence against such serious breaches of personal integrity". (V.C.L. and A.N. v United Kingdom, 2021, para 161).

## 4. Findings

This section summarises the study's findings and draws from: (a) the legal and policy analysis, (b) survey data, and (c) interview data. The findings are addressed under five key themes: (1) Northern Ireland's unique context, (2) barriers in the legal and policy framework, (3) knowledge and understanding, (4) capacity, and (5) the moving picture. While addressed separately, there are significant points of intersection. In particular, the unique aspects of Northern Ireland's societal, legal, and institutional context identified in Section 4.1 have relevance across all themes.

### 4.1. Northern Ireland's unique context: implications for effective identification

*"We have conditions and levels of trauma, for instance, that condition communities and individuals in a way that in post-conflict society that don't exist in other parts of the UK. It's just a reality, no matter how difficult those other parts of the UK have it." (NI-09)*

Northern Ireland's distinct context and the associated challenges were acknowledged from the outset of the study. Throughout analysis, this research aimed to uncover: (a) insights on the nature of these distinct elements insofar as they relate to CCE and (b) the implications for an effective NRM process for CCE in Northern Ireland, 27 years on from the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (BGFA).<sup>52</sup> The unique context is one that is apparent both within Northern Ireland's society as a whole, and within the distinct devolution arrangements in place in the region.

#### A unique societal context

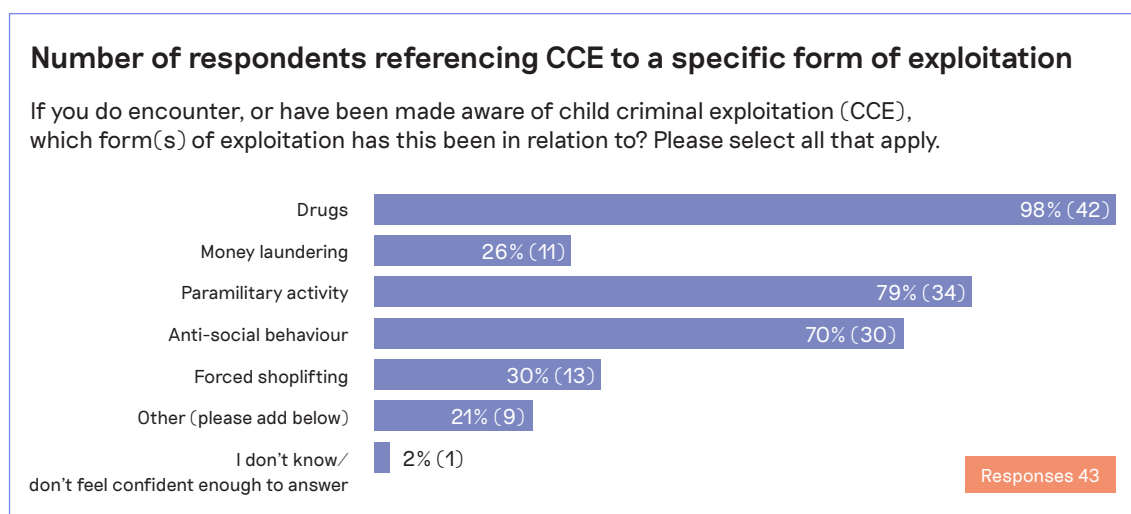
Northern Ireland remains a society in transition, *"I think where it's different in Northern Ireland is I suppose the whole legacy of generations of people who lived through the conflicts and community reps and politicians and social workers who worked...through a very changing society and the impact that has on individuals*

52. "The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was signed on 10 April 1998 following three decades of conflict known as the Troubles. The Agreement created a new power-sharing arrangement, including an Executive and Assembly, and was based on a series of fundamental principles including: (i) the parity of esteem of both communities; (ii) the principle of consent underpinning Northern Ireland's constitutional status; (iii) the birthright of the people of Northern Ireland to identify and be accepted as British or Irish, or both, and to hold both British and Irish citizenship. The hard-won gains of the peace process have transformed the political and economic life of Northern Ireland since 1998, and the Agreement continues to serve as a framework for peace and prosperity." (UK Government). More information is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement>

*and the years of intimidation and control by paramilitaries, it's very hard to come out the other end of that*" (NI-01).

It is acknowledged that paramilitary organisations remain active in and exert control over many communities (Sturgeon et al., 2024). This study's findings reveal that the legacy of the past persists in both the intergenerational and familial links to paramilitary and organised crime groups, the level of control these groups have over local communities, and the hyperlocal and normalised nature of exploitation that occurs as a result of these contexts.<sup>53</sup> Some interviewees spoke of participation in such groups as almost a 'rite of passage'. One respondent remarked: *"I don't know if this is Northern Ireland centric that because of the familial links, a lot of them don't think they're being exploited"* (NI-05). This sentiment was shared by others who remarked that young people themselves often do not recognise their own exploitation.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has acknowledged that both "individuals and groups will use paramilitarism as a cloak for overt criminality (such as extortion, drug dealing, threats, money laundering, sexual exploitation and other illegal activities)", and has highlighted the social capital that can be granted to individuals when they are referred to as "paramilitaries" (NIAC, 2024, p.7).<sup>54</sup> Survey respondents and interviewees provided insights into the nature of such activity and control, and its links to CCE. Responding to the question of which types of CCE which they had encountered, 79% (n=34) of respondents selected 'paramilitary activity'. Indeed, even where other harms are noted, such as drugs, or anti-social behaviour, this exploitation often occurs in the context of paramilitarism, or organised criminality with links to the legacy of the past.



**Figure 6: Number of respondents referencing CCE to a specific form of exploitation.**

53. For further discussion on the nature of these harms, see Walsh (2023).

54. This quote was included in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report but originated from the Independent Reporting Commission. See: (NIAC, 2024, p.7) for details.

The impact of intergenerational trauma, and connection with paramilitaries, was raised in several interviews. Indeed, the parents and grandparents of children at risk of, or experiencing exploitation in Northern Ireland may very well have experienced violence, trauma and exploitation themselves. A 2025 study on the impacts of adverse childhood experiences in Northern Ireland highlights the scale of such a problem: 60% of the 1200 adults surveyed reported at least one adverse childhood experience, while 17.6% reported experience of four or more such incidents (Walsh et al., 2025, p.9). In the present study, one respondent remarked that: *“there’s a lot of intergenerational normalised behaviour. So your big brother does that then you’re going to do it or, your family’s done it, your uncles do it, you know, or there’s maybe families that would exploit, within families. But you don’t necessarily see it as exploitation per se, it is, they are exploiting, but you would probably see it more as a safeguarding issue”* (NI-11). Another noted that, *“[s]ome young people join paramilitaries because their daddy was in it. The grandad was in it, their brother’s in it, their uncle’s in it, etc. So it’s nearly potentially even now seen as a rite of passage”* (NI-05). Further, when it comes to evidence of the continued pervasive control paramilitaries exert on many communities in Northern Ireland, one respondent pointed to the fact that groups appear to be able to *“flip a switch and get 2000 people out on the street within 20 minutes. You’re not getting that in in England...to the best of my knowledge”* (NI-05).<sup>55</sup>

## Northern Ireland’s unique devolution arrangements

Alongside community contexts that are still very much impacted by the legacy of the past, Northern Ireland’s system of government is also distinct. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement established a consociational model of power sharing, ensuring all sides of the community are represented in the Northern Ireland Executive. As such, the Northern Ireland Executive is a mandatory coalition. Such an Executive composition would undoubtedly bring challenges in any context, but in Northern Ireland the parties represent communities with fundamentally different constitutional aspirations, and must also grapple with how to jointly address often divisive legacy issues of the past as well as current issues, including the complexities associated with the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. At various points, institutions have collapsed, most recently from 2016–2020 and 2021–2024.<sup>56</sup> The impact of these challenges is evident across a range of policy areas. One respondent spoke to the impact on challenges such as CCE which requires strategic, long-term, cross-departmental cooperation: *“we are... structurally designed to look at [what] one particular minister wants and those particular ministers are often of different political parties. So where you may get*

55. N.B, Section 22(9) of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 does not preclude public order offences such as rioting, from the application of the statutory defence. This is in contrast to Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which does, as per Section 45(7), read in conjunction with Schedule 4.

56. More recently, the Northern Ireland Assembly (Stormont) and Northern Ireland Executive collapsed in 2017 and reformed in 2020 with the New Decade New Approach Agreement; then in 2022, the institutions collapsed again, only to be restored in January 2024 with the Safeguarding the Union Agreement.

*consensus, you don't necessarily get cohesion*" (NI-09). The same respondent spoke of the challenges of Agreements to restore the institutions where policymaking can be disrupted and lack strategic foresight: *"we have developed policy on the hoof and...they're not all consistent with each other."* Ultimately, *"you have individual departments trying to do their best under massive resource pressure with no political leadership for large amounts of time at a time when the rest of the UK and to an extent down South have been moving on with this"* (NI-09). In this regard, it is encouraging to observe that the work of the Northern Ireland Departments of Justice, Health, and Education on addressing CCE, continued during periods of institutional collapse and stagnation. Indeed, during the most recent pause, the Departments developed recommendations on CCE and made progress in moving forward to address the issue. Thus, despite some unique challenges, efforts to address CCE have continued.

The challenges are, of course, not unique to CCE or MSHT policy settings. Yet, they can certainly impact upon such a complex issue, that requires a coordinated, strategic and long-term approach. Even where progress is desired, the 'stop-start' nature of devolved government in Northern Ireland creates unique challenges. Progress on addressing CCE as MSHT, and ensuring effective identification, requires cross-departmental buy-in. In Northern Ireland, this means reaching agreement across the political spectrum, and continuing to press forward even without Ministers and an Assembly in place, which can add an additional challenge to efforts to improve identification.

#### 4.1.1. A Northern Ireland-specific response

Harm is normalised in Northern Ireland to the extent that children, parents and those working in their communities do not always recognise exploitation that is occurring as CCE.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, where exploitation and harm are normalised and not understood as such, and where the groups engaged in exploitation are sometimes trusted as those protecting communities (Walsh, 2023), CCE may simply not be identified at all. This, together with the hyperlocalised setting of harm can mean that even where exploitation is recognised, there are concerns about formally identifying such harm through the NRM. Concerns relate primarily to the safety of children themselves, but may also relate also the safety of those referring, particularly in youth and community settings. Interviewees raised concerns that children might be perceived as 'touts' or be at risk of further harm such as paramilitary style attacks,<sup>58</sup> if NRM referrals were made, *"that's your fears and concerns that actually by referring people into the NRM process...actually could put children and adults at more risk"* (NI-05).

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57. See Section 4.1 on societal context.

58. BBC (2023) Paramilitary-style shootings on the rise in Northern Ireland. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-67443033>



One participant with experience working in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, remarked that, *"The young people here [in Northern Ireland] don't want to talk. They're terrified. The young people [in England] would tell you anything. They don't have the same fear"* (NI-07). Those with experience of the justice system in Northern Ireland expressed concerns about how the statutory defence in the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 would work in practice, if a young person felt too fearful to admit the harm they encountered due to potential repercussions. While an NRM referral or Conclusive Grounds decision is not strictly necessary to make use of the statutory defence, it would present strong evidence to support the applicability of the defence. Further, for the defence to be utilised even without an NRM referral, the same challenges would persist. This is not a challenge that is unique to Northern Ireland. However contextual challenges remain, given the control exerted over communities by paramilitaries and organised criminal groups.

Those with experience of working to support children who have encountered CCE in Great Britain did acknowledge that threats exist in those settings too. Perhaps, though, what makes Northern Ireland distinct is the pervasive nature of paramilitaries and organised criminal groups within its society, and the often hyperlocal context of exploitation, which may making it harder to remove a child from risk of reprisals where referrals are made. Walsh's (2023) research with young people in Northern Ireland sheds light on some of the distinct challenges that exist in Northern Ireland. One participant in that study stated that if a young person was at risk of harm in England, they could move to another area "not under the control of that group" (Walsh, 2023, p. 37). In Northern Ireland, this is not always possible, since "networks extend much wider, and if a particular group wanted to identify and harm a particular young person these young people believed that there were few places that could offer full protection" (Walsh, 2023, p. 37) Similar concerns about the adequacy of relocation support were raised in the interviews in this study. This means it is crucial that any move towards NRM referrals regarding CCE in the Northern Ireland context proceeds with adequate support and safeguarding in relation to potentially distinct associated risks. There are risks associated with making poor-quality NRM referrals that may be rejected at the Reasonable Grounds (RG) or Conclusive Grounds (CG) stage. This risk is particularly pertinent in the Northern Ireland context, since a child could be placed in an even more vulnerable situation, potentially labelled as a 'tout', but left without any of the protections formal identification provides access to, and potentially at risk of reprisal. While this risk would undoubtedly exist in any context, it may be more pronounced in a context where paramilitaries and organised criminal groups exert significant control over communities in a hyperlocal setting.<sup>59</sup> Risks are present if referrals are made outside of a context where there are secure protections in place for both the children referred and adults involved in the referral process. These risks must therefore be addressed. Such efforts should be accompanied by investment in building capacity,

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59. For further discussion on some of these unique dynamics, see Walsh (2023).

expertise, training and awareness raising, all of which are addressed in the sections below.

While the distinctiveness of Northern Ireland may be more pronounced, or visible, than other regions in the UK, it is not the only region to grapple with divergence from the national picture in aspects related to CCE and the NRM. In Scotland, interview respondents spoke about the different terminology of human trafficking in Scottish legislation, and the tension that exists between the letter of the applicable statute, and the Home Office NRM Guidance (NI-13). While the technicalities of this tension are addressed in section 4.2, its existence sheds light on the challenges of a NRM with homogenous guidelines and procedures, that must operate and function in devolved legal, institutional, and cultural contexts.

## 4.2. The legal and policy response to identifying child criminal exploitation as modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland: barriers impacting opportunities?

The analysis of the legal and policy response in Northern Ireland reveals both promise and potential barriers when it comes to the identification of CCE as MSHT.<sup>60</sup> The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 – in Sections 1 and 2 – sets out offences in human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced labour. In so doing, it defines these harms in domestic law. Formal identification of conduct amounting to MSHT is not yet mandated by the Act, but identification remains crucial to enable the effective operation of a range of protective and assistive measures, such as those in Sections 17–21. These provisions stipulate a range of assistance and support that should be available to trafficked persons in a range of contexts. Section 21 states that the Department of Health (DOH) “must make arrangements to enable... an independent guardian to be appointed to assist, represent and support” children who have been, or are about to be referred to the NRM in *some* cases. Given that CCE-related harms may be familial, the possibilities of the Section 21 are encouraging. Yet, these protective provisions hinge upon identification.

At an institutional and policy level, further promise, that can assist identification, is observable. As outlined in Section 2, the former Child Protection Senior Officials Group has been engaged in providing “strategic direction on existing and emerging child protection issues” including in the CCE Action Plan (MSHT Strategy, 2024, para. 1.11). This work will undoubtedly continue in the renamed CYPS Child Protection Group. The Safeguarding Board CCE coordinator is tasked with leading a range of actions related to the Action Plan, in collaboration with the

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60. The scope of analysis is limited to those provisions that are most relevant to CCE.

SBNI Child Exploitation Committee and other statutory actors (NI DOJ, 2024). The Action Plan contains agreed actions to develop training and awareness raising among the general public and frontline practitioners (Commitment 1.2, 1.5); collate and share data (Commitment 1.4); and raise awareness of CCE and the links to MSHT and the NRM (1.3). Such actions of a cross-departmental, multi-agency approach to CCE are encouraging. Alongside this, the Northern Ireland Department of Justice has implemented a new three-year Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy (2024–2027) which contains an explicit focus on: (1) improving identification of trafficking of both children and adults, (2) CCE as potentially relevant in the MSHT framework, and (3) the need for training and awareness raising on MSHT.

The paragraphs above demonstrate that there are helpful provisions and commitments within the applicable legal and policy frameworks, which can provide support for effective identification of CCE as MSHT. Yet, this analysis also identifies potential barriers to the identification of CCE in Northern Ireland that exist within the MSHT framework itself.

#### 4.2.1. Potential barriers to identification

The analysis of the Northern Ireland legal and policy framework identifies barriers to both: (a) identifying MSHT more generally, and (b) identifying CCE as MSHT.

##### Absence of legal duty and accountability mechanism

While the UK has a duty to identify human trafficking under Article 10 ECAT, and compliance with positive obligations under Article 4 ECHR require the identification of MSHT, the Northern Ireland legislation's 'Duty to Notify' provision is not yet in force; and while referral to the NRM is said to be mandatory for children in Northern Ireland, under both Northern Irish law or NRM Guidance, there are no legal consequences for failure to make a referral or requirements to otherwise notify the Secretary of State regarding potentially trafficked children.<sup>61</sup>

In Northern Ireland, Section 13 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 – which remains prospective – would place a duty on “specified public authorities” to notify the National Crime Agency (NCA) of potential trafficking cases. This provision has not yet commenced. It is notable, however, that a public consultation has taken place on a potential Duty to Notify (DtN) process in Northern Ireland and possible action on Section 13 is listed as a potential Action in the most recent MSHT Strategy.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, in England and Wales, Section 52 of the Modern Slavery Act places a statutory duty on certain authorities to notify the *Home Office* when

61. For more information see: National Referral Mechanism Guidance: Adult (Northern Ireland and Scotland), in comparison with National Referral Mechanism Guidance (England and Wales) Section 2.

62. See commitments under Objective 1.1 of the MSHT Strategy (DOJ, 2024).

“potential victims of modern slavery” are encountered.<sup>63</sup> While the NRM is not explicitly mentioned, Guidance notes that this duty is deemed satisfied where an NRM referral occurs (MSA Statutory Guidance, para 4.3). In the case of children, an NRM referral can occur without consent and as such, the duty will always be met when a child is referred to the NRM. For adults, where an NRM is not made, a Duty to Notify (DtN) form must be filled in by those authorities who are deemed by statute to have the duty.

Helpfully, the NRM Guidance (Northern Ireland and Scotland) notes that children do not need to consent to an NRM referral, and implies that referral is mandatory, although it does not state that a referral ‘must’ be made as the England and Wales Guidance does. This arguably further weakens the assertion that children must be referred to the NRM. Indeed, when the NRM is mentioned in the CCE Action Plan, it is framed as discretionary, i.e. “whether it is in the child’s best interests to make a referral” (Objective 1.3). While it is helpful to see this reference, this negates the mandatory nature. Rather, given the international human rights law obligations to identify and protect trafficked persons and those who have experienced slavery, servitude and forced labour, it might be more helpful to assume that referral *is* in the best interests of the child, with an option to follow another course of action if the circumstances of the case indicate that an NRM referral would not be in the child’s best interests.<sup>64</sup> In this regard, and given the knowledge and awareness gaps outlined below, it would be helpful to see further explanation and guidance for stakeholders, outlining how and why referral is normally within the child’s best interests.

The absence of a clear legal duty to identify MSHT in Northern Ireland stands as a barrier to identification of MSHT in all contexts, including CCE. This could be addressed by ensuring the commencement of Section 13 in Northern Ireland and updating the Northern Ireland NRM Guidance and CCE Action Plan accordingly. Nevertheless, one interviewee noted that there appears to be no consequence in practice for failure to notify even in England and Wales. Thus, for a duty to have any meaningful effect, it must be well understood and consideration ought to be given to an associated accountability process. This may, for example, take the form of a mandatory reporting process on how the duty is discharged within organisations. In addition, not all public authorities are specified under Section 52 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Thus, there are opportunities for reform that could inspire helpful improvements not only to the identification process in Northern Ireland, but throughout the UK.

63. These entities are set out in Section 52(5) of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and include local authorities, and police officials, among others.

64. Note that NRM Guidance for Decision Making Pilots in England and Wales, at 1.96 states that: ‘Children may not withdraw themselves from the NRM. A child may not be withdrawn from the NRM unless it is in the best interests of the child as determined by the responsible local authority Child Safeguarding Services’, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/piloting-devolving-decision-making-for-child-victims-of-modern-slavery/decision-making-guidance-for-pilot-sites-in-england-and-wales-accessible-version#:~:text=A%20child%20may%20not%20be%20withdrawn%20from,to%20the%20Modern%20Slavery%20Unit%20for%20advice>.

## Human trafficking definition

A further potential barrier to identifying human trafficking in particular, lies in the statutory definition of human trafficking itself. Since, as outlined in Section 3, human trafficking will often be the most appropriate category for CCE, its definition in domestic law is of key importance. Section 2 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 defines human trafficking identically to Section 2 of the Modern Slavery Act (MSA) 2015, as follows: “(1) A person (“A”) commits an offence if A arranges or facilitates the travel of another person (“B”) with a view to B being exploited”. Section 2(4) clarifies that “Travel” means— (a) arriving in, or entering, any country, (b) departing from any country, or (c) travelling within any country.”

When it comes to identification, it is notable that this understanding of human trafficking is reflected in the “Modern Slavery: Statutory Guidance for England (under Section 49 of Modern Slavery Act 2015) and Non-Statutory Guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland” (NRM Guidance). In this guidance, the “action” element of both adult and child trafficking is set out as follows: “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt, of child which includes an **element of movement**” (2025, p. 20).<sup>65</sup> This is also the case in the Northern Ireland Public Prosecution Service Policy, which states that Section 2 of the Act “provides that a person commits an offence if they arrange or facilitate the travel of another person into, out of, or within any country, with a view to that other person being exploited”.<sup>66</sup> It goes on to note the various ways that arranging or facilitating travel can happen, and it is here that the mention of the other ‘acts’ is found. Still, these acts are referenced as ways of facilitating travel, and the link to movement remains.

This requirement in Northern Ireland, and England and Wales, has the effect of narrowing the ‘act’ element in the internationally accepted trafficking definition. As noted in Section 3, ‘recruitment’ and ‘harbouring’ are relevant acts for the purpose of establishing conduct amounting to human trafficking. Indeed, the 2024 United States Trafficking in Persons Report characterises the “element of movement” here as “[i]nconsistent with international law”. The report acknowledges that these jurisdictions criminalise slavery, servitude and forced labour, which could assist in addressing trafficking that does not have a movement element (US State Department, 2024). Similar concerns were raised by stakeholders in the Independent Modern Slavery Act Review, with some Expert Advisors recommending an amendment to remove the references to travel. The Reviewers stopped short of this, noting that “it is too early to determine if this is causing issues in securing prosecutions” but requested that the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) monitor the impact of the current definition (2021,

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65. Emphasis added.

66. See also the CPS Guidance (England and Wales) on Section 2 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015: “Human trafficking is an offence that covers the movement of a person or people from one place to another with the intent to exploit them”.

para 2.3.6). Yet, the impact on *identification* of trafficking for the purpose of support and the NRM does not appear to have been explicitly addressed in this regard.

As discussed in Section 3, the nature of CCE in Northern Ireland would almost never meet the requirements of slavery and servitude under Article 4 ECHR, and not *all* CCE may easily meet the definition of forced labour. NRM Guidance appears unclear in this regard. It does appear to define forced labour in a broad manner – arguably broader than the European Court of Human Rights – noting a requirement for a “means” and “service”, and for children, only the service element is deemed required. This is certainly helpful, and it may be the case that some CCE-related harm may be identified as forced labour, and as such, modern slavery, in cases where there is no movement. Indeed, a National Crime Agency explainer defines criminal exploitation as a sub-category of forced labour, referring to Section 1 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Yet, this conceptualisation does not appear to be widespread and is not evident in the NRM Guidance itself. In addition, the explainer also refers to trafficking throughout the document, seemingly linking criminal exploitation to trafficking in practice. In the NRM Guidance, criminal exploitation *itself* is addressed as a form of trafficking, rather than explicitly within the discussion on forced labour. In short, while the “element of movement” requirement narrows the scope of human trafficking for criminal exploitation, there is a lack of clarity on the extent to which forced labour may capture CCE related harms. While it might be legally possible to capture *some* CCE harms within the scope of forced labour this would certainly not always be the case, and may add an extra layer of complexity for both first responders and decision makers.

More problematically, a focus on movement within the statutory definition and NRM guidance may be both a cause and consequence of how human trafficking (and in some cases, modern slavery) is conceptualised and understood by first responders, decision makers, and others capable of referring children into safeguarding pathways. Survey data reveals movement narratives within understandings of both concepts among first responders, statutory service providers, and NGO staff alike. When asked, “[i]n your words, how would you describe ‘human trafficking’ and ‘modern slavery’?”, survey responses often linked human trafficking and modern slavery, referring to movement. Examples include:

*“The transporting of children and young people for the purpose of exploitation of a criminal, sexual nature or forced labour.” (Survey response)*

*“Human trafficking is the transport of a person from one area to another through deceit or force with the purposes of making a profit.” (Survey response)*



Some, however, did make a distinction between human trafficking and modern slavery, with movement often being key to the distinction:

*“Trafficking – transporting or arranging/facilitating the transport of people for the purpose of exploiting their labour. Modern slavery – the exploitation of vulnerable people in order to profit from their labour. Can take the form of underpaid or unpaid work, poor or dangerous working conditions, or illegal activity.” (Survey response)*

Interviewees also often articulated trafficking in terms of movement. Some explicitly spoke about how minimal movement may be, “even... moved down a corridor so it doesn’t have to be long distance” (NI-01). Yet, movement was often emphasised, indicating an underpinning conception of trafficking as requiring this element. Such understandings are not unique to Northern Ireland. Participants who had experience working in England typically had a more nuanced understanding of what amounts to trafficking, with some referencing the Palermo Protocol, and the act-means-purpose approach.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, references to movement were almost always present. Perhaps this is unsurprising, since the Modern Slavery Act 2015 defines trafficking in the same way.

Significantly, the Scottish legislation takes a different approach. The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 defines human trafficking in Section 1(1) as follows: “A person commits an offence if the person— (a) takes a relevant action, and (b) does so with a view to another person being exploited.” Section 1(2) goes on to note that a “relevant action” means: either: “(a) the recruitment of another person, (b) the transportation or transfer of another person, (c) the harbouring or receiving of another person, (d) the exchange or transfer of control over another person, or (e) the arrangement or facilitation of any of the actions mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (d)”.

The drafting history of the provision reveals that the original bill contained the travel requirement. At the Committee Stage, the Justice Committee heard from a number of witnesses who expressed concern at the inclusion of travel. (Justice Committee, 2015) On the basis of this concern, one of the Committee recommendations related to amending the wording, and in the second reading, the provision as we see now in Section 1 appeared. Notably, when asked to define human trafficking, the interviewees based in Scotland noted that the Scottish legislation does not require a demonstration of movement, or travel, for conduct to amount to trafficking. Their awareness and understanding of trafficking was more aligned with the Palermo Protocol definition, but also appeared to be informed by the statutory definition in the Scottish legislation. When discussing the definition, one noted:

67. The knowledge and understanding gaps in Northern Ireland are explored further below in section 4.3.



*“And we also kind of use that...talk to people as well, use the legislation as well to help people understand that notion of a relevant action. What does that actually mean?” (NI-13b)*

They pointed to the challenges of reconciling the Scottish definition with Home Office guidance which requires movement:

*“Our legislation doesn’t require us to demonstrate movement – it’s an action, but their guidance, the one that we referred to says that there has to be.” (NI-13b)*

The hyperlocal and familial nature of CCE in Northern Ireland may shed light on the barrier of the movement narrative embedded in the legislative and policy framework on trafficking in a way that may not be as apparent in other settings where county lines exploitation in particular often involves movement or travel. Yet, undoubtedly, there will be CCE in these contexts which is much more localised, or even familial, and may not be recognised as such. Further, the requirement of movement – and its apparent impact on how MSHT is understood – may impact on the levels of identification of CCE in Northern Ireland, where it is often hyperlocal. As explained in Section 3, CCE is likely to fall within the scope of the Palermo Protocol and ECAT trafficking definitions. Thus, a definition of trafficking and NRM guidance that requires movement may pose an unnecessary barrier to both understanding and addressing CCE as a form of human trafficking. Even where thresholds are low, the use of the word “travel” appears to inform understandings of trafficking that do not always align with how exploitation occurs. Indeed, these challenges likely do exist in other contexts, and as such, we do not only recommend that the Northern Ireland Assembly considers amending the statutory definition of trafficking, but also that the UK Home Office explore approaches to NRM guidance that take account of each devolved region to ensure that CCE is effectively identified. To fully understand the impact of this potential barrier, further research on NRM referrals and decision-making processes will undoubtedly be required. Yet, it is also a potential barrier that is easily addressed in both law and guidance, and addressing it may indeed enhance clarity and understanding across those working with children and young people, and those involved in the NRM process itself.

## 4.3. Knowledge and awareness of child criminal exploitation as modern slavery and human trafficking

### 4.3.1. Understandings of child criminal exploitation and modern slavery and human trafficking

#### Child criminal exploitation

Among most survey participants from Northern Ireland, we observed a general good awareness of CCE. The majority of survey respondents (81%, n=35) have regular contact with the term (daily, weekly or monthly). Terms used by participants to describe CCE included themes of coercion, manipulation, power imbalance, vulnerability along with debt, dependence and exchange. Key terms used included “coerce” (n=15), “drugs” (n=14), “manipulation” (n=9), “vulnerable” (n=9), “gangs” (n=4) and “paramilitary/ies” (n=4). Overall survey data suggests that the perception and understanding of CCE and its connection to different types of activity varies across sectors, potentially impacting how it is identified and addressed. Respondents across all sectors indicated encountering or being made aware of CCE in relation to “drugs” at a high percentage (98%, n=42). The community and voluntary sector respondents encountered CCE in relation to ‘paramilitary activity’ at a rate of 93%, while law enforcement encountered it at just 57%. In relation to money laundering, 7% of law enforcement encountered CCE through this activity, while a higher rate of 57% is noted from first responders in the community and voluntary sector. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that 21% of all law enforcement and community and voluntary sector respondents encounter CCE in relation to forced shoplifting, however among statutory bodies this is 47%.

Likewise interviewees used a range of terms to define CCE, with several acknowledging the newly agreed Northern Ireland definition, while referencing similar key words “coercive control”, “imbalance of power”, “targeting vulnerability”, “grooming” and *“quite simply, where a person, by deceit, fear... grooming, forces or places a child to commit criminal offences for their benefit”* (NI-12). The prevalence and pervasive nature of organised criminal groups and paramilitaries, and their links to hyperlocalised communities and familial ties, also impacts on recognition and awareness of how young people are exploited. Interview data indicates an awareness of CCE as a phenomenon that has occurred for decades in Northern Ireland without formal recognition despite legal and policy frameworks and vast support structures relating to child protection as outlined in Section 2.2. This aligns with the sentiment discussed in Section 4.1, that exploitation in Northern Ireland may be normalised, *“It’s so obvious that paramilitaries in Northern Ireland have been exploiting young people for decades. And I think it’s the elephant in the room, probably in this whole CCE issue. Why have we been so slow to recognise that?”* (NI-04).

## Modern slavery and human trafficking

Despite a general understanding of MSHT among participants, analysis reveals problematic conceptions of the issue among both survey respondents and interviewees, particularly in relation to a perceived need for movement, framed by the statutory guidance in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not in line with the international definition, as outlined in Section 4.2.1. Throughout surveys, the terms 'modern slavery' and/or 'human trafficking' are encountered by 81% (n=35) of respondents either daily, weekly or monthly.<sup>68</sup> Although not always connected, similar themes to CCE were commonly used to describe MSHT, including coercion and control, debt bondage, threats, confiscation of personal documents, and exploitation of vulnerabilities, as well as themes of forced labour, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation.

Interviewees had similar knowledge and understanding, speaking of "*the exploitation of a person for gain*" (NI-05), to more detailed acknowledgement, and in some instances referencing the Palermo Protocol. One interviewee, with significant experience working in England stated, "*the definition says an act, means and purpose, and you don't need the means for children. So you've got an act, whether with coercion, force, fear or moving around, you've got that transportation, retained, whatever it is... for a purpose...*" (NI-12).

In addition to a range of understandings, some problematic conceptions were present. Survey responses showed that 83% of law enforcement representatives assume victims of MSHT in Northern Ireland are primarily women and/or 'foreign nationals', while the community and voluntary sector (CVS) mainly referred to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) or 'foreign nationals' (60%). Throughout responses, there is a lack of reference to UK or Irish nationals, children and adults. Further, when asked to define the terms, 77% (n=33) of respondents refer to movement. This aligns with many interviewees referencing movement as a key aspect of MSHT, "*So human trafficking is movement. Movement is an easy one*" (NI-02). It is often compounded with the narrative of movement across borders and particularly of 'foreign nationals' when reflecting on wider public perception, "*I think people have a stereotype that human trafficking would only ever apply to somebody who had come from a far and distant country*" (NI-09); or unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These conceptions are reflected in the number of NRM referrals in Northern Ireland outlined in Section 2.3, with 87% of all child referrals in Northern Ireland reporting exploitation overseas only and could be a result of a wider societal understanding of the issue.

If human trafficking and modern slavery is often viewed or understood as something that: (a) involves movement, or (b) impacts those who have crossed a border to arrive in Northern Ireland, then children experiencing CCE in the street

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68. Overall survey responses suggested a higher exposure to the terms 'modern slavery' or 'human trafficking' in comparison to 'CCE'.

or neighborhood, or perhaps home, they grew up in, may not be readily identified as having experienced MSHT. It is worth noting, however, that where trafficking is understood as requiring movement, this does align with how it is defined in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The emergence of a recognition of the exploitation of children for criminal purposes in England, Wales and Scotland may be a result of exposure to: (a) a greater awareness of MSHT, (b) an increasing number of NRM referrals, and (c) the framework and language of MSHT already being utilised by professionals and policy makers encountering exploitation through county lines. It may also be the case that county lines type exploitation naturally fits within understandings of MSHT that require movement. However, in the case of Northern Ireland as outlined in Section 4.1, where intergenerational trauma, a post-conflict society, and the pervasive presence of paramilitaries continue, stakeholders may well have a framing of certain forms of exploitation or child criminality that pre-dates the MSHT agenda. Without recognition of the issue of MSHT, momentum to change this narrative as seen in England, Scotland and Wales may be slow.

### Child criminal exploitation in the context of modern slavery and human trafficking

Data analysis indicates that despite some problematic conceptions, there is a general awareness and understanding of both CCE and MSHT among key stakeholders. Yet, understanding of the connection between these concepts is sometimes lacking. This is unsurprising, since, only five NRM referrals have ever been made for children for 'criminal exploitation', in Northern Ireland, in comparison to 15,094 child referrals for CCE across the rest of the UK.

Among all survey respondents, 71% (n=10) of the community and voluntary sector, 46% (n=12) of first responders, 36% (n=5) of law enforcement and 17% (n=1) of HSCNI, would 'often' consider CCE as a form of MSHT. However, only 43% (n=6) of the community and voluntary sector, 38% (n=10) of first responders, 29% (n=4) of law enforcement, and 50% (n=3) of HSCNI respondents felt the recognition of MSHT for those who have experienced CCE would '*definitely*' be beneficial. As outlined in Section 4.3.2, suggested benefits included understanding crime trends, increased data collation, the recognition of children as victims rather than perpetrators and the potential use of statutory defence.

Interviewees expressed similar sentiments and discussions provided insights as to the disconnect between the two issues. One participant suggested the challenges may relate to terminology and understanding given that the nature of CCE may be hyperlocal, lack significant movement, and is mainly a "safeguarding issue" for the local population, whereas MSHT is often perceived as relating to 'foreign nationals' or unaccompanied asylum-seeking children travelling internationally across borders.

*“I think the barrier is probably just the lack of knowledge of piecing them together. I think we’ve probably separated them out. So I think we would see child criminal exploitation within our local population as just that. I don’t think people would confidently make the link. Well, certainly I don’t as a practitioner... I haven’t made the link was modern slavery... There would maybe need to be education around, actually this is a form of modern slavery human trafficking.” (NI-11)*

*“Child exploitation has become more normal and it’s become used more. I do think there is a challenge in using human trafficking because I think you’d need to do some work around about helping people understand that... because of the sort of media focus on what is trafficking, you know, boats of migrants, you know, invading the white Cliffs of Dover.” (NI-09)*

As such, despite general knowledge of both CCE and MSHT, a gap remains when it comes to identification of CCE as MSHT, and formal recognition through the NRM. As one participant remarked: *“This isn’t necessarily new to some people, a lot of people will understand that through CSE they’re recognising signs and symptoms It’s just they don’t link it to the NRM”* (NI-04).

### 4.3.2. The National Referral Mechanism

The non-identification of potential victims of MSHT, in general, within Northern Ireland is evident. Indeed, since 2014, only 315 people (children and adults) were referred to the NRM in Northern Ireland where the exploitation is recorded as taking place in Northern Ireland (UKHO, 2025). This number is equivalent to approximately 10 days of referrals in England in 2024. Furthermore, given that conceptual misunderstandings may impact on recognising CCE as MSHT, it is unsurprising that NRM referrals for CCE in particular in Northern Ireland have also been almost entirely absent, as outlined in Section 2.3. Data analysis reveals further challenges, including limited awareness and understanding of the NRM, a perceived absence of benefits of the NRM for children indigenous to Northern Ireland, and an absence of awareness of state obligations to identify human trafficking.

#### Awareness of the NRM

Among survey respondents and interviewees, there was a range of knowledge and understanding of the NRM. While 51% of survey respondents (n=22) are “very aware” of the NRM, 35% (n=15) have “heard of it” and 14% (n=6) “do not know about it”. Among first responders, 58% report being “very aware”, whilst only 36% of law enforcement are “very aware” of the NRM. The lower rate of awareness of

the NRM among law enforcement could also be reflected in statistics which show that 3% of child NRM referrals in Northern Ireland are made by the PSNI, while 19% are made by Local Authorities, 18% by NGOs, and 60% are made by another Government Agency (UKHO, 2025). Although survey respondents generally encounter CCE, of all first responders 50% would either not feel confident or would need support to make an NRM referral (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7: Number of first responders and confidence in making an NRM referral.<sup>69</sup>**

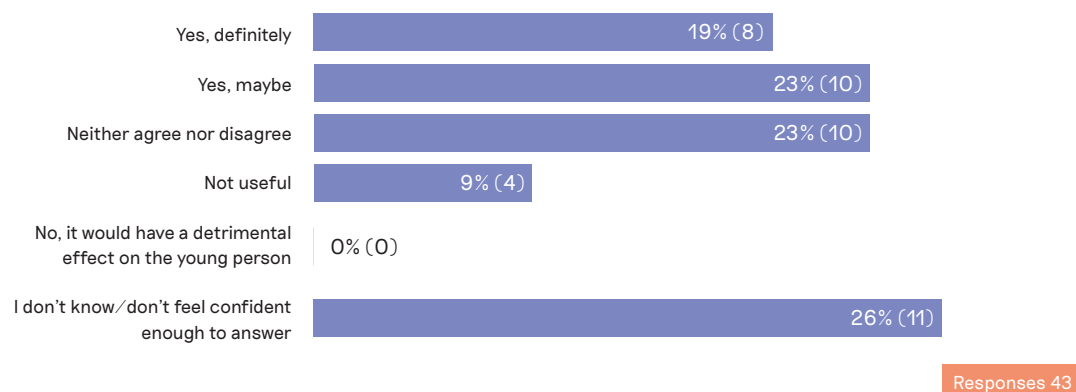
When asked whether the NRM is a useful mechanism for supporting victims of CCE, only 19% (n=8) stated “definitely”, 23% (n=10) stated “maybe”, and over 50% were unsure or disagreed<sup>70</sup> (see Figure 8).

69. While 27 responses were received for this question, one response was excluded due to an error in the question in the online survey form at the time the survey was taken.

70. Unsure or disagreed refers to answers selecting “Neither agree nor disagree”, “I don’t know / don’t feel confident enough to answer” or “Not useful”.

### Number of respondents stating the NRM as a useful mechanism for support potential and actual victims of CCE

Do you think the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a useful mechanism for support potential and actual victims of child criminal exploitation (CCE)?



**Figure 8: Number of respondents stating the NRM as a useful mechanism for supporting potential and actual victims of CCE.**

### Perceived challenges and drawbacks of the NRM

We observed a significant lack of knowledge and awareness in the NRM's function and purpose, "*I don't think there's an understanding or knowledge base out there for what the NRM would bring for young people from Northern Ireland*" (NI-08). A key theme, reflected in many responses, was that the NRM would not bring an added benefit for those in Northern Ireland referred for CCE. Several referenced the existing support from social services without need for an NRM referral, spoke of the NRM as a 'tick box' exercise or referenced an awareness that the NRM would support "*certain legal immigration processes whereby an NRM referral or a recognition that they're a victim can help maybe humanitarian protection stuff*" (NI-04). This is also consistent with the NRM data on the high number of referrals of overseas cases of exploitation in comparison to identified victims where exploitation occurred within Northern Ireland.

Others felt that not only may the NRM not bring any additional benefit, but its use could also potentially be harmful. Some questioned how the NRM could function in a post-conflict society, given the familial links with CCE in Northern Ireland and the threat of repercussion, if "*the community sees them as somebody who has snitched*" (NI-02). As outlined in section 4.1.1, the nature of CCE in Northern Ireland's unique setting may leave young people, and those with responsibility for them, believing that there are "few places that could offer full protection", should a particular group want to identify and harm them (Walsh, 2023, p.35).



The perception of the NRM's function and benefits is compounded by a lack of confidence in the process. One respondent noted: *"I never would have thought about NRM and we have plenty of young people who are being exploited by paramilitary organisations. And it's the lack of, I think confidence"* (NI-08). Several referred to minimal or inadequate training as an issue: *"the only NRM training there comes from the Home Office themselves in terms of what their thresholding is. So yeah, I think I empathise a lot with other organisations in having the confidence to put those in"* (NI-08). Some individuals may have had no training at all. One first responder noted: *"I would say probably the NRM is just such a process now that even newly qualified staff that maybe haven't had training or anything on it"* (NI-11).

## Perceived benefits of the NRM

Despite the potential challenges of the NRM's operation in Northern Ireland, as outlined in Section 4.2.1, the referral of children to the NRM is considered mandatory even without consent. Furthermore, as outlined in Section 2.3, the NRM is the most significant data source to understand CCE. Several interviewees outlined the positive impact this could have on prevention and response. Several respondents mentioned how NRM data could provide a wider picture of CCE in Northern Ireland, acknowledging trends in identification, methods of harm, types and location of exploitation, allowing for a more targeted response, effective resourcing and impactful support and safeguarding. Indeed, this wider understanding could also benefit law enforcement (NI-09). A respondent who had worked in Great Britain also spoke of understandings of the NRM's usefulness in connection with law enforcement, which has developed over time: *"it was realised that trafficking offences could be used against child sexual exploitation and county lines type, drug type, criminal exploitation and you could put that charge of trafficking, that focused the mind of the investigators, so the NRM tied together quite nicely"* (NI-12).

An additional perceived benefit of the NRM relates to the potential power of recognising and understanding a young person as a victim, rather than a perpetrator: *"the benefit for me is if we understand victimhood... referring young people who've been forced into crime into an NRM and we make it the norm that they are treated as victims rather than perpetrators. Then we can make it a community norm, and then we can start to change the community and the societal, you know, how the society looks at these young people"* (NI-02).

Victim recognition also has a role to play in youth justice and diversion from prosecution. Section 22 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, implements the "non-punishment" principle, by providing a statutory defence for victims of MSHT in relation to actions directly resulting from their exploitation. The use of the NRM in recognising CCE was noted as an objective benefit to a young person being exploited, *"if we can just utilise that NRM as a defence in court I think it's worth*

*it. It's worth its weight in gold if we can do that"* (NI-02), which could be more effective through early intervention, *"prevention of criminality is one that would pertain to anybody referred, and so that that could be an advantage certainly"* (NI-04). Despite this suggested benefit, there is limited data regarding the implementation of statutory defence to fully understand how it is used in practice (Kidd, 2022).<sup>71</sup>

Despite recognition of the defence as a significant benefit that is utilised across Great Britain, *"if we look at other parts of the UK, the amount of children that have been prevented from going through the criminal justice system is massive... if they can avoid jail time, that's a win to me"* (NI-02). Participants felt that this provision is unused and unknown among legal practitioners across Northern Ireland: *"the solicitors in Northern Ireland don't use, don't encourage their clients to bring that defence up"* (NI-01). Indeed, some interviewees did not have any awareness of the defence at all. Relatedly, one participant expressed concern that the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) may not have adequate knowledge of the issue of CCE in general: *"I was concerned that whenever this information landed with the PPS, they wouldn't even know what it meant"* (NI-07).

## Promising practice elsewhere

When it comes to addressing gaps in knowledge and understanding of CCE, its relationship with MSHT, and the role of the NRM, promising practice from elsewhere offers insights for Northern Ireland. Significant progress has been made in Glasgow, Scotland, where the devolved NRM decision making pilot for children has been implemented.<sup>72</sup> Respondents familiar with the Glasgow pilot indicated that implementation positively impacted knowledge and awareness of CCE in relation to MSHT among colleagues, who were, *"able to look at the wider picture... moving our staff on in the journey to think when we're talking about trafficking and exploitation, well, what are we actually meaning? What is that actually like?... that's been the significant change for us"* (NI-13a). This knowledge and awareness of CCE in relation to MSHT is also evident in NRM statistics in Scotland. Since 2022, there have been 205 NRM referrals for CCE in Scotland compared to just 69 prior to that year (UKHO, 2025). Respondents also spoke of reduced waiting times and an increase in recognition of CCE as a form of MSHT through embedding the NRM in child protection processes, *"we wanted to embed it in our child protection processes. So we took the view that, well child trafficking and exploitation is child protection. So why would it not just sit in our child protection processes that are multi-agency?"* (NI-13a). This has provided a clearer picture on what difference the NRM can have, although this is a journey that continues: *"still today though we get asked, what difference?"*

71. While an NRM referral or decision is not strictly necessary to make use of the statutory defence, it may prove very difficult to successfully make use of the defence without one.

72. The Home Office NRM pilot programme aims to devolve decision-making for child victims of MSHT from the Home Office to local authorities.

*What difference does it make putting an NRM in?"* The same respondent went on to note, *"obviously the diversion from prosecution... changing the care plans for these young people... and that significant change in language around seeing children as victims"* (NI-13a). It is important, however, to fully acknowledge the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland and threats that still exist, and to take into account the personal circumstances of a child, ensuring their best interests and safety.

In light of the foregoing, it may be that a devolved NRM-style process, embedded within existing safeguarding processes in Northern Ireland, could be most appropriate. This process could potentially be modified, as deemed necessary, to account for the unique challenges present in the Northern Ireland context. For example, it may be that where there are significant safety concerns over referral into the NRM, a form of Duty to Notify (DtN) procedure could be established for such children. The Northern Irish legislative framework could be modified to reflect such a procedure, if deemed appropriate. In such cases, it may also be necessary to explore added protection around the use of the statutory defence under Section 22 of the Northern Ireland human trafficking legislation. While the defence will naturally be raised in the context of a public trial, it may be possible to explore certain privacy or anonymity procedures where an NRM referral has been made. These potential modifications would enable the UK to meet its international legal obligations, in a way that takes account of contextual safeguarding concerns.

## 4.4. Capacity

Given the findings outlined in the previous sections, it is apparent that there is a need to further develop: (a) the understanding of CCE in the context of MSHT in Northern Ireland, (b) knowledge of the NRM's purpose and process, (c) awareness of the rights and obligations that exist within the MSHT framework, and (d) a response that can operate in Northern Ireland's unique context. Yet, this will require investment, resourcing, and training for statutory bodies, the community and voluntary sector and particularly first responders.

Interview participants recognised awareness raising and training as important to change the narrative around CCE and MSHT. Training is included in the CCE Action Plan (Objectives 1.2, 2.2, 3.2), and MSHT Strategy (1.3, 3.2), and alignment of both could improve confidence, build capacity of stakeholders and ensure that the NRM is used appropriately. One respondent from Great Britain, noted:

*"[i]f you're going to get everybody in Northern Ireland to start submitting NRMs... you'd need that training around what a good NRM referral looks like because otherwise the system will fail immediately"* (NI-12). Some participants felt this investment should extend far beyond Home Office training for NRM decision-makers, which was described by one as *"informal"* and *"not very educational"* (NI-02). Interviewees also highlighted the need for specialist knowledge and understanding of the referral process: *"One thing is like writing the written*

*statement in to the NRM... 'cause you're providing civil evidence... that's like an academic skill"* (NI-07). In Scotland, through the implementation of the devolved NRM pilot, the UK Home Office provided funding for a *"co-developed training... so it would really get people an insight into what to look for, for criminal exploitation"* (NI-13), as well as refresher trainings and "deep-dives" into specific topics which moved staff on a journey of "significant change". The funding meant that local partners could be engaged to deliver the training. Such training may be particularly relevant to the unique context of a post-conflict Northern Ireland.

One respondent spoke of addressing CCE as MSHT through a "specialised practice": *"Dealing with child criminal exploitation is a specialised practice, it's not youth work. It's an element of youth work yes...you know we can't rely on, you know, youth clubs to do this. There should be individuals within those spaces who specialise in it... and it should be a part of their role within the organisation"* (NI-07). Specialism is also observable within the PSNI where, *"the inspector with the human trafficking portfolio, effectively, [they] will be the expert"* (NI-05). However there still remains a divergence in operational response to child protection under a separate Branch. As such, a coordinated approach to specialist practice in all organisations, should be considered.

Similarly, one interviewee spoke of the concept of an "MSHT Champion" which was previously introduced in some settings in England, to have expert focal points trained within local authorities, police and social services to streamline resources, remarking that, *"you're better off having a smaller group of... specialised people, trauma informed, etc, that will be doing them almost on weekly, monthly basis and become experts in the field"* (NI-10). This aligns with the approach in some Local Council areas in England where "Modern Slavery Coordinator" roles have been established. NRM referral rates in Council areas with a Modern Slavery Coordinator are shown to be significantly higher than in areas without a such a role (Human Trafficking Foundation, 2025).

Notably, the specialised role of the Independent Guardian Service was also noted as at capacity. Section 21 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 makes provision for an independent guardian to be appointed for any child who is – or is about to be – referred to the NRM, only where individual with parental responsibility for the child, "(i) is not in regular contact with the child or is outside of the UK, (ii) is suspected of having committed an offence under section 2 in relation to the child; or, (iii) for other reasons has interests which conflict with those of the child" (Section 21, HTE Act). This service could play a vital role in providing key specialist supports to children from Northern Ireland especially where harm can be familial and in circumstances where there is no parental responsibility. While the Independent Guardian Service itself may not currently have a considerable role in the identification of CCE as MSHT, the expertise will only add value and capacity to other stakeholders in the sector. However, if CCE is not recognised as a potential situation of trafficking, then eligibility for the service will not be considered.

Further, the Independent Guardian Service is already at capacity, and as such, if more children were deemed eligible, there are unlikely to be the resources to provide the support owed to them under this legislative provision. Speaking of the service, one interviewee stated: *“we have quite a big wait list now, so whilst we are preaching for young people to get this access, we understand the capacity within the service can’t reach that. But again, it goes back to that legal entitlement. And that actually then [the service] should be fully funded if that’s going to be the case”* (NI-09).

Findings highlight that capacity building is required to improve the response to CCE and address many of the barriers to identifying MSHT in these contexts. However this requires resourcing which is an ongoing issue for stakeholders including the PSNI, which has ongoing capacity challenges and has sought an additional £200m in funding (HMICRFS, 2025). One respondent remarked: *“How can we bring a in new process that we know we can’t deal with?... we can’t start creating teams and processes when we don’t have the people to do the work”* (NI-01). Beyond law enforcement, resourcing is also an issue among the wider community and voluntary sector, which can hinder responses. A more effective and efficient allocation of resources could provide significant cost savings and value for money, as illustrated by one interviewee whose organisation works with families of exploited children across the UK. They noted that *“they are notional figures but the potential savings for one of our parent liaison officers to work in one family whose child is exploited was £87,000 a year. One of our [staff] works with forty families – which is three and a half million a year”* (NI-12).

## 4.5. A moving picture: an opportunity for Northern Ireland

The research was undertaken at a time of significant flux in terms of the response to CCE in law, policy and practice. As outlined above, addressing CCE has emerged as a significant policy priority within Northern Ireland and the 2-year CCE Action Plan and Northern Ireland CCE definition have been operational since September 2024. Alongside this, the response to MSHT in the UK as a whole, and Northern Ireland in particular may also be characterised as a moving picture. The Northern Ireland institutions were restored in January 2024, which meant a Justice Minister was back in post and further progress on MSHT, including a new strategy, could be made. A change in the UK central government in July 2024 brought shifting legal and policy priorities. A New Safeguarding Minister (with a brief for MSHT), and the Crime and Policing Bill’s introduction in early 2025 are two notable aspects of the national moving picture. In Northern Ireland, interviewees spoke about plans to implement a devolved NRM pilot in Northern Ireland.

Further, data indicates that the nature of exploitation in Northern Ireland may also be changing. As acknowledged above, while Northern Ireland remains unique, it must be acknowledged that several interviewees highlighted a form of evolution taking place in the context of paramilitarism, some of this activity may indeed look much more like non-politicised organised crime. Participants familiar with the context in England also noted how the nature of exploitation continually evolves.

#### 4.5.1. The opportunity

In the context of this moving picture, there is real a sense of the opportunity that exists for Northern Ireland to make significant meaningful progress in addressing CCE, in particular, within the anti-trafficking framework. Interview participants pointed to this opportunity, and some spoke of the promise within upcoming changes likely to occur as part of the moving picture:

*“We have an opportunity to build something better than the rest of the UK has. We are creating this safeguarding mechanism, whatever it looks like, so we’re creating this thing. We have an opportunity to do one that’s more, that’s very niche, very specific for here, but also better... And why wouldn’t we grab that between both hands?” (NI-02)*

*“So I think that [a possible devolved NRM] really has exciting opportunities to bring the agencies together to get back at better recognition of this and if the experience of Glasgow...is anything to go by, we’re going to see a lot more CCE referrals....” (NI-04)*

Despite the challenges ahead, it is encouraging that the work of seizing the opportunity has already begun. Notably, the opportunity for Northern Ireland was also recognised by participants working in Great Britain. Yet, it is important that the opportunity is maximised through an effective, context-specific, strategic approach. Such an approach should have clear ‘owners’, at various levels, yet data indicates that there may be a lack of clarity among respondents on who ‘owns’ the issue of CCE as MSHT and indeed who *should* own it. While the Department of Justice clearly owns the MSHT policy area, since CCE is not always readily understood as a form of MSHT, ambiguity remains. Interview participants working in Northern Ireland raised queries, such as:

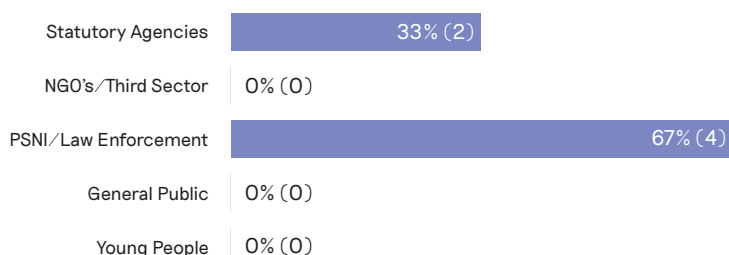


*“Who takes responsibility for it? Because everybody seems to think that it probably sits in Justice. And it doesn’t just sit in Justice. But this is across the board.” (NI-09)*

This indicates that it remains unclear if the issue is primarily thought of as a child protection issue or a MSHT one. In reality, it is both, and it is essential that the response intersects across these policy areas. In this regard, it is encouraging to see cross-departmental work on the CCE Action Plan. Further clarity among stakeholders as to the cross-departmental approach and the way that CCE intersects across policy areas may be useful in this regard.

In addition, survey responses reveal differing expectations and understandings of who should have overall responsibility for identifying and responding to CCE. Among survey respondents working for HSCNI 67% (n=4) think PSNI should have overall responsibility, while 33% (n=2) selected ‘statutory bodies’. However, among respondents working in law enforcement 43% (n=6) believe PSNI should have overall responsibility, while 50% (n=7) selected ‘other statutory bodies’ and 7% (n=1) selected ‘general public’. We recommend establishing clear ‘leads’ at executive level and within individual organisations and bodies. It may be that some cross-departmental and cross-organisational dialogue needs to take place before reaching consensus on a strategic approach to ownership of the issue.

**Percentage of HSCNI respondents when asked, “Who do you think has the main responsibility for identifying and responding to child criminal exploitation (CCE)?”**

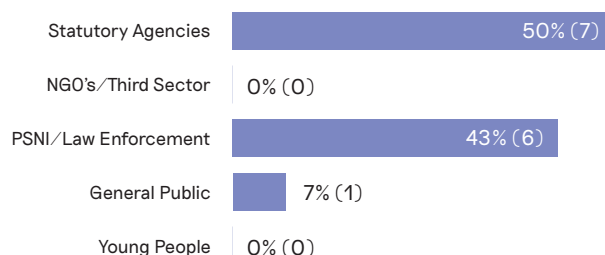


Responses 6

**Figure 9: Percentage of HSCNI respondents when asked, “Who do you think has the main responsibility for identifying and responding to child criminal exploitation (CCE)?”**



**Percentage of PSNI/Law Enforcement respondents when asked, "Who do you think has the main responsibility for identifying and responding to child criminal exploitation (CCE)?"**



Responses 14

**Figure 10: Percentage of PSNI/Law Enforcement respondents when asked, "Who do you think has the main responsibility for identifying and responding to child criminal exploitation (CCE)?"**

It is worth noting that questions of ownership will arise not only at government level, but also within individual organisations, as responses to CCE and MSHT can be siloed. For example, in the PSNI, the Organised Crime Branch primarily deals with MSHT of adults, while the Public Protection Branch would likely deal primarily with any form of child exploitation, such as CSE which is an established practice. Those with ownership at organisational, sectoral, and governmental level can work to establish a collaborative, multi-agency and multi-sector approach to addressing the issue. A long-term and strategic approach, can assist in establishing clarity on questions that will assist in maximising the opportunity present for Northern Ireland. One respondent asked:

*"[W]hat are you measuring? Who are you targeting? Is it prevention based? Is it intervention based?... These are basic questions that we should be able to answer, and we're nowhere near that. But the glimmer of hope is that people here do understand what's going on." (NI-07)*

The answer to these questions will undoubtedly be informed by the resource and capacity available across a range of sectors. As the moving picture and response evolve, a strategic, evidence-based approach that meaningfully implements international obligations will ensure that resources are used in a way that is most effective, and ultimately, that children and young people receive the protection they are owed.

## 5. Conclusion

This scoping study set out to enhance the understanding of why, given the increased focus on addressing harms experienced by children in the context of criminal exploitation, the formal identification of MSHT is largely absent. At the outset, NRM data indicated: (a) a limited knowledge among wider stakeholders of MSHT indicators to consider in relation to identifying exploitation among indigenous populations in Northern Ireland, (b) a lack of awareness and understanding of CCE in Northern Ireland, the interpretation of this harm and its framing as MSHT, and (c) a lack of recognition of the NRM among stakeholders or its perception as a relevant or useful resource.

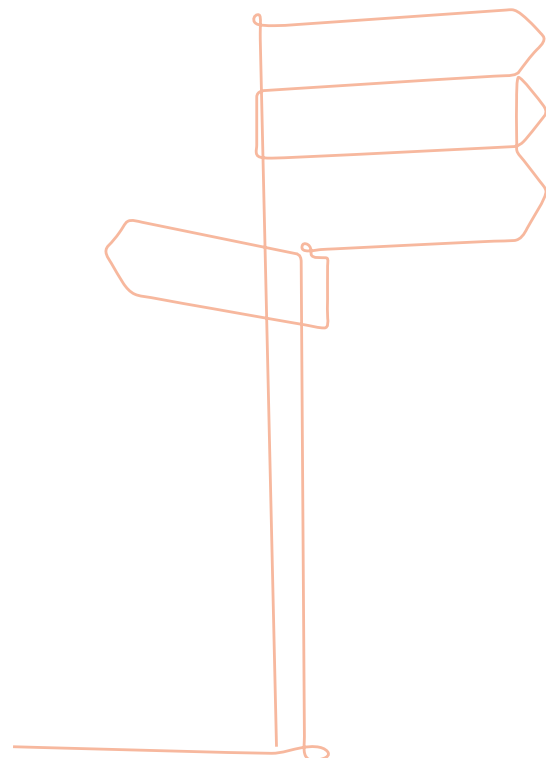
Findings reveal that while awareness of CCE-related harms is present in a range of settings, the unique context of Northern Ireland means that sometimes harm is normalised, and may not always be recognised as exploitation. As such, it is encouraging that the CCE Action Plan is in place, with increasing momentum to understand and address CCE that is already occurring. The findings indicate that CCE is not always understood or framed as modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland. While this could be related to a lack of awareness, it may also be linked to common perceptions of modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland, as well as how human trafficking in particular is defined in domestic law and policy. In addition, the data indicates that even where CCE is understood as a MSHT issue, relevant stakeholders do not always understand the added benefit of an NRM referral for children in Northern Ireland. Further, some have concerns about its potentially negative effects, including safety risks for children experiencing exploitation in hyperlocal and familial settings. Beyond this, findings highlight further challenges, including the absence of a statutory duty to identify modern slavery and human trafficking, the complexity of the NRM referral process, and the need for specialist knowledge to be able to make high quality NRM referrals, as well as capacity and resource challenges at government, third sector and organisational levels.

Taken together, the challenges identified in this study begin to paint a picture of why, despite the increased focus on addressing CCE in Northern Ireland, NRM referrals are largely absent. While this scoping study points to potential barriers, further research and analysis would assist in providing additional depth of understanding as to the nature of these barriers, and their interactions with one another, as well as whether additional barriers may be present. Yet, even as the research continues, there are actions that can be taken to begin to address the challenges that are already evident.

## 6. Recommendations

5. Northern Ireland's unique post-conflict context has led to normalised and often hyperlocalised harm, and there are additional safeguarding concerns, including fear of reprisals, to be considered for the National Referral Mechanism processes. To ensure, in alignment with international law, that identification of child criminal exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland can take place appropriately, the UK Government and Home Office should consider ways to: (a) involve safeguarding partners in the identification of modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland, and (b), explore in consultation with key stakeholders, what regional modifications to the NRM may be required for it to function effectively in each devolved region.
6. The international legal definition of human trafficking includes, but does not require, movement and the UK has obligations under the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, and the European Convention on Human Rights, to identify conduct that falls within the scope of the international definition. To ensure compliance with international law, especially where child criminal exploitation in Northern Ireland may not involve significant movement, the Northern Ireland Department of Justice and Northern Ireland Assembly should consider: (a) amending Section 2 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 to remove the requirement for travel and instead align with the Scottish legislation (i.e. 'takes a relevant action') (b) progressing plans (MSHT Strategy 1.1) to introduce the Duty to Notify (DtN) and Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders (STROs) in Northern Ireland, (c) introducing an accountability mechanism to ensure referral of children, accompanied by an associated training for organisations to enhance understanding on how their duty is discharged.
7. High quality National Referral Mechanisms referrals require specialist knowledge of key legal and policy frameworks and associated processes. To equip and empower first responders to effectively make Child Criminal Exploitation referrals to the National Referral Mechanism, the Northern Ireland Department of Justice should consider, in partnership with the Departments of Health and Education, developing a modern slavery and human trafficking and National Referral Mechanism toolkit, with expert and lived experience input, to be incorporated into the planned child criminal exploitation toolkit laid out in the Action Plan. Additional research further exploring the barriers to identification of modern slavery and human trafficking in the context of child criminal exploitation, and including lived experience, should also be considered to further inform the development of the toolkit.

8. Key stakeholders in Northern Ireland often lack the knowledge and awareness needed to be able to effectively refer children to the National Referral Mechanism, yet evidence from elsewhere, such as Scotland, shows the impact of specialist training in local settings. While training should be implemented separately through the Child Criminal Exploitation Action Plan and Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy, to increase understanding of the issue, and confidence in the NRM process, the UK Home Office should consider resourcing an in-depth training and awareness raising programme, combining cross-cutting issues of modern slavery and human trafficking and child criminal exploitation, for first responders, and those who are likely to encounter child criminal exploitation across Northern Ireland. This training should be designed and delivered by local organisations and include separate modules on: (a) National Referral Mechanism processes, safeguards and benefits, and (b) understanding and identifying child criminal exploitation.
9. Addressing child criminal exploitation in the context of modern slavery and human trafficking requires specialist knowledge and insight. Elsewhere, investing resourcing into key modern slavery and human trafficking 'champions' has proved to be a useful, cost-effective and strategic approach to develop subject specialists who can act as points of contact. To develop specialist expertise, awareness and capacity for response, the Departments of Health, Justice and Education should consider investing in child criminal exploitation/modern slavery and human trafficking champions within regions, bodies and sectors, who are equipped to act as subject focal points for their respective organisation.



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# Annex 1 – Definitions

## Child Criminal Exploitation

The Northern Ireland multi-agency Action Plan to address CCE, defines the issue as, *“Child criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse which occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity. The exploitation may be through violence or the threat of violence but may also appear to be transactional and in the context of perceived relationships and friendships. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears to be consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact. It can also occur through the use of technology and social media. The criminal exploitation of children and young people can include being exploited into storing drugs or weapons, drug dealing, theft, violence, intimidation, vandalism, forced labour and other forms of criminality through grooming by people that children and young people trust or look up to”.*

## County Lines

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) define county lines as “a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.”

## First Responder

A first responder organisation is an authority that is authorised by the Home Office to refer a potential victim of modern slavery and human trafficking into the National Referral Mechanism. Current first responder organisations in Northern Ireland are:

- The Police Service of Northern Ireland
- Certain parts of the UK Home Office:
  - UK Visas and Immigration
  - Border Force
  - Immigration Enforcement
- Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA)
- Health and social care trusts (HSCNI)

- Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid
- Independent Child Guardian Service (Barnardo's)
- Youth Work Alliance

## Human Trafficking

### International Definition:

The Palermo Protocol defines trafficking in Article 3 using a three-element framework focused on the 1) act; 2) means; and 3) purpose, as follows:

- a. "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs"
- b. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used;
- c. The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons" even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;
- d. "Child" shall mean any person under eighteen years of age."

### Northern Ireland

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 defines Slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour as follows:

1 – A person ("A") commits an offence if—

- a. A holds another person ("B") in slavery or servitude and the circumstances are such that A knows or ought to know that B is held in slavery or servitude, or
- b. A requires B to perform forced or compulsory labour and the circumstances are such that A knows or ought to know that B is being required to perform forced or compulsory labour.

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 defines human trafficking as follows:

2—

1. A person (“A”) commits an offence if A arranges or facilitates the travel of another person (“B”) with a view to B being exploited.
2. A may in particular arrange or facilitate B’s travel by recruiting B, transporting or transferring B, harbouring or receiving B, or transferring or exchanging control over B.

## Scotland

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation Scotland Act 2015 defines the (1) Offence of human trafficking as follows:

1. A person commits an offence if the person—
  - a. takes a relevant action, and
  - b. does so with a view to another person being exploited.
2. In this Part, “relevant action” means an action which is any of the following—
  - a. the recruitment of another person,
  - b. the transportation or transfer of another person,
  - c. the harbouring or receiving of another person,
  - d. the exchange or transfer of control over another person, or
  - e. the arrangement or facilitation of any of the actions mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (d).
3. It is irrelevant whether the other person consents to any part of the relevant action.
4. For the purposes of subsection (1), a person takes a relevant action with a view to another person being exploited only if—
  - a. the person intends to exploit the other person (in any part of the world) during or after the relevant action, or
  - b. the person knows or ought to know the other person is likely to be exploited (in any part of the world) during or after the relevant action.
5. An offence under this section is to be known as the offence of human trafficking.



## National Referral Mechanism (NRM)

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK's framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

The NRM has a two-stage decision-making process for identifying potential victims of modern slavery (a term that includes any form of human trafficking, slavery, servitude or forced labour). The first stage is the Reasonable Grounds (RG) decision, which should be made within 5 working days of a potential victim being referred to the NRM. The RG decision is a "decision taken by the competent authorities as to whether the decision maker agrees there are reasonable grounds to believe, based on all available general and specific evidence but falling short of conclusive proof, that a person is a victim of modern slavery." A positive RG entitles a person to a reflection period of at least 30 days to receive specialist support and assistance. The second stage Conclusive Grounds (CG) decision should be made no sooner than 45 days after the RG decision and is made on the 'balance of probabilities' threshold. Both the RG and CG determinations are made by the Single Competent Authority (SCA) and Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority (IECA) which both sit within the Home Office.

Individuals who are recognised as a potential victim of modern slavery through the NRM have access to specialist tailored support, which may include access to advice, accommodation, protection and independent emotional and practical help. In Northern Ireland individuals will receive support for at least 45 days while their case is considered. Support providers will assess each potential victim to determine what support is most appropriate.

In Northern Ireland the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill was passed by Royal Assent in March 2022. The Act will improve services for victims of trafficking and exploitation beyond the 45 days specified in the 2015 act, providing support for an additional 12 months.



## Annex 2 – List of figures

- Figure 1:** Research survey respondents represented per sector.
- Figure 2:** Number of child referrals to the NRM in Northern Ireland reporting exploitation taking place overseas, within the UK (Northern Ireland), or within the UK and overseas.
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- Figure 4:** The number of child NRM referrals made in Northern Ireland (2104-2024) per nationality.
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- Figure 8:** Number of respondents stating the NRM as a useful mechanism for supporting potential and actual victims of CCE.
- Figure 9:** Percentage of HSCNI respondents when asked, “Who do you think has the main responsibility for identifying and responding to child criminal exploitation (CCE)?”
- Figure 10:** Percentage of PSNI/Law Enforcement respondents when asked, “Who do you think has the main responsibility for identifying and responding to child criminal exploitation (CCE)?”

# MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS

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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.

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