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

A Protocol

University of Nottingham Rights Lab

UK BME ANTI-SLAVERY NETWORK

MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS | POLICY & EVIDENCE CENTRE
Led by the University of Oxford

A Rapid, Realist-Informed Review of Safehouse Provision for Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

A Protocol

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The Rights Lab

The Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham is the world's largest, leading group of modern slavery researchers. Through our four research programmes, we deliver new and cutting-edge research that provides rigorous data, evidence and discoveries for the global antislavery effort. Our impact team provides an interface between the Rights Lab research programmes and civil society, business and government, and our INSPIRE project elevates survivor-informed research as a key part of knowledge production to help end slavery. Read more about the Rights Lab at https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/index.aspx.

BASNET

The UK BME Anti-Slavery Network (BASNET), a project of AFRUCA – Safeguarding Children, champions race equality, diversity, and inclusion in the UK's anti-trafficking and anti-slavery sector. As a collective of organisations serving Black and Ethnic Minority communities, we are dedicated to combating modern slavery and human trafficking through collaboration, advocacy, and research. Our mission is to eradicate exploitation and ensure the protection and well-being of those affected. BASNET focuses on Policy, Research, and Capacity Building as key drivers for achieving racial equity and inclusion in the sector. Read more about BASNET at https://bmeantislavery.org/.

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC) was created by the investment of public funding to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of laws and policies designed to address it. Read more about the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC at www.modernslaverypec.org.

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Funding

Content Note

This report does not overtly mention any explicit or sensitive topics. However, discussion will refer to subjects related to modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation.

Terminology

Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking and Exploitation

Modern slavery and human trafficking are crimes involving the violation of human, migrant and labour rights. Under the Modern Slavery Act (HM Government, 2015) "modern slavery" serves as an umbrella term encompassing the offences of human trafficking, as well as slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. Although widely adopted in practice in the UK, there remains considerable scholarly and practitioner debate regarding the use of the term modern slavery to describe the spectrum of human exploitation within the Act. As this report concerns care and support provision for survivors within the UK, it has adopted the UK legislative terminology of "modern slavery" but recognises the live and legitimate debate about what is and should be included in the term. Exploitation, in this context, refers to the extreme manipulation of an individual by another for profit or personal gain (UN, 2017). It can take several forms and includes sexual exploitation, forced labour, criminal exploitation (e.g. county lines activities), home based exploitation (e.g. cuckooing) and domestic servitude.

Victim and Survivor

Most organisations and academics in the UK anti-slavery sector refer to individuals who have experienced modern slavery and/or human trafficking as "survivors". However, it should be noted that "victim" and "potential victim" are used within some academic papers, reports and official UK Government documentation, when referring to a survivor's formal identification status. The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre (2024) framing modern slavery guide suggests

that the term "lived experience" is an inclusive term and is increasingly used across the anti-slavery sector. Whilst the preferred terminology in this report is "survivor" and/or "person with lived experience"; "victim" and/or "potential victim" may be used when referring to sources or quoting individuals directly.

Recovery

Recovery in this report draws on the definitions of "personal" (as opposed to "clinical") recovery from the mental health literature. Anthony (1993: 527) defines personal recovery as:

> *"a deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills and/or roles" and as "a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even within the limitations caused by illness".*

In this context, the goal of services is to support individuals to live as well as possible. A key insight from this perspective is that living well involves more than symptom amelioration, but also addressing psychological and social needs, supporting self-management and building individual and community resilience (Slade et al, 2014). This understanding is relevant to work with survivors of modern slavery, who may have mental health symptoms (e.g. those related to trauma) but also a range of other psychological (e.g. self-identity), social (e.g. anticipated and experienced discrimination) and cultural challenges (e.g. dislocation).

Protocol Registration

This protocol has been registered with PROSPERO 2025: CRD420250655123.

Executive Summary

Introduction: Adequate housing is a human right enshrined in international law. The potential for housing to address health inequalities and promote wellbeing has been highlighted for several underserved groups such as those with mental health problems, refugees or have experienced intimate partner violence. The Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set (Janassari et al. 2024) identifies that for those who have experienced modern slavery and human trafficking, safe and secure accommodation is one of seven core outcomes to support recovery. However, there is emerging evidence that safehouse accommodation is not always experienced positively by survivors. Further exploration is required to identify for whom and in what circumstances does safehouse accommodation promote recovery (or not) for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking. This paper outlines a protocol for a rapid, realist review which aims to explore the active ingredients and contextual factors of safehouse provision.

Methods: The overall approach to the review is informed by the five stages outlined by Saul et al. (2013): (1) research question development and preliminary programme theory; (2) search strategy; (3) document selection and appraisal; (4) data extraction, analysis and synthesis; and (5) dissemination of findings. In addition to academic literature, grey sources such as NGO reports, policy documents and survivor led publications will also be included. To supplement the literature review, "real-world" data will be collected from stakeholders via a survey of practitioners and focus groups with survivors. Ethical approval will be obtained for the focus groups and survey. No other aspects of the review require approval.

Dissemination: The review results will be reported according to the Realist and Meta-narrative Evidence Synthesis: Evolving Standards (RAMESES) quality and reporting standards (Wong et al. 2013). A full report and research summary will be prepared for the funder: the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre. Other written outputs will be developed for academic, practitioner, policy and survivor audiences. In addition, an end of project webinar will take place to share findings. Roundtable discussions with key beneficiaries such as survivor leaders, statutory and non-statutory safehouse providers, policymakers, practitioners working in safehouse accommodation, oversight bodies and other academics will also be held.

Background

Survivors of modern slavery have often experienced extreme violence and psychological abuse, resulting in a range of complex short-, medium- and long-term health and social care needs. To meet its obligations under ECAT (European Convention Against Trafficking), the Government in 2009 instigated the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as the route for identifying and supporting survivors' post-exploitation. Currently, the support component of the NRM is administered by the Salvation Army via the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC). The Salvation Army subcontracts to 13 different organisations across the UK to provide direct support to survivors. A core part of the MSVCC provision is the entitlement to accommodation and in particular safehouse accommodation for those assessed to be eligible. In addition to safehouse accommodation funded via the MSVCC, accommodation may also be delivered outside of the official support mechanisms for those survivors who (1) need support prior to entering the NRM; (2) have left the NRM; (3) do not want to access support via the NRM; and (4) are assessed to be in receipt of safe, secure and appropriate accommodation (e.g. local authority accommodation or asylum accommodation).

Increasingly seen as a commodity, adequate housing is a human right enshrined in international law and relevant to all states (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (2014) specifies that the right to adequate housing should not be interpreted narrowly:

> *"rather it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity"*.

The right to adequate housing contains freedoms and entitlements. Freedoms include protection against forced evictions, the arbitrary destruction and demolition of a person's home; the right to be free from arbitrary interference with one's home, privacy and family; the right to choose where to live/reside and freedom of movement (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). Entitlements include security of tenure; housing, land and property restitution; equal and non-discriminatory access to adequate housing; and participation in housing-related decision-making at the national and community level (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). Bonnefoy (2007: 413) summarises this by defining adequate housing as having:

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

Housing is increasingly recognised as an upstream intervention with the potential to tackle health inequalities. For example, Yakobovich et al. (2022) note that safe, accessible and affordable housing options from emergency shelters to permanent supportive accommodation are crucial to a holistic IPV (Intimate Partner Violence) response strategy. Individuals with serious mental health problems and homelessness, have been found to benefit from Housing First interventions which prioritise stable housing with clinical and social support services linked to them (Barnett et al., 2022). Poor living conditions were found to adversely affect asylum seekers mental health, with some types of accommodation more detrimental than others (Spira et al. 2025). Collective housing and detention were associated with the highest rates of self-harm; whereas private and community accommodation were better alternatives that could promote wellbeing (Spira et al. 2025). Spira et al (2025) propose three themes to explain why housing impacts asylum seeker mental health: lack of autonomy; feeling unsafe; and lack of support.

Within the modern slavery sphere, the Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set (MS COS) (Janassari et al. 2024) has safe and secure accommodation as one of seven core outcomes to support survivor recovery and reintegration. A lack of suitable accommodation was associated with homelessness and poverty which can increase the risk of exploitation and re-trafficking (Janassari et al., 2024). However, there is emerging evidence that safehouse accommodation is not always experienced positively by survivors. BASNET (2024) identified several issues within statutory safehouses in England and Wales that affected survivor wellbeing including: discrimination by staff; poor living conditions; unclear or missing complaints procedures; and sexual harassment. BASNET (2024) also noted the lack of research looking at safehouses in terms of what works (or not) in terms of promoting survivors' recovery.

This rapid review adopts a realist informed approach to undertake an in-depth exploration of the evidence-base related to safehouse accommodation for survivors of modern slavery. It seeks to answer the following research question: *"for whom and in what circumstances do safehouses promote (or not) recovery for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking?"* To achieve this the following objectives will be addressed:

(1) understand how safehouses can work to provide safe, person-centred and appropriate support for survivors.

(2) clarify when, in what contexts and for whom they are most likely to be supportive.

This review does not assume a priori that safehouse accommodation is a good thing for all survivors. By asking for whom and in what circumstances they work, this review will also investigate for whom

and in what circumstances they do not. Initial, scoping searches of PROSPERO, Google Scholar and academic databases have not identified any similar reviews currently being undertaken.

Methodology

Traditional systematic reviews often take a deterministic and linear approach to assessing the evidence base by asking "does A lead to B?" (an effectiveness review) or "is A acceptable or meaningful to a particular group in a particular context? "(a qualitative review). This narrow focus can result in a limited number of studies being included. When there is a lack of evidence to include, systematic reviews can often be inconclusive or make vague recommendations that an intervention works "to some extent" and "sometimes" (Pawson et al. 2004). Pawson et al. (2005) suggest that a realist review aims to provide practical guidance to practitioners and policymakers on how to alter the context or resources so that mechanisms are triggered to produce the desired outcomes for complex programmes. In summary, a realist review asks, "what is about A that results in B happening for whom and in what circumstances?" (Bhaskar, 2008).

Realist evaluation consists of testing programme theories, using evidence obtained as part of the review process. Programme theories are hypothetical statements that describe how a programme, service or intervention works to produce outcomes. This review will investigate the theory that safehouse accommodation works for some survivors of modern slavery in some circumstances. Initial programme theories are developed from the literature as "if… then" and "if… then… leading to…" statements. For example, if X is in place, then Y happens. The process of extracting data from the literature will consist of identifying the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes (CMOs) for safehouse accommodation and proposing explanations for how these interact. Jagosh et al. (2022) summarises these three elements as:

> *"context is the backdrop of programmes, whereas mechanism is how stakeholders respond to resources. Outcome is measurable impact at the behavioural, clinical or system level."*

Instead of investigating the safehouses themselves, a realist synthesis investigates the proposed theories (CMOs) which offer explanations of what works, for whom and in what situations. The objective is to explain how a complex programme or intervention such as a safehouse works, or does not, in specific contexts.

A realist approach to evidence synthesis entails taking the view that all data sources are *"potentially fallible, limited and subjective by their very nature"* (Jagosh, 2019). Therefore, insights can be found in studies using a range of different methods, as well as opinion articles, editorials and the grey literature (e.g. reports by NGOs, blog posts etc). This allows reviewers to find "nuggets" (Pawson, 2006) of wisdom that can provide insights into the underlying causal mechanisms of a complex intervention –

in this case safehouses. This approach is supported by arguments made by survivors and lived experience advocates regarding epistemic justice, which state literature reviews should contain a broad range of evidence as lived experience is just as valid a form of knowledge as research. Integrating different perspectives into the review process (e.g. lived experience, practice-based knowledge) also enables deeper inferential insights to be made regarding what could work as well as what does work.

A rapid realist review is considered "*robust but not comprehensive*" (Saul et al., 2013). An essential part of this approach is the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders to suggest evidence to be included, check emerging insights and fill in gaps with practitioner and lived expertise. Whilst Saul et al. (2013) suggests the inclusion of an expert panel, this review will take a multi-method approach to engaging with the widest group of stakeholders and therefore mitigate the risk that significant areas are missed. This will include roundtable discussions with key stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, safehouse providers), seeking evidence from the widest sources and embedding lived and learnt experience data into the review process (see below for methods). Data sources for inclusion could include NGO reports, Government reports, blog posts, commentaries and opinion articles.

Ethical approval from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Nottingham will be obtained for the survivor focus groups and practitioner questionnaire. The review is designed to be completed within 4 months.

Methods

The traditional data source for realist reviews is secondary data from published documents. For example, empirical studies, reports and evaluations. However, Kantilal et al. (2020) note that:

> "*where interventions are widely implemented combining real-world experience with published data could provide clearer insights into the mechanisms that operate, in particular contexts to produce outcomes.*"

To capture "real-world" data an online survey will be developed and distributed to practitioners working in safe houses in the UK. In addition, two focus groups with survivors will be conducted using realist informed interview techniques.

Practitioner Survey

An online survey will be developed to capture practitioner experiences of providing support within statutory and non-statutory safehouses in the UK. The survey will be hosted on the Qualtrics platform, and the link will be distributed via email and social media. The survey will be realist informed and develop insights highlighted by the literature review. Survey questions will be both open and closed, producing qualitative and quantitative data. Participants will be recruited via safehouse provider organisations, regional anti-slavery partnerships, the Human Trafficking Foundation Newsletter and social media.

Potential topics for inclusion in the survey include service design, oversight arrangements, governance, support provision, population receiving support and details of what works well or not and why. Completion of the survey will be voluntary. Responses to the open questions will be analysed qualitatively. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarise the closed responses.

Lived Experience Focus Groups

Two focus groups will be conducted to explore survivor experiences of residing in safehouse accommodation. Each focus group will have a maximum of 6 participants (total participants: 12) and will be facilitated by BASNET. Participants will be recruited by BASNET from their networks. A purposive sampling approach will ensure a diversity of experiences and geographical locales are represented within the focus groups. The focus groups will explore the aspects of safehouse provision that help and hinder survivor wellbeing and recovery. In addition, they will also explore what the ideal provision would look like and how this aligns with survivor experiences.

Focus groups will be delivered on MS Teams and with consent they will be recorded and an automated transcript generated. Once the transcript has been checked for accuracy and anonymised the recording will be deleted. Framework analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) will be used to both inductively and deductively identify themes.

Literature Review Stages

The overall approach to the review is informed by the five stages outlined by Saul et al. (2013): research question development and preliminary programme theory; search strategy; document selection and appraisal; data extraction, analysis and synthesis; and dissemination of findings.

Stage 1: Research question development and preliminary programme theory

In March 2024 project partner BASNET published a report titled "The Safe House is Not Safe". This explored issues which had been raised by survivors in other fora to BASNET with regards to the accommodation offered within statutory provision in England and Wales. Through group consultations with 13 lived experience experts, the report outlined 4 key concerns to survivors:

(1) Discrimination by staff based on survivors' race, gender, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation.
(2) Instances of sexual exploitation and harassment were reported, raising concerns about residents' safety.
(3) Structural defects, rat infestations and the absence of safety protocols indicating that properties were not maintained to a good standard.
(4) Poor complaint handling, for example complaints not followed up consistently and survivors feeling victimised when raising concerns.

Within their report BASNET (2024) outline the need for further academic study in this area:

"*recognising the gravity of the issues, we also expect that a more rigorous, academic and scientific investigation is conducted to thoroughly examine the experiences of individuals with lived experiences of human trafficking and modern slavery who are in the care of government funded safe houses*".

Stakeholder engagement work with the Rights Lab Survivor Research Advisory Board (SRAB) has consistently identified housing and accommodation to be a neglected area of support provision. SRAB members have highlighted that whilst "healthy housing" can promote positive mental and physical wellbeing and reduces the risk of re-exploitation; survivors can reside in unsafe environments which present hazards to health such as mould and damp. Geographically accommodation may be in high crime and pollution areas and fail to offer survivors the respite they need to recover from their experiences.

In addition, an initial scope of the literature using google scholar was also completed. This in combination with the BASNET report and other engagement activities was used to develop preliminary programme theories to support the literature search. Preliminary programme theories are tentative explanations of the of the subject matter, which will be tested (as far as possible) by the evidence collected through the review process.

Stage 2: Search strategy

A multi-stage search strategy will be used to identify relevant literature for inclusion in the review. This will comprise of the following:

(1) An electronic search of bibliographic databases (including those focussed on grey literature sources).
(2) Limited Cluster searching using pearl citations.
(3) Expert recommendations.
(4) Website searches of relevant UK and International Organisations.
(5) Call for evidence distributed via the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre, project partner BASNET, the Human Trafficking Foundation newsletter and social media.
(6) Contacting safehouse providers for relevant documentation such as contracts and complaints processes.

Unlike a systematic review, searches are not necessarily exhaustive but follow the principles of theoretical saturation, ceasing when the programme theories are deemed to be sufficiently explained, supported or refuted by the evidence (including practitioner and survivor insights). Additional, targeted searches may be undertaken to explore emerging mechanisms or apparent gaps in the evidence (e.g. to ensure diversity in geographical spread).

Two key concepts have been identified for the literature search: modern slavery and safehouse accommodation. In a rapid realist review, search terms are recommended to be identified collaboratively (Saul et al. 2013). Search terms in other related systematic reviews (i.e. reviews focussed on modern slavery or safehouse accommodation in other populations) will serve as a starting point (see appendix 2) with other synonyms identified through brainstorming. The University of Nottingham Library Support Service will be consulted to assist with refining the search strategy. Subject headings relevant to each database will also be used (where this functionality is available) and appropriate terms/phrases identified in this way will be added to the synonyms list for keyword searching in databases without subject heading functionality.

To accelerate the review process, reverse chronology quotas (focusing on the most recent and relevant studies first) and limits to the database used will be implemented (Klerings et al. 2023). The search dates will be limited from 2015 to present to reflect the need for contemporary data. Title, abstract and keyword searching will be completed for each synonym list, separated by "AND"

operators in six databases: PsychINFO (Ovid), CINAHL Plus (EBSCO), Medline (Ovid), Web of Science (Core Collection), SCOPUS and ASSIA (ProQuest).

To be eligible for inclusion in the review, literature will need to be published in English; focus on working age adults (age 18 to 65 years); and be studies investigating/grey literature reporting experiences and outcomes related to safehouse accommodation specific to survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking. Literature will be excluded if they focus exclusively on children and young people (under the 18 years) or older adults (over 65 years) or are empirical studies or grey literature reporting survivor experiences in safehouse accommodation which is not specific to modern slavery and human trafficking, for example in asylum or IPV accommodation.

Stage 3: Document selection and appraisal

Literature in realist reviews is assessed for relevance and rigour and is determined by asking first "does the document contain any data that can contribute to developing or testing theory?" (relevance) and second "are the methods (if any) utilised to generate the relevant data trustworthy and credible?" (rigour). Selection and appraisal of the evidence is a two-step process:

(1) Titles and abstracts will be screened and full texts sought for those deemed potentially relevant for inclusion. A total of 10% of the sources will be screened by a second reviewer. Reviewing a sub-sample is recommended when resources do not allow for a second person to screen the complete set of titles and abstracts. The process helps to ensure that studies are not being missed or included incorrectly (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2005).

(2) The full texts of the retained set of documents will be obtained and screened. Again 10% of the sample will be checked by a second person for consistency.

Stage 4: Data extraction, analysis and synthesis

Data describing basic study demographics and characteristics will be recorded in MS Excel. In addition, data will be extracted to build programme theories using an extraction template, aiming to find information that helps identify contextual conditions and mechanisms that facilitate supportive safehouse accommodation (outcome) for survivors of modern slavery. Examples that may be extracted include:

(1) **Contextual factors:** the type of accommodation offered (single sex, mixed), who the accommodation provider is (NGO, private sector, state), capacity of the safehouse to accept referrals, geographical location and eligibility to receive services.

(2) **Mechanisms:** the staffing within the safehouse, types of support available and how survivors respond to this.

(3) **Outcomes:** improved survivor mental health, feelings of safety and being connected into the local community.

Once these have been extracted, the aim is to identify recurrent patterns of contexts and outcomes in the data and to explain these through the mechanisms by which they occurred. Initially these will be constructed as "if…then…" and "if …then…leading to" statements. Once this has been completed for all sources, the complete set of statements will be collated and where possible combined. Similarities will then be looked at across the group of statements – referred to as "demi-regularities" (Jagosh et al. 2012). These will then be grouped into themes and a CMO (context, mechanisms, outcome) configuration will be developed for each theme. Data from the focus groups and questionnaires will also be incorporated into this analysis. Across all the data collected (evidence review, focus groups and questionnaire) further review will take place to actively identify further information supporting, refuting or changing these configurations. The final stage of data synthesis will involve presenting preliminary findings to key stakeholders for validation. This is to ensure the findings reflect the experiences of survivors, practitioners and policymakers and to identify any gaps.

Stage 5: Dissemination of findings

The review results will be reported according to the Realist and Meta-narrative Evidence Synthesis: Evolving Standards (RAMESES) quality and reporting standards (Wong et al. 2013). A full report and research summary will be prepared for the funder: the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre. Other written outputs will be developed for academic, practitioner, policy and survivor audiences. In addition, an end of project webinar will take place to share findings. Roundtable discussions with key beneficiaries such as survivor leaders, statutory and non-statutory safehouse providers, policymakers, practitioners working in safehouse accommodation, oversight bodies and other academics will also be held.

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