

From Invisibility to Justice: Survivor Experiences of the Criminal Justice System Following Modern Slavery

Research Report

September 2026

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Research by



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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank everyone who contributed to this research. In particular, we are deeply grateful to the survivors who generously shared their experiences and insights. Their openness and willingness to participate made this research possible.

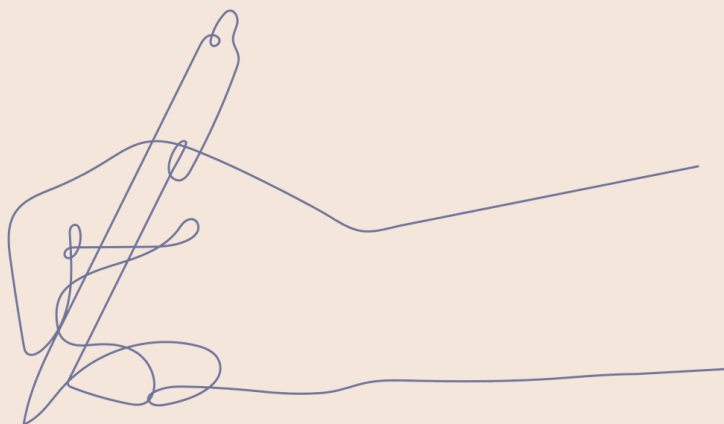
We also extend our sincere thanks to Causeway for their support in facilitating participant recruitment and engagement, and to members of the PEC Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP) for their guidance, expertise and invaluable contributions throughout the project.

Funding

This research is funded and supported by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC), University of Oxford, which in turn is funded and actively supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, the University of Oxford, or the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Content Note

While this report does not include graphic descriptions of participants' experiences of abuse, it discusses potentially sensitive issues relating to modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation.



Terminology

Modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation

The term *modern slavery* is used throughout this report in line with the terminology adopted within UK legislation and policy. Under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, modern slavery encompasses slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking. Modern slavery and human trafficking involve serious forms of exploitation and violations of human, labour and migrant rights.

The term is widely used across UK policy and practice, although its scope and application remain subject to ongoing academic and practitioner debate. We recognise these debates and that *modern slavery* does not necessarily capture the complexity or diversity of experiences falling within this broad category. Nevertheless, it is used here because the research is specifically concerned with how existing UK legal and criminal justice responses operate in relation to people who have experienced these forms of exploitation.

Throughout the report, *exploitation* is used to refer more broadly to circumstances in which a person is subjected to coercion, control or abuse for the benefit of another. Exploitation can take different and sometimes overlapping forms, including labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and criminal exploitation.

Victim, survivor and lived experience

There is no single term universally preferred by people who have experienced modern slavery, and the language used to describe those experiences can carry different legal, policy and personal meanings. Throughout this report, we primarily use *survivor* or *person/people with lived experience* when referring to people who have experienced modern slavery.

The terms *victim* and *potential victim* are also used where they have a particular legal, policy or procedural meaning. This includes discussion of formal identification through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), criminal justice processes and existing policy or documentary sources. These terms are also retained where they are used directly by participants or within quoted material.

Importantly, the use of *victim* within a legal or procedural context is not intended to define an individual's identity or imply passivity. Equally, *survivor* should not be understood as imposing a particular interpretation of someone's experience or recovery. Where possible, the report seeks to remain sensitive to the language used by participants themselves.

Practitioner

The term *practitioner* is used throughout this report to refer broadly to professionals working across criminal justice, statutory and support services whose roles may bring them into contact with people who have experienced modern slavery. This includes, where relevant, police officers, prosecutors, legal professionals, caseworkers, advocates and other frontline professionals. Where findings relate to a particular professional group or organisation, this is specified.



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1. Introduction and Policy Context

This report is the first in a series of three reports arising from the 'Legal Enforcement of Modern Slavery' research project (2024-2026). Following a series of workshops with policymakers and practitioners to identify research needs and priorities, the researchers focused on:

Workstream One, Survivor Engagement:

Working with people with lived experience of modern slavery in the UK to understand their experiences of the criminal justice process and what a successful criminal justice outcome looks like.

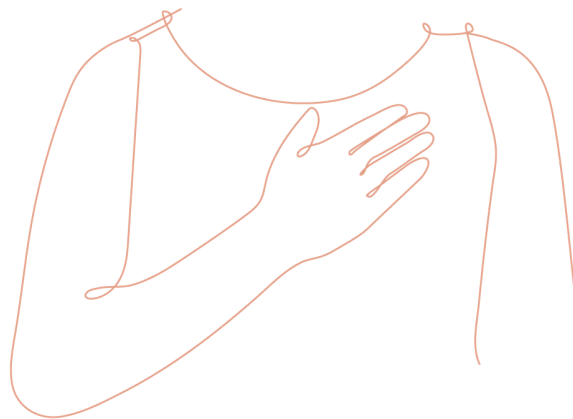
Workstream Two, Civil and Ancillary Orders:

Investigating the use and impact of Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders and Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 as alternative or complementary mechanisms to prosecution.

Workstream Three, The Statutory Defence:

Analysing how the statutory defence, which is intended to protect victims who have been compelled to commit offences as a consequence of their exploitation, is understood and applied in practice.

This report explores survivors' experiences of the criminal justice system and examines what meaningful justice looks like from a survivor perspective. It intentionally centres survivors' voices, recognising that insight into their experiences of justice is fundamental to understanding how the system can be improved.



1.1 Modern Slavery and the Criminal Justice Response

Modern slavery remains a significant and evolving challenge in the United Kingdom, encompassing slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking, the latter including sexual, labour and criminal exploitation, domestic servitude and other forms of exploitation characterised by coercion, control and abuse (Modern Slavery Act, 2015). Although these forms of exploitation differ in how they present, they share the abuse of power for financial or personal gain and frequently result in profound physical, psychological and social harm (Murphy, 2018; Schwarz & Williams-Woods, 2022; Nicholson et al., 2023). Modern slavery occupies an uneasy position across safeguarding and criminal justice systems, requiring responses that must simultaneously recognise and protect people subjected to exploitation whilst investigating and prosecuting serious criminal offending. These functions are not inherently incompatible, but survivors' experiences raise important questions about what happens when protective and enforcement priorities do not align in practice (Heys et al., 2022). Responding effectively therefore requires coordinated action across policing, statutory agencies, health services and the voluntary sector, bringing together responsibilities for safeguarding, identification, support and criminal justice.

Despite this, modern slavery continues to be approached primarily through a criminal justice lens, influenced by Home Office ownership of the policy area and a corresponding emphasis on investigation, prosecution and immigration enforcement rather than independent, safeguarding-led support (Such et al., 2020; Fraser, 2024). Consequently, success is often measured through National Referral Mechanism (NRM) outcomes and prosecution rates, as opposed to survivors' experiences of safety, recovery and justice (Brewster and Wright, 2026).

The Modern Slavery Act (MSA) 2015 represented a significant development in the UK's response by consolidating offences relating to modern slavery, strengthening penalties, introducing civil prevention measures, establishing the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and creating the Section 45 statutory defence for victims compelled to offend (Wright et al., 2024). Alongside the Act, the NRM provides the framework for identifying and supporting potential victims, whilst police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and specialist support providers each play distinct roles throughout criminal justice processes. Since its introduction, considerable policy attention has focused on improving victim identification, increasing NRM referrals, strengthening multi-agency working and improving prosecutions. Nevertheless, partnerships remain uneven across the country, often constrained by fragmented funding and inconsistent national policy (Davies et al., 2026:2).

Whilst NRM referrals have continued to rise, prosecutions and convictions have remained comparatively low, exposing a widening gap between identifying victims and holding

perpetrators to account (Greenslade, 2024; Wright et al., 2024). These indicators provide valuable information about system activity but reveal comparatively little about how survivors experience the criminal justice process, the factors that encourage or discourage engagement, or whether justice is experienced as safe, fair and supportive. Survivors frequently encounter prolonged decision-making, insecure housing, limited access to healthcare, legal uncertainty and fear of immigration enforcement, all of which may undermine recovery whilst simultaneously reducing willingness to engage with criminal justice agencies (Greenslade, 2024; Schwarz & Williams-Woods, 2022). More recently, Pajon (2026) argues that meaningful survivor engagement should be understood as both a safeguarding imperative and a criminal justice objective, demonstrating that participation in criminal justice processes is strengthened where responses prioritise safety, trust, communication and recovery alongside evidential goals.

This is particularly important given the well-established victim-offender overlap within modern slavery. Many survivors, particularly those subjected to criminal exploitation, first encounter the criminal justice system because of apparent offending, not recognised as victimisation, whilst others move through investigations occupying the dual position of victim and suspect (Gadd & Broad, 2018; Darby et al., 2026; Brewster & Wright, 2026). Consequently, experiences of justice are often shaped long before a case reaches court, beginning instead with decisions made during first contact, identification and investigation, where opportunities to recognise exploitation may be realised or missed (HMICFRS, College of Policing & IOPC, 2022; Eglen et al., 2024).

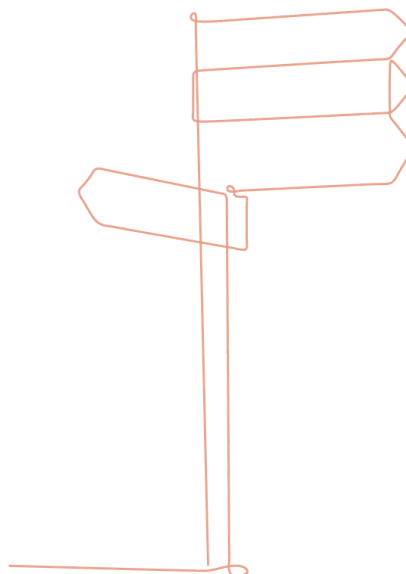
1.2 What we Already Know

An expanding body of research has moved beyond questions of legislation and prosecution to explore survivors' experiences of criminal justice processes. Across this literature, delayed recognition consistently emerges as one of the greatest barriers to effective responses (Eglen et al., 2024; Green & Heys, 2024; HMICFRS, College of Policing & IOPC, 2022). Opportunities to identify exploitation are frequently missed across policing, healthcare, education and wider statutory services because recognition remains shaped by assumptions about who constitutes a "typical" victim (Eglen et al., 2024; Green & Heys, 2024). Survivors who fall outside these expectations, including British nationals, men and those subjected to criminal exploitation, are consequently more likely to experience disbelief, delayed identification and criminalisation (Baxter, 2020; Brewster & Wright, 2026). Beyond recognition, repeated questioning, poor communication and lengthy delays have been associated with secondary victimisation and reduced engagement, whilst trauma-informed, survivor-centred practice characterised by consistent relationships, respectful communication and independent advocacy has been shown to strengthen trust and support recovery (Wright and Such, 2026). Emerging work on procedural justice similarly suggests that being listened to, treated fairly and afforded dignity may be as influential as legal outcomes in shaping survivors' understandings of justice (Hussemann et al., 2018).

1.3 Policy Developments and Remaining Evidence Gaps

These concerns are increasingly reflected within national policy. The Hidden Victims super-complaint concluded that, despite improvements, inconsistent identification, safeguarding and communication continued to discourage survivors from engaging with investigations, ultimately limiting opportunities to prosecute offenders (HMICFRS, College of Policing & IOPC, 2022). More recent guidance from the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, the CPS and the National Police Chiefs' Council has similarly emphasised survivor engagement, trauma-informed practice and improved multi-agency working, signalling a gradual shift towards recognising that effective criminal justice outcomes depend not only upon successful prosecutions but upon survivors feeling safe, supported and able to participate throughout the process and not just seen as a source of evidence (Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2025).

Despite this growing evidence base, important gaps remain. Existing research has largely examined identification, policing, victim support or recovery in isolation, with comparatively little attention given to survivors' experiences across the criminal justice journey as a whole (Brewster & Wright, 2026), or beyond the “cliff-edge” of support post-NRM outcome (Schwarz and Williams-Woods, 2022). Whilst survivor-defined understandings of justice have begun to receive greater attention (Fraser, 2024; Bond, 2025), much less is known about how these evolve throughout engagement with the criminal justice system or how survivors themselves believe responses should improve (Heys et al., 2022). Responding directly to these gaps, this report draws on qualitative interviews with survivors of modern slavery to explore experiences from first contact through engagement with statutory agencies, examine what justice means from a survivor perspective, and identify opportunities to strengthen policy and practice through survivors' own lived experience.



1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Study Aims and Research Questions

Specifically, the study aimed to:

- explore survivors' experiences of the criminal justice system;
- understand what justice means from a survivor perspective;
- identify barriers and facilitators to engagement; and
- develop recommendations for policy and practice.

To meet these aims, it focused on three key research questions:

1. How do survivors of modern slavery experience interactions with the criminal justice system, from initial identification through to investigation and prosecution?
2. In what ways do criminal justice processes (e.g. evidence gathering, court proceedings, sentencing) impact survivors' recovery, sense of justice, and trust in statutory systems?
3. What changes do survivors themselves identify as necessary for the criminal justice system to better safeguard, empower, and deliver justice for people with lived experience of modern slavery?

1.4.2 Data Collection

Fifteen adult survivors participated in semi-structured interviews between February and June 2026, with interviews lasting between 1-2 hours. Participants had experienced a range of forms of exploitation, including criminal, labour and sexual exploitation, and had engaged with different stages of the criminal justice system. Most were recruited through Causeway, a specialist third-sector organisation that supported survivors of modern slavery. Interviews conducted were online or by telephone according to participant preference.

1.4.3 Ethical and Trauma-Informed Approach

Ethical considerations informed every stage of the study, from its design through to reporting and knowledge exchange. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Hull Faculty of Arts, Cultures and Education Research Ethics Committee, with the study

also reviewed and informed by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre's Lived Experience Advisory Panel (LEAP). Consultation with the LEAP contributed to the development of participant-facing materials, interview schedules and wider study procedures, ensuring that the research was shaped by lived experience perspectives throughout and underpinned by a trauma-informed approach (Asquith et al., 2022; Alessi and Jahn, 2023). Attention was paid to avoiding extractive research practices, recognising survivors as experts by experience whose perspectives were central to understanding how criminal justice responses are experienced and how they might be improved.

1.4.4 Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). Analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, allowing emerging ideas to inform subsequent interviews whilst remaining consistent with the interview schedule. Deductive coding informed by the study's research questions was combined with inductive coding grounded in participants' accounts, allowing themes to develop iteratively through repeated engagement with the data. Initial coding and data management were supported using NVivo, whilst subsequent theme development, refinement and interpretation involved close manual engagement with transcripts, coding frameworks, analytic memos and cross-case comparison. Throughout analysis, particular emphasis was placed on maintaining participants' own language and interpretations, with themes refined through ongoing discussion within the research team. Testimonials are presented throughout the report using pseudonyms to preserve anonymity whilst illustrating the diversity and depth of survivors' experiences.

The remainder of the report presents the key themes identified through the analysis, interpreting survivors' accounts alongside the wider literature and policy evidence. The findings are organised around three interconnected stages that emerged from participants' experiences of the criminal justice journey: *Recognition* (how exploitation was identified, understood and responded to), *Navigation* (survivors' experiences of moving through criminal justice and wider statutory processes), and *Restoration* (what survivors understood justice, recovery and meaningful accountability to look like). Direct quotations are integrated throughout to foreground survivors' voices alongside the wider evidence base.

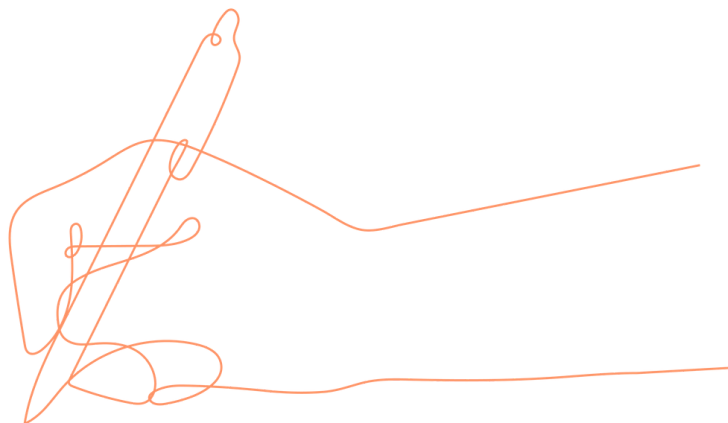
1.4.5 Strengths and Limitations

The qualitative design of this study prioritised depth and understanding of survivors' experiences rather than statistical representativeness. The study involved fifteen survivors of modern slavery who had experienced different forms of exploitation and had engaged with different stages of the criminal justice system. The aim was therefore not to

produce statistically representative findings, but to generate rich, in-depth insight into how criminal justice responses are experienced by survivors, and how those experiences shape understandings of justice, engagement and recovery.

Whilst the sample size was relatively modest, it is consistent with qualitative approaches that prioritise depth of understanding over breadth of coverages. Participants' accounts demonstrated a high degree of convergence across a number of key themes, including challenges relating to recognition, communication, delays, trust and recovery, despite differences in their experiences, and exploitation histories. The findings should not be interpreted as representative of all survivors of modern slavery. However, they provide important insight into recurring issues identified across participants' accounts and are considered alongside the wider evidence base discussed throughout this report.

The study's findings and recommendations were further informed through engagement with existing research and expertise through the PEC, including by experts with lived experience of modern slavery, to help situate participants' experiences within broader evidence and lived experience perspectives.



2. Finding: The Struggle to be Seen (Recognition)

For survivors of modern slavery, the criminal justice journey does not begin with an investigation, prosecution or court hearing. Instead, it begins at the make-or-break tipping point of first contact with statutory agencies, where practitioners make sense of who an individual is and what has happened to them. Whether survivors are recognised as victims of exploitation at this stage fundamentally shapes the support they receive, the protections afforded to them and their subsequent experiences of the criminal justice system. Gachanja and Williams argue that this first point of contact is “*a highly determinative factor shaping both their long-term recovery and willingness to participate in the justice process*” (Gachanja and Williams, 2023:16).

Across many forms of hidden abuse, it is often assumed that the hardest step toward recovery is asking for help. Participants' accounts challenge this assumption: asking for help did not necessarily result in their being recognised as a victim, nor alleviate trauma or assure safety. Survivors described repeated experiences of being viewed through the lens of offending, immigration status or credibility, with their exploitation remaining hidden beneath assumptions about who they were and why they had come to official attention. These findings reflect wider evidence that recognition is frequently shaped by predetermined stereotypes of modern slavery and trafficking victims (Eglen et al., 2024), and support arguments that recognition should be understood not as a single event but as a gradual, contested process requiring professionals to question first impressions and remain professionally curious (Lumley-Sapanski et al., 2024; Heys et al., 2022).

The following sections explore survivors' struggle to be seen by the criminal justice system.

2.1 Invisible Victims

Missed opportunities to recognise exploitation characterised many survivors' earliest encounters with statutory agencies. Several participants from this study reported having repeated contact with police, immigration officials and local authority services before they were identified as victims, whilst others remained unidentified despite attempts to communicate their experiences. For those criminally exploited, offending frequently obscured victimisation. Charlie described how repeated contact with police and local authority services focused solely on his behaviour, with little consideration of the exploitation underpinning it:

*"... it was just perpetrator, that's it... **Everyone is put in the perpetrator box immediately and the criminal justice system doesn't have the filters or systems to identify those [victimised] young people.**"*

Nathaniel described a similar experience following his arrest. Despite clear indicators of vulnerability, he recalled being treated as a serious, organised criminal rather than a young person in need of safeguarding:

"I was treated like if I was a kingpin, to be honest... I was heavily high on drugs when I was arrested... I looked like I was a user... They're just trying to hammer me down and get me to say stuff."

Participants did not describe these assumptions of criminality as isolated oversights; similar experiences were reported across police, local authority and immigration services, suggesting that failures of recognition were rooted in broader assumptions about offending, vulnerability and who is perceived to be a 'typical' victim of modern slavery (Raby and Chazal, 2022). These findings mirror wider critiques that recognition is shaped by socially constructed assumptions about who constitutes a "genuine" or "ideal" victim of modern slavery (Christie, 1986; Nelu, 2025). Those who do not conform to stereotypical expectations – for example, British nationals, men, individuals subjected to criminal exploitation, or those who have committed offences under coercion – are less likely to be recognised as victims and more likely to experience disbelief or criminalisation (Baxter, 2020; Forringer-Beal, 2022).

Misrecognition was not confined to survivors who had been criminally exploited. Participants also described assumptions based on immigration status, nationality and narrow understandings of coercion. Collette explained that police dismissed her experiences because she still possessed her passport and had signed an employment contract:

"they stated that they consider somebody who is exploited as somebody who doesn't have access to their travel documents. So, in my case, since I had travelling documents and I signed the contract... they said they consider it a civil matter... not criminal offences."

For Collette, the existence of apparently legitimate employment arrangements became central to how her account was interpreted. Possession of her identity documents and a signed contract appeared to be treated as evidence against exploitation, despite her account of coercion and control. Her experience illustrates the difficulty of recognising exploitation where indicators do not conform to more familiar assumptions, particularly where apparent consent or legitimate documentation may obscure the wider circumstances in which they operate. Similar assumptions emerged elsewhere, with several participants feeling that nationality, immigration status or personal circumstances shaped how their accounts were interpreted. Like Collette, Melissa believed professionals relied on stereotypes over individual accounts:

"... especially my background from where I'm from... They [professionals] don't listen for example to what I'm saying... They just go from stereotypes that they have created that they [people from my country] are all criminals from where I'm from."

Richie reflected that prevailing images of modern slavery left him largely invisible because he did not fit public or professional assumptions about who a victim should be: *"...they've got a picture in their mind... and it's not a British-born working class white man.... They picture some poor Pakistani girl... and that's not me".*

Participants emphasised that recognition could not always depend upon survivors being able to provide immediate corroborating evidence. Julia stressed the importance of listening to survivors' accounts even where evidence was not readily available:

"Just listen. No matter if they don't have proof of evidence, just listen and hear them out. Like hear their voice. Their voice is enough. Just hear them and make sure like you're able to come and give them justice."

Julia's account reinforces the importance of looking beyond narrow evidential expectations at first contact and creating opportunities for survivors' accounts to be heard (Gachanja & Williams, 2023; Yu et al., 2018).

Recognition was rarely described as a single moment, but as a gradual and often contested process that depended less on formal procedures or screening tools than on individual professionals willing to question first impressions. Those moments of recognition were consistently attributed to individual professional curiosity rather than the consistent operation of formal procedures. Participants recalled individual professionals who noticed something that *"didn't sit right"*, asked an additional question or took time to understand the wider circumstances surrounding apparent offending or vulnerability rather than treating what was immediately visible as the whole story. The concern is not that professional curiosity can replace formal identification mechanisms, but that recognition should not depend upon survivors happening to encounter an individual practitioner willing and able to look beyond the presenting issue. Reflecting on the solicitor who eventually recognised her exploitation, Alexandra explained:

"...it was the professional curiosity... just look at that little thing which is not sitting right... Don't forget to ask people how they are. Sometimes it takes that word... are you alright?... That can crack somebody."

Relying solely on disclosure was insufficient. Becoming visible required professionals to recognise signs of exploitation even when these were not immediately apparent, to look beyond apparent offending or immigration status, and to remain open to the possibility that the story before them was more complex than first appeared. These findings

resonate with Pajon's (2026) conclusion that effective early engagement begins with safeguarding, welfare and relationship-building rather than evidential questioning alone, creating the conditions in which exploitation can be recognised not dismissed.

2.2 Fear and Disclosure

Disclosure was described as far more complex for survivors than simply deciding whether to tell someone about their exploitation. It did not represent a straightforward route to protection, and instead was often experienced as a high-risk decision, shaped by previous experiences, ongoing threats and uncertainty about how statutory agencies would respond. Across interviews, survivors described carefully weighing the potential consequences of speaking out against the possibility of receiving help, with many concluding that remaining silent represented the safest option due to previous experiences of retaliation, disbelief or systemic failure (Heys et al., 2022). Fear therefore emerged not simply as an emotional response to exploitation, but as a rational response to the risks associated with disclosure itself.

Non-Disclosure as a rational response to risk

For many participants, silence reflected neither acceptance of abuse nor a reluctance to engage with the criminal justice system, but a deliberate strategy to protect themselves and those around them from further harm. The risks differed between participants; however, accounts consistently centred on retaliation, deportation, social stigma, or violence towards family members. These fears often extended beyond their own personal safety, and for some included relatives living overseas. Nicky explained that although police requested a formal witness statement, she felt unable to provide one because of explicit threats made against her family:

"when I lived with him, he said very clear to me, and I have said this to the police. He said "I have money, I have British. I have connection. If you dare to give my name to the police, then you and your family, they're going to pay for it"... And it's not the first time that they have killed or taken revenge to the family... I can't do this to my family."

Similarly, Richie described repeated threats directed towards his parents, explaining that the possibility of retaliation prevented him from seeking help whilst he remained under his exploiters' control: *"If you say anything to anybody... we can get down to your parents... with a shotgun."*

Disclosure therefore represented a decision whose consequences extended well beyond the survivor themselves. For others, immigration status became another mechanism through which disclosure was actively discouraged. Collette explained that her employer

repeatedly threatened to cancel her visa if she reported the exploitation, knowing that returning to her country of origin would expose both her and her daughters to significant danger:

"Because he kept on threatening... it's a matter of him clicking one button to the Home Office so that they cancel my visa and I will see myself and my daughters back in Africa. And now, knowing that I fled away from domestic abuse, I felt trapped... I couldn't report to the Home Office what was happening to me, because with the Home Office once you report they revoke the company licence, and if they revoke the company licence, I'll be given 60 days to look for another company to sponsor me."

Collette's story is sadly not a unique one; Chazal et al (2023) highlighted the heightened vulnerability of parent survivors, who face an additional complex layer of risk, prioritising their children above their own safety and therefore facing increased danger of further exploitation and abuse. Collette's account was echoed across interviews, as survivors described exploiters using threats of detention, imprisonment or deportation to maintain control, convincing them that approaching authorities would increase rather than reduce danger. Julia explained: *"They told me that when you report to the police, they're not going to do nothing. You are going to be jailed."*

These fears were reinforced when survivors later encountered immigration enforcement directly. Sonja recalled being detained during an immigration reporting appointment:

"The next time that I went there, they detained me. It was horrible... They said that they were deporting me that day... They took my phone, I couldn't talk to anybody, I couldn't even speak to my lawyer."

Nathaniel similarly described refusing to identify those exploiting him because he did not trust the police to protect his identity. His fear of retaliation was reinforced by his previous treatment:

"I wouldn't have snitched... I'm going to put myself at risk for racist ass police? No... How do I know you're not going to be sloppy enough for your paperwork and then somehow release my name? I'm dead... I don't trust you."

This fear was also reflected in the wider literature. The joint statutory investigation in response to Hestia's super-complaint explicitly confirmed *"fear of immigration enforcement action is a barrier to foreign national victims reporting crimes and engaging with the police"* (HMICFRS, COP & IOPC, 2022). Magugliani and colleagues found that many survivors actively refuse NRM referrals because they are fearful of it being used as a tool for immigration control and have limited trust in authorities to protect them from traffickers (2024). Victoria's prolonged uncertainty surrounding her status left her feeling

that she was “living on the fence”, unable to work, reunite with her children or establish whether she would be permitted to remain in the UK.

Through the interviews, it became clear that fear of immigration authorities was not based solely on misinformation provided by exploiters: it was reinforced through experiences of detention, reporting requirements and prolonged uncertainty about immigration status.

When disclosure did not lead to protection

For some participants, their fears were not hypothetical. Far from providing protection, disclosure resulted in further harm, reinforcing perceptions that statutory agencies were either unable or unwilling to safeguard them and that asking for help could increase, rather than reduce, their vulnerability.

Whilst many participants described fearing the consequences of disclosure, Alexandra's account illustrates how these fears were realised in practice. After being arrested alongside her exploiter, Alexandra disclosed that she was being exploited and expected the police to recognise her as a victim and remove her from the situation. Instead, she recalled being treated as an accomplice because she had been arrested with him. Trusting that she had “*done nothing wrong*”, she described feeling hopeful that the police would recognise what was happening:

“...I was 100% so happy... I just knew in my head that this is the way of God that now these people (police) are going to take me out of this situation.”

Those expectations were not realised. Alexandra explained that, following her release from custody, she was returned with her exploiter to the same address where she had disclosed she was being abused:

“when I was released, I was put in the same car with this person... then we were released to the... home address. And I had the beat of my life... I thought I might really die.”

Reflecting on the experience, she questioned how professionals could return her to the very environment she had identified as unsafe:

“I said [to the police officers] ‘do you mean you’re going to release me back to what I’m telling you, that I’m being held there, I’m being beaten, you know? Men come there, you know, they’ve aborted pregnancies several times. Are you telling me you’ll release [me back to that situation]...’ They said yes, because that’s the address where I live.”

Here, disclosure alone did not guarantee safety, nor protection. Alexandra had identified

the source and location of harm and explicitly questioned the decision to return her there, yet this did not translate into an effective safeguarding response. Alexandra's experience illustrates a disconnect between professionals hearing a disclosure and acting upon it; the address recorded as the place where she "lived" was the very location in which exploitation and violence was occurring. Recognition therefore matters not simply as a process of identifying exploitation, but because of what that recognition triggers in practice. Where disclosure does not lead to appropriate assessment and protective action, contact with statutory services may leave survivors no safer than before, and, in some circumstances, exposed to further harm.

Shame, stigma and the hidden burden of disclosure

Alongside external threats, participants described powerful internal barriers to disclosure. Feelings of shame, embarrassment and anticipated stigma frequently prevented them from discussing their experiences even after they had reached relative safety. This shame was reinforced by a fear of community rejection or pity, prompting survivors to go to extreme lengths such as wearing heavy cosmetics, or maintaining absolute social isolation, to conceal physical and emotional scars. Participants spoke of carrying their trauma in silence instead of risking the social cost of being labelled a "victim".

Alexandra described the lasting impact of facial injuries sustained during her exploitation, explaining that she concealed the visible reminder of her abuse from those closest to her: *"I would go to bed in makeup... wake up early in the morning to put my makeup back on... because I didn't want anyone to see."* Sonja similarly explained that she chose not to tell anybody about her experiences because she associated exploitation with shame: *"I didn't want to say to nobody because I feel that it's something shameful... I just wanted to keep it to myself, even though it's killing me."* Mandy reflected that she deliberately withheld her experiences because she did not want others to define her through what had happened: *"I don't share it... I just want people to know me the way I am without my story."*

These accounts demonstrate that disclosure was shaped not only by fears of external consequences, but also by the psychological legacy of exploitation itself. Even when immediate danger had reduced, shame and anticipated judgement continued to influence decisions about whether, when, and to whom, survivors disclosed their experiences. These experiences closely mirror Pajon's (2026) findings that fear for personal safety, uncertainty about criminal justice processes, limited trust in statutory agencies and concerns about future consequences frequently prevent survivors from engaging with police or disclosing exploitation at the earliest opportunity. Moton (2025) also discusses the precarious use of the term victim, suggesting some survivors of modern slavery disassociate and even actively revoke being labelled as such. These findings suggest that reluctance to disclose should therefore not be interpreted as an absence of exploitation or credibility but understood as a trauma response shaped by shame, stigma and the enduring psychological consequences of abuse, reinforcing the importance of

professionals creating opportunities for disclosure over time rather than expecting immediate accounts. Indeed, Yu et al., (2018) find that survivors highly value determining themselves the pace at which they share their stories, without institutional pressure. This is particularly important given survivors who shared that, for them, their silence was often protective; a response to what they believed disclosure might cost them – as discussed earlier in *“Non-disclosure as a rational response to risk”*.

Creating the conditions for safe disclosure

Although participants described significant barriers to disclosure, interviews suggested that survivors were more willing to share their experiences when professionals created conditions that felt safe, respectful and trustworthy, as described by Charlie: *“Once they get that connection from an individual, which simply shows that someone cares, shows that someone’s interested in their life, shows that someone’s invested.”*

Rather than expecting immediate disclosure, participants valued practitioners who demonstrated patience, empathy and genuine curiosity, allowing trust to develop over time. Disclosure was described in terms that suggest it as a relational process as opposed to a one-off event, and occurring when a professional took time to listen, believed what they were saying and prioritised their wellbeing over procedural requirements. In contrast, where professionals responded with disbelief, interrogation or rigid procedural approaches, participants described withdrawing from further engagement or limiting what they were prepared to disclose.

Far from representing unwillingness to engage or being uncooperative, for those participating in this project, silence reflected survivors' assessments of whether professionals could genuinely provide protection. Where a trust deficit existed, participants anticipated disbelief, retaliation or further harm, and consequently remaining silent was often considered the safest available survival response. Where professionals demonstrated curiosity, empathy and consistency over time, however, participants described feeling better able to disclose their experiences and engage with the criminal justice system (Pajon, 2026).

2.3 Criminalisation Before Protection

Participants consistently described entering the Criminal Justice System through the lens of offending rather than exploitation. Across interviews, apparent criminal behaviour took precedence over recognising indicators of coercion, with police and other agencies responding to what survivors had done instead of the circumstances in which those actions had occurred. Although most evident amongst those who had experienced criminal exploitation, similar experiences were described by survivors exploited through labour and sexual exploitation, suggesting that early criminal justice responses continued to struggle with the complexity of victim-offender overlap (Darby et al., 2026).

For those criminally exploited, first contact with the police was frequently experienced as adversarial rather than protective:

"Because they already see the victim as perpetrator... If you pull someone over, he's a black man with drugs in the car, you're not thinking, 'Oh, he's being forced to do this.' You're thinking, 'You're a criminal.' That's just how it is. That's the world we live in today. It's a stigma we have, you know"

Nathaniel recalled that indicators of vulnerability had been overlooked in favour of securing evidence against him. Only later, when a custody officer advised him to request legal representation, had he felt anyone acknowledged his vulnerability. Charlie similarly reflected that throughout repeated contact with police, youth justice services and local authority agencies, professionals focused almost exclusively on his outward behaviour rather than the exploitation underpinning it:

"Never... it was just perpetrator, that's it. Even the local authority gangs units, housing associations, local police, it's all targeted work towards behaviours that were being presented but no one was informed or trained to pick up on the modern day slavery aspect of things."

For some participants, this "perpetrator box" was not simply an individual experience but reflected a wider perception that statutory agencies lacked the mechanisms to identify exploitation where offending behaviour was immediately visible. Rather than asking why a young person was repeatedly involved in criminal activity, participants felt statutory agencies frequently responded to the behaviour itself, yet overlooking the coercion, grooming and exploitation driving it. As Charlie explained:

"We weren't in control. We were children. There were adults, predators if you want to call them that, in the driving seat, in full control of circumstances and situations. Yes, there's an element of taking responsibility. Yes, there's an element of decision making but when you've got someone in the driving seat orchestrating behind the scenes, that can be a heavy influence..."

These accounts illustrate the practical consequences of the victim-offender overlap, describing how apparent offending masked the influence of adults exercising control over children's decisions and behaviour (Darby et al., 2026). Several participants suggested this was further reinforced by assumptions associated with race, age and criminality, an issue similarly identified by Koch relating to criminal exploitation (2025), and Davies who explores systemic racial biases and adultification more broadly in safeguarding contexts (2022).

The victim-offender overlap remained poorly understood within early criminal justice responses, with participants describing a system that often struggled to recognise coercion when offending behaviour was immediately visible. Another emerging theme across the interviews was that criminal justice processes themselves appeared to compound the harms associated with exploitation. Rather than safeguarding victims following disclosure, some found themselves drawn further into criminal justice processes

as an offender, as opposed to a victim, as a direct consequence of the circumstances in which they were being exploited. Alexandra described being arrested for breaching police bail after being forcibly moved by her traffickers, despite repeatedly explaining that returning to her original address had never been within her control:

"So when they came to arrest me... they were interested in that I'd jumped police bail... I said I'm not denying that I have, but there was no way I could have even come back... I was moved from the area to another area [by my exploiters]... They didn't take anything into consideration... So they put me now in prison on remand."

Here, procedural criminal justice responses treated exploitation as incidental to the offence rather than central to understanding it.

Even where participants were formally identified as victims and removed from exploitation, protection did not always feel distinct from punishment. Several participants described being transported between locations in police vans, subjected to repeated questioning and accommodated within highly regulated safe houses that felt restrictive rather than restorative. Cate reflected that although she had expected safety following disclosure, she instead experienced further institutional control:

"They've been taking me from place to place... I'm always in the police van treated like a criminal... you went to that (safe) house... even knives, forks, everything you have to go and sign for... we have to go to bed by 9 o'clock... they say that's the rules... People who reported themselves, I regret why I do this because our independence or our freedom was totally taken off from us."

For Cate, these experiences blurred the distinction between protection and punishment, leaving her questioning whether disclosure had genuinely improved her circumstances. This echoes findings from Wright and Such (2026) who conducted a review of safehouse provision for survivors of modern slavery and found that *"overly restrictive or punitive practices can undermine autonomy and replace dynamics of control experienced during exploitation"* (2026:5).

Criminalisation extended beyond prosecution itself to the ways survivors were perceived, questioned and managed during their earliest contact with statutory agencies. Across interviews, participants argued that recognising the coercive circumstances surrounding offending, rather than responding only to the offence, represented the first step towards genuinely survivor-centred criminal justice responses.

3. Finding: Living Through the System (Navigation)

3.1 Living in Legal Limbo

For many participants, leaving exploitation did not mark the beginning of recovery. Instead, it signalled the start of a prolonged period of uncertainty characterised by lengthy delays, limited communication and ongoing insecurity surrounding criminal justice, NRM, immigration and other legal decisions. Across interviews, participants described feeling unable to move forward with their lives whilst waiting for decisions over which they had little control. They described living in a form of limbo in which uncertainty about their status was accompanied by restrictions on their ability to work, study, achieve financial independence and make longer-term plans. Waiting was therefore not passive: it shaped survivors' everyday lives, prolonged insecurity and, for some, created significant emotional distress. This experience of administrative limbo has been widely documented within the modern slavery literature, and has been shown to extend the harms of exploitation well beyond the point of escape, disrupting recovery and preventing survivors from rebuilding independent lives (Schwarz and Williams-Woods, 2022; Murphy, 2018; Nicholson et al., 2023; Greenslade, 2024; Magugliani et al., 2024).

Several survivors described waiting years for decisions regarding their immigration status or modern slavery identification, with little information about when, or if, their circumstances would change. Alice described living with uncertainty for almost six years:

"I have applied nearly six years ago and they keep pushing the case, keep taking long time to make a decision. And this is very frustrating, to be honest... We're like constantly in this situation and it's very exhausting... Really I can't move on because if the justice is not put in place, then how can I move on? I can't really."

Similarly, Melissa reflected on the emotional impact of prolonged uncertainty:

"The asylum system is not clear in the UK... this waiting really kills you... You are just in alert mood all the time, what's coming next... It makes you feel a gap, where you are, what is now and what's going to come next."

For Nicky, the prolonged delays themselves became a source of harm:

"I always said if my abuser will kill me directly, home office is people who kill people slowly, slowly with their taking the case... I came here 26, I'm now 33. The best years of my life, asylum seeker."

Far from representing a neutral administrative process, participants described prolonged waiting as a source of significant emotional and psychological distress that could compound the trauma and insecurity already associated with exploitation. Greenslade (2024) similarly found that prolonged waiting could become harmful in itself, leaving survivors suspended in a state of ongoing uncertainty.

Alongside lengthy delays, participants repeatedly described a lack of communication throughout the process. Rather than feeling involved in decisions affecting their lives, many described long periods of silence, leaving them uncertain whether their cases were progressing at all. Alexandra recalled waiting almost six years without receiving any meaningful updates: *"I waited for, I think maybe six years... But I never had any communication... There was just total silence. Nothing."*

Mike similarly reflected that even occasional communication would have reassured survivors that they had not been forgotten:

"Correspondence was very important in my case... Tell us where you are... don't just keep us waiting and throw us in the system... let people know you're still there, you're still remembering, you're still looking at the case."

Survivors' accounts suggest that communication itself functioned as a form of reassurance, with prolonged institutional silence reinforcing uncertainty and abandonment, an experience similarly identified by Greenslade (2022). For many, this uncertainty extended beyond immigration decisions and affected every aspect of daily life. Survivors described feeling unable to work, study, rebuild relationships or make plans for the future whilst their status remained unresolved. Cate reflected on spending five years unable to move forward:

"I've sat down here uselessly, not being able to work, not being able to go to proper school... for about five good years... I feel like my life has been wasted... It affects how I see myself."

Julia similarly described the emotional impact of being prevented from working whilst living with the constant fear of deportation: "This is four years now... I need to work. I'm tired of staying at home... I don't want to be deported. I don't want to leave my son."

Victoria captured this experience simply:

"I felt my life was on hold. I felt like I was living on the fence because I didn't know if they're sending me back or if I'll settle... It was so difficult."

This prolonged uncertainty was described by survivors as creating further vulnerability, detailing deteriorating mental health, increasing dependence on others and heightened risks of further exploitation whilst waiting for decisions. As Alexandra explained:

"Life was stagnant and when you're not doing anything, all you have is your thoughts... people might start self-harming... people can end up jumped back into another different setting of vulnerability because they don't have equipment to equip them to be perfectly financially stable."

Similarly, Uma reflected that delays left survivors vulnerable to further exploitation because they remained unable to work lawfully or achieve financial stability:

"It took a long time... people were in limbo... and in that waiting, most of us were seriously abused... the taskmasters pay them cash at hand... and give us this fear that, if you talk, we'll make sure you are deported."

The consequences of administrative limbo extended beyond the delayed outcome itself – a delayed decision could hold other parts of life in place with it. Restrictions on lawful employment, prolonged financial insecurity and limited opportunities for education and independence could impede recovery and, in some cases, heighten vulnerability to further exploitation (Magugliani et al., 2024). Findlay (2024) conceptualises this prolonged uncertainty as a form of 'slow violence', arguing that extended immigration and NRM decision-making traps survivors in a state of protracted temporariness in which opportunities to work, study and establish independent lives remain suspended long after exploitation has ended. Across interviews, participants consistently described wanting decisions to be made more quickly, communication to be more transparent, and systems to recognise the emotional and practical consequences of prolonged delay. The Centre for Social Justice's report *It Still Happens Here* similarly highlights this issue, describing NRM decision-making as an "agonising wait" that leaves survivors' lives on hold (Centre for Social Justice, 2020:42).

3.2 Relational Lifelines

Leaving exploitation did not mean survivors no longer required support. For many, it marked the beginning of navigating a new set of unfamiliar systems and decisions whilst simultaneously trying to recover and rebuild. Whilst many participants experienced statutory processes as impersonal, bureaucratic or difficult to navigate (Murphy, 2018), they often distinguished these experiences from encounters with individual professionals who demonstrated empathy, consistency and genuine care. Rather than formal procedures or organisational structures, it was these relationships that survivors identified as the foundation of feeling safe, heard and supported whilst navigating through the Criminal Justice System. In this sense, trusted professionals and advocates could function as relational lifelines: providing continuity, reassurance and human connection within otherwise fragmented and uncertain

systems. Pajon (2026) describes survivor engagement as “fundamentally shaped by rapport and trust-building”, an ethos shared by Jannessari and colleagues who state that survivors view recovery through long-term consistent support and trauma-informed compassionate services, as opposed to standard legal metrics (2023). The present research found that what mattered was not simply that individual practitioners were kind. Trusted practitioners could make otherwise fragmented systems navigable; explaining what was happening, providing continuity when other professionals changed, and creating enough relational safety for survivors to remain engaged. Relationships were therefore not peripheral to the operation of the criminal justice system – for some survivors, they were what made navigating it possible.

Relationships before processes

For many participants, practical support provided by third-sector organisations represented far more than assistance with appointments or paperwork. Instead, support workers helped survivors navigate unfamiliar systems, rebuild confidence and begin developing independence after exploitation.

Victoria described how her NRM caseworker supported her through everyday tasks that many take for granted following years of exploitation and isolation:

"My caseworker really came in handy because of course of the language barrier. I didn't speak good English. And I was scared, you know, culture shock... she helped me to do activities, you know, going to see the GP, registering for volunteering... using the public transports, how to use a mobile phone, which I didn't know, because I never had one before... without the NRM... I don't know how I could have survived."

For Victoria, this support made unfamiliar systems and everyday tasks more manageable at a point when both had become barriers to independence (Eglen et al., 2024). Similarly, Mandy described how practical support gradually developed into something much more significant:

"The first day, I met a support worker... they brought me clothes... every week they were coming to me to see how I was going... (organisation name redacted) became like family with me because I didn't have anybody."

Melissa similarly explained that specialist support organisations were the only places where she consistently felt safe: *"I felt safe only with two organisations that helped me a lot. Only there I was feeling safe and I was treated very well but for the government part, no."*

Specialist organisations could therefore provide something that survivors did not

consistently experience elsewhere: an ongoing relationship in which they felt known, understood and safe. This reflects wider evidence that survivors may place greater trust in specialist support organisations than statutory agencies, valuing consistent relationships and feeling understood (Schwarz & Williams-Woods, 2022).

Being Heard and Rebuilding Trust

Alongside practical support, participants repeatedly described the importance of professionals who took time to listen, showed genuine interest and treated them as individuals rather than cases. These seemingly simple interactions were often described as turning points in survivors' willingness to engage with support and criminal justice processes. Julia summarised this simply: *"Just listen. No matter if they don't have proof of evidence, just listen and hear them out. Like hear their voice. Their voice is enough."*

Alexandra recalled how being asked simple questions about her wellbeing changed her willingness to trust:

"She was very professional and very assuring. She didn't look like she had 20 cases at all. She looked like that was the only case she had... she said words which I hadn't been asked, like how are you?... How did you keep all this to yourself?"

Similarly, Alice described the impact of a volunteer who made her feel respected and valued:

"She made me so comfortable... she made me feel seen by others and respected... that I was someone."

Charlie took this further, describing a sense of reciprocity that could develop where survivors felt that a professional was genuinely invested in them. Feeling cared for could foster a willingness to remain engaged, or, as he described it, to "give back" to the individual who had invested in them:

"Once they get that connection from an individual, which simply shows that someone cares, shows that someone's interested in their life... any of us, as human beings, would give back to that individual."

Kindness and empathy mattered, but relational practice did more than make difficult systems feel compassionate. Feeling listened to, respected and genuinely cared for could help begin to rebuild trust following prolonged experiences of exploitation, disbelief and institutional mistrust. Charlie's account also points towards an important relational dimension of engagement: where survivors felt that somebody had invested in them as an individual, this could create a sense of reciprocity and a willingness to remain engaged with that professional and, through them, with wider processes of support and justice.

Love et al. (2018) found that survivors frequently describe a trust deficit, feeling excluded, powerless, and ignored during interactions with criminal justice or immigration practitioners. However, importantly in this study, positive encounters across statutory services were also identified, demonstrating that meaningful relationships were not confined to third-sector organisations. Nicky described a detective who made her feel "like family" during the investigation, whilst later reflecting that a tribunal judge treated her with greater respect than she had experienced elsewhere. Uma recalled an immigration officer who recognised her distress and prioritised her immediate welfare before continuing the interview, whilst Alexandra described how her GP gradually encouraged her to rebuild her confidence and consider returning to education. What connected these positive encounters was therefore not the type of organisation involved, but the way individual professionals behaved within it.

When support ended

Whilst supportive relationships were highly valued, participants also described how these connections were often temporary. Rather than providing continuity throughout recovery, support frequently ended because of organisational policies, funding arrangements or transitions between services, leaving survivors feeling abandoned at a time when they still required support (Murphy, 2018).

Nicky described the impact of her caseworker being changed:

"They don't let one caseworker stay for a long time... But to me this was so bad... when they changed her from me... I was feeling all alone in this world again."

Here Nicky describes how when relational continuity is disrupted by service transitions, it dismantles the fragile foundation of trust required for survivors to safely engage with the justice system (Pajon, 2026). Similarly, Victoria described the abrupt loss of both financial support and her relationship with her caseworker following a positive Conclusive Grounds decision: *"When I get the status, the support stopped... losing my caseworker... I felt on my own."*

Victoria's experience exposes a paradox within formal recognition: the decision confirming her status as a victim also coincided with the loss of her caseworker and support that had helped her reach that point. This reflects what has been described as the statutory 'support cliff-edge' following a positive Conclusive Grounds decision (Greenslade, 2024; Murphy, 2018). Overall, participants' accounts suggest that trusted relationships were not an additional benefit of support but could operate as relational lifelines within an otherwise fragmented system, providing continuity, safety and stability as survivors began to rebuild their lives. When these relationships ended abruptly or lacked continuity, participants described feeling as though an important source of safety and stability had been removed just as they were beginning to rebuild their lives.

These findings closely reflect Pajon's (2026) identification of rapport-building, consistency, trustworthiness and continuity of professional relationships as central determinants of sustained engagement. However, participants' accounts also raise questions about what continuity should mean once formal identification has been achieved. A positive Conclusive Grounds decision did not mark the end of survivors' recovery or of the practical and emotional consequences of exploitation. For some, it instead coincided with the withdrawal of established relationships and support at a point when they were only beginning to rebuild their lives, reflecting the statutory 'support cliff-edge' previously discussed (Greenslade, 2024; Murphy, 2018).

These findings suggest a need to think beyond time-bound models of support towards forms of transition that better reflect survivors' longer-term circumstances and needs. Rather than support ending abruptly following a formal decision, greater attention should be given to how trusted relationships can be stepped down or transitioned safely, what ongoing practical, emotional or administrative support may be required, and how survivors can be connected to longer-term sources of stability. Continuity need not mean indefinite involvement from the same service or practitioner, but ensuring that formal recognition does not itself create a new point of instability. In this sense, participants' experiences reinforce wider concerns that administrative exit criteria can sit uneasily alongside the longer-term and non-linear nature of recovery from exploitation (Schwarz & Williams-Woods, 2022).

For survivors in this study, being formally recognised was therefore not synonymous with no longer needing support. For some, it arrived while they were only beginning to rebuild.

3.3 When Systems Cause Further Harm

Whilst participants described positive relationships with individual professionals, these experiences existed alongside, often contrasting, interactions with wider statutory systems that were experienced as frustrating, distressing and, at times, actively harmful. Across interviews, survivors reflected on encounters with police, courts, immigration, healthcare, housing and welfare services that left them feeling unheard, disbelieved or unsupported. Many described these experiences as disrupting recovery, reinforcing mistrust and, for some, recreating aspects of the control, uncertainty and powerlessness they had experienced during exploitation. These experiences undermined confidence in statutory agencies and shaped how participants engaged with ongoing criminal justice processes, making it more difficult to participate in systems they no longer trusted.

Repeatedly reliving trauma

Participants commonly described having to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences as they moved through criminal justice processes and the wider network of statutory and

support services. Police officers, immigration officials, solicitors, counsellors and healthcare practitioners often required them to repeat highly distressing accounts with little evidence of coordination between services. Although participants understood the need to explain their experiences, repeatedly revisiting traumatic events was widely described as emotionally exhausting and, for some, actively harmful. Cate reflected on her experience: *"they want me to continue so I'm like no, this is not really helping me because it's like I'm repeating myself every time and it's making me remember things that I wanted to forget."*

Alexandra similarly described how repeated therapeutic disclosure could itself become distressing when she did not feel ready to revisit her experiences:

"So like the counselling made it really hard... I don't think I'm ready for that... it was pretty much like torturing myself because I'm taking myself back... that was a time whereby I've retraumatised myself by going through what I've gone through."

Alongside the impact of repeated disclosure itself, participants described the additional burden of recounting their experiences to multiple professionals and agencies. Mandy recalled moving rapidly between different services immediately after escaping exploitation: *"So many, like, at once... had to open the whole can of worms from the beginning... meetings after meetings... Home Office interviews... it was overwhelming... I felt tired."*

These accounts suggest that retraumatisation could arise both from repeatedly revisiting traumatic experiences and from the fragmented way in which survivors were required to do so across different parts of the system. Shirgholami et al. (2024) similarly describe a “ping-ponging” effect, whereby poor organisational coordination requires survivors to repeatedly disclose traumatic experiences as they move between agencies. The consequences extended beyond the immediate emotional burden. Participants described repeated disclosure across investigations, immigration procedures and wider statutory services as exhausting their capacity to continue participating, with some becoming increasingly reluctant to recount their experiences again. Repeated disclosure therefore had implications not only for survivors' wellbeing, but for their continued engagement with criminal justice and associated processes. These findings reinforce the importance of coordinated, trauma-informed approaches that minimise unnecessary repetition and improve information-sharing and continuity across services, whilst recognising that some repeated questioning may remain necessary within legal processes but that this should be clearly communicated to survivors in order to adjust expectations, inform and prepare survivors (Pajon, 2026; Greenslade, 2022).

When Procedure Recreated Powerlessness

Participants also described situations where criminal justice and statutory processes

themselves became sources of distress and recreated dynamics of exploitation. Several reflected that immediate questioning, restrictive environments and procedural requirements often failed to account for their physical or psychological wellbeing at the point of crisis. Following a suicide attempt, Cate recalled being moved repeatedly between police vehicles and secure environments whilst investigators prioritised gathering evidence:

"At that point it would have been better just to try and help the person to settle down before putting so many questions... you've been taking me from place to place... I'm always in the police van treated like a criminal... Before you get to where they want to take you, you pass five or six doors... you're kind of like what crime have I committed?"

Highly regulated support environments could unintentionally reproduce aspects of the control and restricted autonomy survivors had sought to escape (Greenslade, 2024). Participants also described aspects of the court and evidential processes that reinforced feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness and that undermined confidence in the justice system. After attending court to give evidence and waiting an entire day, Rehan recalled simply being told: "you can go home because there is no evidence". The pressures of giving evidence also extended to how survivors believed their accounts would be judged. Richie worried that if he became confused when recounting his experiences, "they'll think I'm making it up."

This concern is particularly significant in the context of trauma, which can affect memory, recall and the way experiences are communicated (Love et al., 2018; Goard, 2021). Participants' accounts suggest a tension between processes that require detailed, coherent and sometimes repeated accounts; and the effects that trauma may have on survivors' ability to provide them in the ways expected. Anxiety that confusion or inconsistency might be interpreted as evidence of dishonesty could itself compound the distress associated with participation. The consequences are potentially twofold: procedures intended to support investigation and prosecution may cause further distress for survivors, whilst also creating conditions that make continued participation more difficult. Trauma-informed criminal justice practice requires attention not only to what information must be gathered, but to when, where and how survivors are asked to provide it.

3.4 Rebuilding Whilst in Limbo

Whilst prolonged criminal justice, NRM and immigration processes left many participants feeling unable to move forward, they also described actively seeking ways to rebuild their lives whilst those legal processes remained ongoing. As discussed in Section 3.1, this

was not simply a period of waiting for decisions to be made. For some, unresolved status restricted access to lawful employment, education and financial independence, leaving them unable to make longer-term plans and heightening the sense that their lives were on hold. Against this backdrop, participants' efforts to engage in education, volunteering and community activities took on particular significance. These activities did not remove the uncertainty surrounding their cases, but provided routine, purpose and opportunities to regain a sense of agency and look beyond the immediate demands of ongoing legal processes (Thorogood & Durand, 2019).

Education emerged as one of the most consistent ways participants described coping with prolonged waiting. Beyond gaining qualifications, learning provided structure during a period dominated by uncertainty and enabled participants to focus on future possibilities rather than unresolved legal outcomes. Mandy described how beginning an Access to Nursing course gave purpose to a period otherwise characterised by waiting: *"...what kept me going, was just going to college and coming back."* Nathaniel reflected that his software engineering course shifted his focus away from his ongoing criminal justice case, adding: *"if you really want a survivor to reintegrate into society quicker...give them a vocation."*

Across interviews, opportunities to learn, develop new skills and pursue personal ambitions were consistently described as helping participants regain confidence and begin imagining identities beyond those of victim, offender or immigration applicant. Participants' accounts also echoed the wider evidence base, which identifies education and community participation as supporting recovery not simply through qualifications or activities, but by restoring confidence, creating routine and enabling survivors to reconnect with others whilst prolonged legal processes remained unresolved (Greenslade, 2024; Thorogood & Durand, 2019). Melissa explained that college helped her "engage with other people" and "change the environment", whilst Raj described playing the piano at church as *"the chance to be included... with other people... doing something."* Even where formal opportunities were limited, survivors found their own ways to move forwards. Cate described spending hours reading in the local library, explaining that she was *"trying to pick myself from the floor and trying to get things to work for me."*

These accounts suggest that rebuilding began long before criminal justice, NRM and immigration processes had concluded. Despite continued frustration with prolonged legal uncertainty, participants consistently described purposeful activity and social connection as important sources of stability and hope while awaiting decisions. Rather than removing the challenges of the justice process, these opportunities enabled survivors to continue moving forwards despite it.

4. Finding: What Justice Really Means (Restoration)

Participants' experiences demonstrate that justice was understood far more broadly than criminal convictions or successful prosecutions. Although holding perpetrators to account remained important, survivors consistently described justice in relational, practical and restorative terms. Their accounts suggest that justice begins long before a court outcome and continues long after legal proceedings have ended. Feeling believed, experiencing safety, having genuine opportunities to rebuild their lives, and seeing meaningful accountability all emerged as equally important dimensions of justice. This relational and restorative framing of justice directly aligns with the empirical findings of Love et al. (2018) and Bond (2025), who document a stark divergence between how criminal justice systems conceptualise justice (focused heavily on retributive prosecution) and how survivors define it (focused on safety, restoring autonomy, and personal healing). The following sections explore how survivors defined justice through their own experiences and priorities, and in their own words.

4.1 Justice Begins with Being Believed

Justice meant very different things to participants than might traditionally be assumed within criminal justice policy. Although successful prosecutions and convictions were recognised as important, these outcomes rarely emerged as survivors' first descriptions of justice. Participants spoke instead about being believed, being listened to and being treated with dignity throughout their interactions with professionals. For many, justice began long before a court outcome; it started the moment someone accepted their account and recognised what had happened to them. These accounts also reflect principles of procedural justice, highlighting that respectful treatment, active listening and being believed were experienced as important forms of justice in their own right (Yu et al., 2018).

Formal Recognition: When the system believes you

Many participants described formal recognition of their experiences as an important turning point. Receiving a positive Conclusive Grounds decision was frequently discussed in emotional rather than administrative terms. After prolonged periods of uncertainty, participants described feeling lighter, validated and, for some, as though their experiences had finally been believed.

Mandy reflected on receiving her positive Conclusive Grounds decision after years of uncertainty:

"To be honest, to see them understanding what I went through and knowing that there's some people who believe that I went through made me felt really good. I felt really recognised, felt really seen."

Alice described a similar experience:

"Yeah, I was happy, because finally they did something and they trusted all of what I have... all my issues and all my problems felt a bit lighter that now someone is believing me and is doing something about it."

The language used by participants is significant. They spoke about being “recognised”, “seen”, “trusted” and “believed”, suggesting that the meaning attached to a positive Conclusive Grounds decision extended beyond its procedural function. For survivors whose accounts had previously been questioned, overlooked or misunderstood, formal recognition could provide a concrete form of institutional validation that their experiences were real and acknowledged (Eglen et al., 2024).

This finding also highlights the significance of the NRM decision-making process itself within survivors' wider experiences of justice. The outcome did not simply determine formal recognition as a victim of modern slavery; participants' accounts suggest that it could carry considerable symbolic and emotional weight. This makes the prolonged periods of uncertainty described in Section 3 particularly important: where a decision capable of providing such validation takes several years to reach, survivors remain for prolonged periods without that formal acknowledgement.

However, a positive Conclusive Grounds decision was not synonymous with justice having been achieved. Formal recognition could provide validation, but it did not resolve the wider consequences of exploitation or necessarily enable survivors to rebuild their lives. Participants' broader definitions of justice therefore extended beyond being formally recognised to how they were treated, whether they felt safe, the opportunities available to rebuild their lives and whether meaningful accountability followed.

Justice meant being treated as a person

Participants repeatedly distinguished between achieving justice and *experiencing* justice. Whilst legal outcomes were important, the way survivors were treated throughout the process was often viewed as equally significant.

Alice reflected that justice, for her, extended beyond winning a case:

"Justice is not only winning the cases, it's also treating me fairly and giving me the respect that I needed... justice is not only in the paper... but also being treated as a human being, not as a trash."

She also described feeling reduced to a statistic within wider systems *"Because they just thinking me as a number, not thinking as a person."* Mandy drew a similar distinction when describing her support worker: *"To be honest, for the fact that she used to talk to me as a person, not as a system, yeah it helped."*

For Cate, justice was inseparable from fairness and equality: *"The word justice means... to serve people... treating somebody the way the person should be... treating you equally... giving you the help you want."*

Across interviews, participants consistently described respectful interactions as fundamental to their understanding of justice, regardless of whether those interactions occurred within criminal justice agencies or wider statutory services.

Small acts of respect had a lasting impact

Participants often recalled relatively small moments that shaped how they viewed the justice system. Simple acts of kindness, patience and acknowledgement were remembered years later because they contrasted so sharply with previous experiences of exploitation and the institutional disbelief that initially followed. Nicky described appearing before an asylum judge:

"I can say in my life... there is no woman which has treated me with more respect than this woman. I didn't feel like I'm in a court.... The judge was saying to me, 'sorry, we are making you cry'... The people who put me through this, I haven't got a sorry, but she was saying sorry for them."

Cate similarly recalled a magistrate stopping proceedings when she became distressed:

"That gave me hope... she stopped me and said, 'Do you want to take a drink? Do you need any break?'... for the first time I was heard."

Compassionate, trauma-informed practice within legal settings can shape survivors' experiences of justice, regardless of the legal outcome (Paterson & Morgan, 2025). Alice remembered the impact of a volunteer who consistently treated her with kindness: *"She made me so comfortable and made me so feel seen by others and respected, that I was someone."*

Alexandra also reflected that institutional accountability and acknowledging mistakes could itself contribute towards justice: *"If somebody says sorry... you actually understand that it happened and they've acknowledged that."* This deep desire for institutional acknowledgment and apology reflects a foundational element of restorative justice, where the formal validation of past harms, systemic failures and missed opportunities serves as a crucial, non-punitive vehicle for survivors to achieve emotional closure and psychological healing (Bond, 2025; Love et al., 2018). Across survivor accounts, it was clear that justice was not defined solely by

legal outcomes. Feeling believed, being treated with dignity and experiencing genuine human compassion were repeatedly described as integral to what justice meant and to survivors' ability to move forward following exploitation (Pajon, 2026).

4.2 Justice Means Feeling Safe

Every survivor who participated in this project described safety as a fundamental component of justice. Although prosecutions and convictions were recognised as important, many explained that legal outcomes meant little if they continued to fear their exploiters, lacked secure housing or remained vulnerable to further harm. Feeling safe was described not simply as physical protection, but as the ability to rebuild a life without constant fear, uncertainty or the expectation of further victimisation. Participants' accounts echo wider research showing that survivors consistently identify safety, stability and freedom from fear as fundamental components of justice and recovery (Jannesari et al., 2023).

Protection before prosecution

Many participants felt the criminal justice system focused heavily on investigating offences and prosecuting perpetrators whilst giving insufficient attention to protecting survivors. Justice was therefore understood not only in terms of holding offenders accountable, but also ensuring victims were safe throughout the process. Cate reflected that the police's failure to recognise her exploitation left both her and her family vulnerable to further harm:

"I believe the police didn't protect me, because even the [work] sponsors, the perpetrators, they knew very well that the law will always protect them, hence they kept on trying to re-exploit me because the police said that it's civil matters... I believe the criminal justice didn't do a good job in my case."

Cate later explained:

"Justice should be served on me, the victim, because I didn't do wrong. I didn't do wrong, I need to be protected. For me to get justice is for that perpetrator to be taken into accountability for the wrongs they did."

Cate's experience is not unique. Previous research has identified similar failures to recognise modern slavery, with frontline indicators sometimes dismissed as civil disputes or other non-criminal matters, delaying safeguarding and criminal justice responses (Farrell et al., 2019; HMICFRS, College of Policing & IOPC, 2022). Uma similarly argued that safeguarding should continue throughout survivors' engagement with services:

"Making sure from start to finish, you make sure the victim is not victimised again. You put in structures or put in systems there that they can easily access if they are being... re-victimised."

Participants' accounts suggest that justice was closely linked to feeling protected from further harm. For many, accountability and safeguarding were viewed as complementary rather than separate aims. This insight was also shared by Pajon (2026) whose own findings argued that safeguarding and recovery should be regarded as the foundation of effective criminal justice engagement, with survivors more likely to participate in investigations when they first feel safe, supported and able to regain a sense of control.

Living with fear

Fear did not necessarily end once exploitation had been disclosed or survivors had reached safety. While earlier accounts demonstrated how fear could prevent disclosure, participants also described fear persisting long after exploitation had ended, shaping whether they experienced themselves as genuinely safe and whether justice felt as though it had been achieved. Richie described becoming intensely hypervigilant whilst waiting for police action:

"[I was] hypervigilant. I was armed constantly... If there was a group of men somewhere, I would never walk through them... If there was a van or a car at the side of the road with anybody sitting in it, I would get well away from it... I didn't go anywhere where I could be followed."

Persistent hypervigilance is recognised as a common consequence of modern slavery and trafficking (Evans et al., 2022). Nicky similarly reflected that justice remained incomplete whilst those responsible for her exploitation remained free:

"The one who did me bad is free, is having his best life... Even if someone tells me he's in prison again, I'm not calm... You have to feel this peace [to have justice]... that I can do whatever I want to do and nothing is going to happen to me.... As long as these criminals are outside... I can't even go one time outside and be 100 percent safe, you know, that no-one is watching me or is after me."

Fraser (2024) and Bond (2025) also found that survivors often struggled to feel safe whilst perpetrators remained free, limiting both recovery and survivors' sense that justice had been achieved. These accounts highlight that survivors often measured justice by whether it reduced fear and successful legal outcomes alone were not always enough to restore a sense of safety.

Building a secure future

Participants also described safety in practical terms. Stable accommodation, financial security and confidence that their basic needs would continue to be met were viewed as essential foundations for recovery. Sonja described the importance of secure housing, which she had not yet found: *"This house I'm living... They don't care... Settle, settle the person. Let them know that, okay, you have settled."*

Victoria reflected on finally entering safe accommodation after years of exploitation:

"The assurance of telling me I'm now safe... nobody is coming for me... putting me in a safe accommodation... getting supply of the essentials... the safety one was so massive for me... at least I can breathe for once."

Participants also looked beyond their own experiences, describing justice as preventing future exploitation. Charlie explained: *"Justice is ensuring that victims don't go through the same thing twice... We need to put everything in place to prevent that."* A consistent theme across interviews was the way in which participants described safety as something that extended well beyond immediate protection. Feeling safe meant being able to live without constant fear, having confidence that exploitation would not happen again, and knowing that systems were working to protect both themselves and others. For many survivors, these outcomes represented a far more meaningful measure of justice than legal processes alone.

4.3 Justice Means the Opportunity to Move Forward

Across interviews, survivors reflected that being believed, feeling safe and holding perpetrators to account were important aspects of justice. Many also argued that justice ultimately depended upon whether they were able to build meaningful lives beyond exploitation. Legal recognition, positive NRM decisions and criminal investigations were important milestones, but they did not remove the enduring consequences of exploitation or guarantee that survivors were able to move forward. Participants described continuing barriers to education, employment, financial independence and ordinary life that could persist beyond formal recognition. Justice was therefore not simply about escaping exploitation or achieving recognition, but having a genuine opportunity to rebuild without continually being constrained by its consequences. Survivor accounts are consistent with research suggesting that recovery depends not only on leaving exploitation, but on having genuine opportunities to rebuild independent lives (Thorogood & Durand, 2019).

When moving forward remains difficult

Importantly, the consequences of prolonged uncertainty did not necessarily end once a

decision was reached. As explored in Section 3.1, participants described lengthy periods in which restrictions on work, education and financial independence left their lives effectively on hold, alongside significant emotional and psychological distress that could compound the trauma and insecurity associated with exploitation. Some participants' accounts suggested that both the practical consequences of these lost years and their emotional and psychological effects persisted beyond the period of waiting itself, affecting wellbeing, confidence and survivors' ability to rebuild. Cate, who had spent around five years unable to work or access education whilst awaiting decisions, reflected that "*I feel like my life has been wasted*", and described how her earlier experiences of being treated "like a criminal" continued to affect how she saw herself. At the time of interview, she explained, "*Up to now I'm taking some depression tablets.*"

Cate's account illustrates how the harms associated with prolonged legal uncertainty and experiences of suspicion could outlast the administrative processes that produced them (Eglen et al., 2024; Findlay, 2024). Formal recognition could therefore mark an important change in status without simply undoing the consequences of the years that preceded it. Being able to move forward was bound with survivors' wider understanding of justice. Alice, despite actively trying to rebuild her life through education and personal development, described feeling unable to fully move forward while justice remained unresolved:

"I can't move on because if the justice is not put in place, then how can I move on? I can't really."

Alice's account demonstrates that moving forward did not necessarily mean leaving questions of justice behind; for some survivors, recovery remained closely intertwined with whether they felt that justice had been achieved.

Survivors' accounts suggest that justice was understood not simply as the end of exploitation, or the achievement of formal recognition, but as having the opportunity to move forward afterwards. Although legal proceedings and formal decisions were important, the consequences of exploitation – and, for some, of the lengthy processes that followed it – continued to shape everyday life long afterwards. Recovery was therefore closely intertwined with both the outcomes of systems intended to provide protection, and with the lasting consequences of survivors' experiences whilst navigating them.

When the system continues to close doors

One of the most striking findings across the interviews was that many of the barriers that survivors faced after exploitation originated not from their exploiters, but from the institutional systems they encountered whilst trying to rebuild their lives. Participants described repeatedly finding that disrupted education, missing documentation, criminal

records resulting from exploitation and gaps in employment histories continued to restrict access to opportunities long after they had been formally recognised as victims. Previous research has identified similar barriers to education, employment and independence long after exploitation has ended (Currie & Bezzano, 2022).

Alexandra described the exhausting process of securing Student Finance, explaining that years spent in exploitation left her unable to provide the documentation routinely required to demonstrate eligibility:

"Because I was enrolling for university study and I used a route that I've been in the country for more than 20 years and they wanted documents to back me that yes, I was in the country for 20 years and the time I was enslaved, I don't have any documentation. There is no way of getting anywhere, no matter how well you can write down to explain... The student finance, I wrote a letter handwritten, typed, everything explaining the situation. Nothing."

Charlie similarly reflected that convictions arising from his criminal exploitation continued to limit his future career opportunities despite his rehabilitation:

"It's definitely impacted me in terms of I can't go down certain career paths. I wanted to go into finance, banking... My criminal conviction stays for life because of the length of time. It never goes... as soon as they tick that box of ex-offender... they're blocked or stopped or prevented from getting employment. Even the smallest of jobs now, the enhanced DBS processes can pick up on things as well."

Charlie's experience confirms growing concerns that criminal records arising from exploitation continue to restrict education and employment opportunities long after survivors have left exploitation (AYJ, 2025; Brewster & Wright, 2026). Even where employment remained possible, survivors described the continuing consequences of criminalisation. Reflecting on applying for caring roles, Alexandra explained that her conviction required her to repeatedly disclose and explain the circumstances of her exploitation to prospective employers:

"But with a criminal record, it was tricky... they wanted to interview me intensively to understand why I have that and after that, I had to write a personal statement with personal details to explain. So it's a constant remind of it's there... An extra interview to explain yourself and another extra personal statement to explain your unfortunate situation."

Repeatedly having to explain convictions linked to exploitation also highlights the continuing emotional burden of disclosure during attempts to rebuild independent lives (Countryman-Roswurm et al., 2024). The effects of exploitation and criminalisation did not end with the conclusion of legal proceedings; in a form of continued injustice, they

continued to shape access to employment, requiring repeated disclosure of experiences. For Richie, the years spent in exploitation created employment gaps that were difficult to explain to prospective employers: *"How do you explain where you've been for the last 10, 15, 18 years, in my case...? A prospective employer's going to look... and go, 'He's a bad risk...'"*

Across these accounts, survivors described a justice system that recognised their exploitation whilst leaving many of its structural consequences untouched. Formal recognition therefore represented an important beginning, but meaningful justice depended upon whether survivors were able to access the education, employment and opportunities needed to rebuild independent lives (Wright et al., 2026).

Wanting an ordinary life

One of the most memorable aspects of participants' accounts was the simplicity of what they hoped justice would ultimately enable. Survivors rarely described extraordinary ambitions or expectations of compensation for everything they had endured; instead, they consistently spoke about wanting stable employment, secure housing, supportive relationships and the opportunity to contribute to society without continually being defined by exploitation. Their accounts suggest that justice was ultimately measured not only by whether exploitation had ended, but by whether they were genuinely able to participate in ordinary life. Julia explained this during her interview:

"I don't really like sharing sometimes because it takes me back again and makes me feel sad, but I don't want to remember the past anymore. I just want to move forward in my life and think about my children and think about my future."

For Alice, gaining confidence through education represented an important step towards living independently and making her own decisions:

"I have learned the language obviously, because I didn't know and then I have done early years education... that has helped me, make me confident for myself and also believing that I can do something in life, not just waiting for others to do stuff for me... I can take control of my life hopefully in the future."

Others also found that education can help survivors rebuild confidence, independence and a sense of control over their future (Thorogood & Durand, 2019). Cate similarly described the significance of finally moving into her own accommodation after years of living under close supervision:

"It was so good because it gave me that peace of mind... I need to do things on my own without nobody monitoring me... So honestly, I feel so, so happy that at least I can do things on my own. I can go and visit people. People can come and visit me... now we are free, we start making friends outside... So yeah, that freedom was good. We started building up something at least."

Previous research has similarly identified independent accommodation as an important step towards rebuilding autonomy, privacy and social connections following exploitation (Wright et al., 2026). Vicky captured this aspiration simply:

"I really want to be a good citizen, work hard and, you know, give back to society, pay the council tax and, you know, pass the goodness to the next person..."

Having opportunities to work, contribute to their communities, support their families and make plans for the future were consistently described as indicators that justice had begun to restore what exploitation had taken away. Recovery has also been described as moving beyond a survivor identity towards participating fully in everyday community life (Rousseau, 2018).

4.4 Justice Means Accountability

Across interviews, survivors described justice as ensuring perpetrators were held responsible for the harm they had caused, ensuring they did not continue to benefit financially from exploitation, in addition to organisations and statutory agencies also learning from failures that had allowed exploitation to occur. For many, meaningful accountability extended beyond criminal sanctions to include financial redress, organisational responsibility and preventing future exploitation.

Holding Perpetrators to Account

Survivors repeatedly raised the importance of perpetrators facing meaningful consequences for their actions, although they rarely understood accountability purely in terms of imprisonment. For many, justice depended upon thorough investigation and a willingness to pursue cases despite the challenges often associated with evidencing modern slavery. For some survivors, the absence of perpetrator accountability also affected their ability to experience a sense of justice and move forward. Nicky contrasted the enduring consequences of exploitation in her own life with the continued freedom of those responsible, explaining that *"as long as these criminals are outside... I'm suffering."* Her account illustrates why holding perpetrators to account remained important within survivor-defined justice, even where participants understood justice as extending beyond prosecution or punishment alone. Julia reflected on the disappointment she experienced when her case was repeatedly closed because of a perceived lack of evidence. Rather than accepting evidential barriers as inevitable, she argued that investigations should begin with survivors' accounts and seek evidence proactively:

"I think that you just forget about the, we need more evidence or proof. I think they should just take the case and try to do one or two things you'll be able to- They will be able to get perpetrators or trying to get the trafficker. I think it's just about trying to investigate on what the victim has said, so that you forget about we need more evidence, we need more evidence."

Nicky shared similar frustrations, questioning why the burden of gathering evidence appeared to fall so heavily on survivors rather than investigators:

"They stress more the victims, asking question and blah, blah, blah, go and do your job. Like they said to me, we don't have proofs. Open your eyes, do your job, find the proofs. Yeah. Don't wait [for] this from the victims. They are the victims. They are not the criminals."

These accounts echo concerns that modern slavery investigations can become overly dependent on survivor testimony, rather than proactively gathering independent evidence to support prosecutions (Farrell et al., 2019; Pajon & Walsh, 2024). The decision not to proceed with Raj's case left him questioning whether perpetrators could simply continue exploiting without consequence:

"I feel maybe not so good because when someone is saying that 'oh, you gave me something and they did something wrong and we can't prove that someone did something wrong'... It shows that people can do what they want and they are getting nothing about it."

Others have similarly found that investigations frequently close because of evidential difficulties, leaving survivors feeling that perpetrators can continue exploiting others with impunity (Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2025). Although participants recognised the complexity of prosecuting modern slavery offences, these accounts suggest that accountability was closely associated with seeing perpetrators proactively investigated and prevented from continuing to exploit others, while calling investigators to place less burden and fewer expectations on the survivors.

Repairing the harm

Participants questioned whether imprisonment alone could ever repair the damage caused by exploitation. Several reflected that whilst years lost to exploitation could never be returned, justice should include removing the financial benefit gained by perpetrators and, where possible, restoring what had been taken from victims. Alexandra explained:

"I think if they'd be hold accountable to what they did... Illicit money, that would be taken away from them, because that was the sole purpose for them to have that. So that, to them, is the bigger punishment than serving the court."

Reflecting further, she acknowledged that no outcome could undo the years that exploitation had taken from her life, whilst emphasising that perpetrators should nevertheless be required to make amends wherever possible:

"But for the victim, it's seeing them right and supporting them and for those who've done wrong, for them to make things right, they've not benefitted financially. Take those out. They've done things to a human being which you can't take back. Taking the years back to somebody. Those years can never be taken back, you know? So if there's a sentence they can serve, yes, they should."

Across interviews, participants rarely described accountability as retribution alone. More commonly, they spoke about fairness, ensuring exploiters no longer benefited from the harm they had caused and recognising the lasting personal, financial and emotional consequences experienced by survivors.

Learning from failure and preventing future exploitation

For many participants, accountability extended beyond individual perpetrators to include organisations and statutory agencies whose actions, or inaction, had contributed to their experiences. Acknowledging mistakes, accepting responsibility and learning from failures were viewed as essential if similar harms were to be prevented in the future. Reflecting on her own experiences of being misidentified and disbelieved, Alexandra explained that even a simple acknowledgement of mistakes would have made a significant difference:

"And if they explained and someone said 'oh, I'm sorry, I didn't understand that', it makes you feel like good... so that's the same thing whereby mistakes were made... Even if somebody says sorry, that's not going to delete everything, but you actually understand that it happened and they've acknowledged that."

Alice similarly emphasised that accountability required professionals to accept responsibility for their own actions rather than placing blame on survivors when systems failed:

"So treating fairly, first of all, and listening to people as well. That's the most important and helping where- Whether they could help, when they see that something is not done properly, they can fix it... Not blaming, but asking and taking responsibility for the actions, because it's not always the victim fault..."

Looking beyond their own experiences, survivors frequently framed justice in terms of preventing future exploitation. Charlie argued that accountability should combine consequences for perpetrators with education and rehabilitation capable of reducing further harm:

"I think justice is where everybody's held accountable for their actions and also justice is ensuring that victims don't go through the same thing twice or become a victim again in the future... We need to put everything in place to prevent that. I think there's ignorance, there's culture... So at the very least there needs to be an education or accountability part... they [exploiter] need to be held accountable and then... educated in the process."

Charlie's emphasis on preventing future exploitation is similarly reflected in survivor-led research, which highlights the value of lived experience in shaping education, policy and prevention efforts (Gachanja & Williams, 2023). Collette also proposed greater regulatory oversight of employers through unannounced inspections, arguing that exploitation was less likely to flourish where organisations expected regular scrutiny:

"in each and every organisation there should be a department that deals with safeguarding... or there should be bodies... that go to the different companies unannounced... random inspections... I'm sure that way there could be change."

Collette's recommendation is consistent with calls for stronger labour market enforcement, including more proactive inspection and oversight of workplaces where exploitation may occur (Greenslade, 2024; Fraser, 2024). Participants understood accountability as extending well beyond criminal punishment. Holding perpetrators responsible remained important, but justice was equally associated with acknowledging failures, repairing harm where possible and ensuring that the lessons learned from survivors' experiences reduced the likelihood of future exploitation. That future focus was striking across interviews, with many participants expressing a strong desire that others should not have to endure the experiences they had lived through.



5. Implications for Policy and Practice: Recommendations

This research highlights an important distinction between how justice responses to modern slavery are organised within criminal justice policy, and how survivors actually experience the criminal justice system. Although statutory responses are commonly structured around identification, investigation and prosecution, participants described journeys that were complex and continued long after any formal criminal justice process had ended. This adds weight to previous research which has found that survivors' understandings of justice frequently extend beyond prosecution and punishment to include autonomy, safety, respectful treatment and the ability to move forward with their lives (Pajon, 2026; Hussemann et al., 2018; Fraser, 2024).

The findings also challenge a linear understanding of the modern slavery criminal justice response. Identification, investigation and prosecution may be organised as distinct procedural stages, but survivors did not experience them that way. Recognition at one point shaped trust at the next; experiences of communication, safety and professional relationships influenced continued engagement; and the consequences of criminal justice and immigration decisions extended long beyond formal proceedings. Recognition, navigation and restoration should therefore be understood as interconnected dimensions of survivors' experiences of justice rather than discrete stages of a process. This matters operationally. Recognition, trust, safety and opportunities to rebuild are not peripheral welfare concerns sitting alongside criminal justice objectives. They help determine whether survivors are able, and indeed willing, to disclose exploitation, provide evidence and remain engaged with criminal justice processes. Improving survivors' experiences and improving the effectiveness of the criminal justice response are therefore not competing objectives. Reform must also remain grounded in survivor voice if policy and practice are to reflect the realities of how the criminal justice system is experienced, rather than assumptions about how survivors move through it.

The following recommendations are grounded in survivors' accounts of what enabled recognition, sustained engagement and meaningful justice in their experiences, as well as the points at which existing responses caused or compounded harm. Addressing the issues identified throughout this report is therefore important not only for reducing avoidable harm to survivors, but for strengthening the effectiveness of the criminal justice response itself. The recommendations translate this evidence into practical opportunities for more consistent policy and practice across the criminal justice journey. The aim is a criminal justice response in which recognition, protection and meaningful justice do not depend on where, when or by whom a survivor is encountered.

5.1 Strengthening Recognition and Identification of Exploitation Throughout the Criminal Justice Journey

Evidence from this study ¹	Recommendation	Lead organisation(s)
Survivors described repeated missed opportunities to recognise exploitation during first contact, with apparent offending, immigration status and assumptions about credibility frequently obscuring victimisation. Recognition often depended upon the professional curiosity of individual practitioners rather than consistent systems or procedures, highlighting the need for both systematic identification mechanisms and professional judgement. <i>See 2.1 Invisible Victims on Page 13 onwards.</i>	1. Introduce consistent first-contact screening procedures for modern slavery indicators, including clear prompts or triggers where a person presents through apparent offending or irregular immigration status, supported by updated training for response officers, call handlers and custody staff. 2. Embed trauma-informed professional curiosity and modern slavery awareness within first-contact practice, ensuring professionals are supported to look beyond immediate presentations of offending or vulnerability and explore indicators of exploitation where concerns arise.	Police forces; College of Policing; CPS; Local Authorities; Home Office; NHS

¹ The evidence underpinning these and the following recommendations draws on the findings of this study, considered alongside the existing evidence base discussed throughout the report. The findings and recommendations were also subject to additional review, including by experts with lived experience of modern slavery.)

5.1 Strengthening Recognition and Identification of Exploitation Throughout the Criminal Justice Journey (continued)

Evidence from this study	Recommendation	Lead organisation(s)
Criminally exploited survivors frequently entered the criminal justice system as suspects rather than victims, with limited understanding of victim-offender overlap contributing to inappropriate criminalisation and missed safeguarding opportunities. <i>See 2.3 Criminalisation Before Protection, on Page 20 onwards.</i>	3. Require training and operational guidance to include reference to the victim-offender overlap, criminal exploitation and Section 45 across policing and prosecution, including a requirement for prosecutors to document consideration of the Section 45 statutory defence and possible exploitation before charge where modern slavery indicators are present. Require compliance through annual audit, or as appropriate.	College of Policing; CPS; Ministry of Justice; HMPPS
Survivors described confidentiality breaches and safeguarding failures immediately following disclosure, including being returned to situations of exploitation or exposed to further harm. <i>See 2.2 Fear and Disclosure, on Page 16 onwards.</i>	4. Review first-contact safeguarding procedures and require a recorded risk assessment before a person disclosing or presenting indicators of exploitation is released or discharged to a location potentially linked to that exploitation, with safeguarding concerns and agreed actions clearly documented	Police forces; Home Office; Local Authorities

5.2 Preventing Harm within Criminal Justice Responses

Evidence from this study	Recommendation	Lead organisation(s)
Participants consistently described prolonged delays across criminal justice, NRM and immigration processes as a significant barrier to recovery, prolonging uncertainty and limiting opportunities to rebuild their lives. Where multiple processes were ongoing simultaneously, delays could compound one another, leaving survivors unable to move forward while awaiting decisions across different systems. <i>See 3.1 Living in Legal Limbo, on Page 23 onwards.</i>	5. Establish and monitor clear timescales for key decisions across criminal justice, NRM and immigration processes affecting survivors of modern slavery, with particular attention to cases where processes overlap or delays in one system prevent progress in another. Require responsible agencies to monitor and report on cases exceeding these timescales.	Home Office; Ministry of Justice; CPS; Police forces; relevant immigration and NRM decision-making bodies
Survivors described fragmented communication, changing professionals and uncertainty throughout criminal justice processes as undermining trust and reducing engagement. Trusted relationships with individual professionals frequently determined whether participants remained engaged. <i>See 3.2 Relational Lifelines, on Page 25 onwards.</i>	6. Develop minimum communication standards, including regular case updates, named points of contact and clear explanations of key decisions, whilst prioritising continuity of professional relationships wherever possible, and minimising unnecessary changes in allocated caseworkers and advocates throughout criminal justice processes.	Home Office; Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract providers; Police; CPS; Witness Care Units; Victim Support providers

5.2 Preventing Harm within Criminal Justice Responses (continued)

Evidence from this study	Recommendation	Lead organisation(s)
Participants described repeated questioning, restrictive environments and procedural practices that recreated aspects of exploitation, contributing to secondary victimisation and discouraging continued engagement. <i>See 3.3 When Systems Cause Further Harm, on Page 29 onwards.</i>	7. Embed trauma-informed approaches throughout investigations, evidence gathering and court processes, including minimising repeated disclosure, requiring justification for additional interviews, using pre-recorded evidence where appropriate, and improving survivors' understanding and predictability of proceedings.	College of Policing; CPS; HMCTS; Ministry of Justice

5.3 Delivering Survivor-Defined Justice

Evidence from this study	Recommendation	Lead organisation(s)
Survivors consistently described justice as extending beyond criminal convictions to include opportunities to rebuild their lives, regain independence, access education and employment, and achieve long-term safety. <i>See 3.4 Rebuilding Whilst in Limbo, on Page 31 onwards; and 4.3 Opportunity to Move Forward, on Page 38 onwards.</i>	8. Review and address structural and discriminatory barriers preventing survivors from accessing education, employment, financial independence and wider opportunities following recognition as victims of modern slavery, including consideration of how existing policies and practices could better protect survivors from disadvantage associated with their experiences of exploitation.	Home Office; DWP; Department for Education; Student Finance England; Department for Business and Trade; Local Authorities
Participants viewed compensation as more than financial redress; it represented acknowledgement of harm, accountability and validation, yet many described significant barriers to accessing compensation. <i>See 4.4 Justice Means Accountability, on Page 42 onwards.</i>	9. Improve awareness of, access to and support throughout compensation processes for survivors of modern slavery, and strengthen the routine consideration of Slavery and Trafficking Reparation Orders, requiring prosecutors to record reasons where an order is not sought following a modern slavery conviction.	Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority; CPS; Police forces Legal Aid Agency; Specialist legal providers

5.4 Building a Survivor-Centred Criminal Justice System

Evidence from this study	Recommendation	Lead organisation(s)
Survivors viewed accountability as extending beyond prosecuting offenders to include acknowledging institutional failures, learning from mistakes and improving future responses. Participants also consistently identified the value of lived experience in shaping policy, professional practice and service design. <i>See 2.1 Invisible Victims, Page 13 onwards; 2.2 Fear and Disclosure, Page 16 onwards; and 4.4 Accountability, on Page 42 onwards.</i>	10. Require relevant agencies to review safeguarding failures where cases involving a person subsequently identified as a victim of modern slavery had previously been treated as a suspect, released or discharged to a location linked to exploitation, or had a disclosure not acted upon. Reviews should record identified learning, required actions and responsibility for implementation, with anonymised learning shared periodically where appropriate. 11. Require meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in the design, review and evaluation of modern slavery policy, guidance, services and professional training, with organisations recording how survivor input influenced the final product or decision.	Home Office; Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner; College of Policing; Ministry of Justice; Police; CPS; HMPPS; Local Authorities; third-sector organisations Home Office; Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner; Ministry of Justice; College of Policing; HMPPS; Local Authorities; third-sector organisations.

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

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

Publication date: September 2026

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This work was supported by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre, University of Oxford [reference number: R90817/CN001] from its grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/T012412/2].

Identification number of the publication:
PEC/2026/09

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