

Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

CC: Jess Phillips MP, Minister for Safeguarding and VAWG

24 November 2025

Re: Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government's asylum and returns policy

Dear Home Secretary,

We write as CEOs of anti-slavery charities across the United Kingdom, concerned that changes to modern slavery protections announced in the *Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government's asylum and returns policy* this week risk undermining the very purpose of the Modern Slavery Act.

Modern slavery legislation and the wider National Referral Mechanism (NRM) framework were designed to identify and safeguard victims of a serious crime and bring perpetrators to justice. It was never intended to serve as an extension of border control. When it is evaluated through immigration objectives rather than safeguarding aims, the system begins to be judged on the speed of removals instead of the identification and protection of vulnerable victims. It also takes the focus away from prosecuting the organised crime groups profiting from exploitation. Modern slavery is a transnational crime involving international and organised criminal elements – but it is also one which impacts many British victims. Changing modern slavery policy to meet immigration goals risks leading the United Kingdom in the wrong direction.

The emphasis on false NRM claims and system abuse oversimplifies what is a complex assessment process. Fraudulent claims exist within all protection systems; it is not evidence that the framework is broken. Such cases should be addressed through robust casework, not by restricting access across the board. The current system has the power to distinguish effectively and promptly between cases deemed credible and non-credible. As the Home Office statistics show, many NRM referrals receive negative reasonable grounds decisions (more than half of all adults this year), excluding them from support and protection from immediate removal. These decisions are made on average within 6 days and do not significantly delay immigration procedures.

The proposals present a great danger that genuine victims will now be prevented from entering the system altogether. We are particularly concerned by the implication in the policy paper that “disclosure just moments before a removal flight is scheduled” is an indication of abuse and the proposal to amend statutory guidance equating late disclosure with poor credibility.

Trauma, coercion, and fear influence how and when survivors disclose their experiences. Many will not be able to recount events coherently on first contact with authorities. Some do not recognise themselves as victims, others have been threatened. The Home Office's own guidance currently recognises that disclosure is a process, not an instant event. If the revised screening processes and reasonable grounds test are applied in a way that expects immediate narrative clarity, the most traumatised individuals become the least likely to be recognised.

When drafting the proposed new modern slavery legislation, we urge the Government to strike the right balance between “address[ing] potential misuse” and “maintaining essential protections”. There is a grave danger that attempts to stop inappropriate referrals will prevent genuine victims of modern slavery from exiting exploitation and accessing support. We caution against any clarification of international obligations to support victims that would exclude whole cohorts of victims. We welcome the Government's repeal of that approach in the Illegal Migration Act and urge the Government to maintain a decision-making framework that takes each person's case on its own merits. As you said in the House of Commons, the new legislation must ensure that the Modern Slavery Act protects all those it was designed for, and note that the European Anti-Trafficking Convention, which the Act implements, puts protection and assistance for victims as among its key purposes, making no distinction between groups of victims.

We caution against adopting stricter asylum models as a blueprint for reform. Evidence from Denmark is instructive. Civil society submissions to the UN's Universal Periodic Review describe how the alignment in Denmark between trafficking decisions and deportation procedures deters victims from seeking support. GRETA's third review of Denmark also highlights insufficient efforts and a lack of capacity among asylum staff to identify human trafficking victims and criticises the focus on ‘currently trafficked’ victims. These outcomes demonstrate the risks of allowing immigration control to distort the responsibilities of identification and protection. The United Kingdom must avoid these pitfalls.

The United Kingdom has played a leading role in fighting modern slavery. The current Government has an opportunity to strengthen that role by ensuring reforms bolster victim protection rather than restrict it. Victims turned away early rarely return at a better time; they risk falling back into exploitation or disappearing from safeguarding reach. When this occurs, traffickers benefit, and justice becomes harder to achieve. Victims hold critical evidence against their perpetrators. Only by supporting victims will we see more successful prosecutions as the Government desires.

The clearing of the NRM backlog provides a strong foundation. The next step is to ensure the gateway into the system remains open to those in need.

We encourage the Government to take the following actions:

1. Provide support for victims in immigration detention that will enable safe and trauma-sensitive disclosure of exploitation alongside the new screening processes.

2. Maintain current statutory guidance about the impact of trauma and other barriers to disclosure and ensure this is given equal weight with the timing of disclosure when assessing victims' credibility.
3. Ensure new modern slavery legislation will underline the safeguarding and criminal justice purpose of the Modern Slavery Act and maintain a case-by-case approach to eligibility and not exclude whole cohorts of victims.
4. Strengthen guidance and training for decision-makers and first responders so that speed and accuracy progress together.
5. Commit to transparent monitoring of reasonable grounds decisions, including disaggregated data, to ensure the system remains evidence-based and fair.
6. Target investment at prosecuting the organised criminal gangs perpetrating both modern slavery and immigration crime, as enforcement remains one of the weakest aspects of the current system.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your officials to discuss how the United Kingdom can uphold both the integrity of the Modern Slavery Act and the Government's wider objectives without reducing access to protection for those who need it most.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Wallis OBE, CEO Unseen
James Clarry, CEO Justice & Care
Dani Wardman, CEO, Medaille Trust
Debbie Ariyo OBE, CEO, AFRUCA Safeguarding Children
Patrick Ryan, CEO, Hestia
Helen Ball, CEO, Causeway
Rachel Medina, CEO, The Snowdrop Project
Sarah Woodcock, CEO, The Anti-Slavery Collective
Yvonne Stocks, CEO, Palm Cove Society
Daljit Kaur, Non Executive Chief Officer, Ashiana Sheffield
Paul Bott, CEO, SJOG
Tim Nelson, CEO, Hope for Justice
Lorraine Mealings, CEO, BCHA
Rebekah Lisgarten, CEO, Stop the Traffik