IT STILL HAPPENS HERE: FIGHTING UK SLAVERY IN THE 2020s
“Victims of modern slavery, from forced labour to sexual exploitation, have their human rights violated every day and are constantly put in dangerous situations, often through manipulation, coercion and abuse. Sadly, modern slavery is much more prevalent in communities than is realised. We must rid this evil from every single community across the United Kingdom and give victims the support they need to live safe lives. Ending this exploitation for good must be a priority.”

Carolyn Harris, MP for Swansea East
Five years ago, Britain passed landmark legislation to step up its fight against modern slavery. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 was groundbreaking in the way it defined and consolidated modern slavery crimes, increased sentences for perpetrators, made provisions for the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and demanded that businesses address the risk of slavery in their supply chains. It set a global precedent and countries around the world followed suit. This legislation undoubtedly marked a leap forward in Britain’s anti-slavery movement and has had a significant impact across the UK.

However, in the years since this law was passed, political leadership has waned. As the problem of modern slavery grows in this country, there is a risk that the Modern Slavery Act has lured us into a false sense of security. Far from being finished, the work is only just beginning.

There is a serious risk that the crisis triggered by COVID-19 will lead to a rise in modern slavery and human trafficking. The main drivers of modern slavery – poverty, lack of opportunity and other vulnerabilities – will intensify, resulting in an increased risk of exploitation and abuse. Millions of people will be driven into desperation to meet their basic needs and to provide for their families, which will ultimately increase the risk of exploitation. As the pandemic continues, it is crucial that the increased risks of modern slavery are addressed. Concerted and coordinated action from the people will be driven into desperation to meet their basic needs and to provide for their families, vulnerabilities – will intensify, resulting in an increased risk of exploitation and abuse. Millions of people will be driven into desperation to meet their basic needs and to provide for their families, which will ultimately increase the risk of exploitation. As the pandemic continues, it is crucial that the increased risks of modern slavery are addressed. Concerted and coordinated action from the Government, in partnership with the voluntary sector, is now more urgent than ever.

Key findings

- Many thousands of children, women and men of all nationalities and backgrounds - including a growing number of British citizens - continue to be trafficked and exploited for profit by ruthless criminal networks. They are tricked, taken and coerced into sexual slavery, crime, hard labour and domestic servitude. Forced addictions are increasingly used as methods of control.

- Nobody knows the true scale and cost of the crime, but based on a new police data analysis tool we believe there could be at least 100,000 victims in the UK, with the actual number likely to be even greater. According to a 2017 Government study, the economic and social cost of modern slavery was £3.3 billion – £4.3 billion, but this was based on their estimated prevalence of only 10,000 – 13,000 suspected victims. It is time for the Government to update its national assessment of the size of this problem, and the cost to the taxpayer.

- Our understanding of slavery and how to fight it must improve on the frontline if we are to tackle it. A ‘local lottery’ exists when it comes to prioritising the anti-slavery fight across public authorities, and the response often remains reliant on personal leadership rather than it being core business.

- Human traffickers and Organised Crime Groups are running riot in too many communities. Very few face prosecution relative to the number of victims found and even fewer are convicted. As the number of victims discovered has skyrocketed in the last five years, convictions have barely increased. In the year ending March 2019 there were 322 completed prosecutions for modern slavery-related crimes and 218 convictions served. During the same period, 7,525 adults and children were identified as potential victims of modern slavery.

- The UK’s immediate and longer-term response to victims is not up to standard - especially because we lose vital intelligence and evidence when victims disengage or are re-trafficked. We can no longer afford half-baked care and support. There is a serious backlog of cases within the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Victims often spend months or years in limbo until a decision is made. 80 per cent of people referred to the NRM in 2019 were still waiting for a decision at the end of December 2019 (8,429 cases).

- The British public can play a unique role in the fight against trafficking by reporting concerns to the police, but almost 60 per cent of people do not know who to tell when they spot the signs. Public awareness has improved though, with 63 per cent saying they are more aware of slavery than they were five years ago. 68 per cent say fighting modern slavery should be a top political priority.

These findings show that frontline agencies are only just getting started in the fight against modern slavery. They are in desperate need of guidance, resources, leadership and, crucially, data on the scale of the problem.

Five years on from the Modern Slavery Act, the exploitation and abuse of vulnerable people is far too easy, with criminals still operating at low risk in many communities. Fighting modern slavery is complex and challenging, but by no means is it impossible. With the right strategy and proportionate resources backed up by a sense of urgency from Westminster, we can ensure an all-out assault on this vile crime.

This report calls the Government to action now, focusing on the following key principles for reform:

- To fight the problem adequately we have to understand its true scale and invest accordingly.
- Good care and support for the exploited is not a luxury extra or just the right thing to do – it bolsters the fight against organised crime because victims are a vital source of intelligence.
- Charities can play a more strategic role in partnering with police. This is a largely untapped resource.
- Bringing more slave masters and Organised Crime Groups to justice is essential if we are to tackle this crime. At the moment modern slavery is a low risk, high reward crime. This has to change.
- More foreign national victims can be helped to return home safely, if they wish to do so, whilst maintaining contact with criminal investigations.
- As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, prevention is crucial to ensure modern slavery is not allowed to flourish.
Summary of recommendations to strengthen the UK’s fight against slavery

1. We need to update our understanding of the scale and nature of modern slavery and human trafficking in the UK. The new police data analytical tool showcased in this report should be scaled up and commissioned to publish an annual national prevalence assessment. This should inform operational and strategic responses and ensure proportionate investment from the Government. More political focus is also required: the Government must produce a new cross-departmental modern slavery strategy setting out clear responsibilities, actions and outcomes for tackling this crime. The high-level Task Force once chaired by the former Prime Minister needs to be revived to spearhead a cross-Government response. Mandatory training should be introduced to ensure public authorities are living up to their duties under the Modern Slavery Act.

2. The Government must enshrine survivor rights in law to guarantee and protect their access to support. This should be done by finally passing the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill 2019 – 2021, which would give victims in England and Wales a guaranteed right to support during the initial period when the NRM decision is being made, and for a further minimum of 12 months afterwards. We also call on the Government to consider further support at that point, akin to the US-style ‘Trafficking in Persons’ visa which offers temporary leave to remain where a victim is assisting as a witness in a criminal investigation. Other reforms should include localising the NRM decision-making process and fast-tracking Government-to-Government safe return and reintegration schemes to allow more victims to return home quickly and safely when they wish to. The Home Office Assisted Voluntary Return scheme needs strengthening when it comes to slavery victims, moving from cash payments that increase vulnerability or go to waste, to targeted spend aiding recovery and avoiding re-trafficking.

3. Police engagement with victims needs to be transformed to dismantle criminal networks and bring more traffickers to justice. This should include piloting promising police and NGO partnership models such as the Justice and Care Victim Navigator, providing wraparound support to victims and securing police engagement. Specialist training for investigating officers, prosecutors and judges should be increased, as should training for a wider cohort of agencies such as the CPS and judiciary, with a focus on victim engagement. It is also time for the Government to consider whether additional safeguarding options should be made available to police officers, social services and UK Border Force personnel to remove potential victims from situations of exploitation for their own safety, for a limited period of time. This could divert them from harm and enable the gathering of intelligence about suspected exploiters. This is an issue raised regularly on the frontline and it has been flagged repeatedly by other research, including the 2016 Modern Slavery Act Review led by Caroline Haughey OBE QC.

4. We need to understand what is happening to the growing number of Britons being enslaved. An urgent inquiry should be launched into the increasing exploitation of British citizens, to gain a better understanding about how they fall victim to traffickers and how they can access the support they are entitled to. This inquiry must also consider earlier intervention to break the cycle of abuse. As a first and urgent step, we are calling for the Government to remove the ‘local connection’ rules for victims of modern slavery who need to be moved across local authority boundaries to escape their situation of abuse and exploitation and be housed safely.

5. Criminals are taking advantage of the Modern Slavery Act. This must stop. A far more robust early assessment tool and guidance for investigating officers, prosecutors and judiciary must be developed to prevent the abuse of the Statutory Defence in the legislation. The non-prosecution of victims is an important principle in law, but it currently undermines confidence in the legislation.

6. Benefit fraud linked to modern slavery must be disrupted. The Department for Work and Pensions must develop more robust measures to identify cases of modern slavery and work in partnership with other law enforcement agencies to uncover criminal activity. Measures should include, but not be limited to, mandatory training for Jobcentre work coaches, who are often the first to encounter a potential victim, as well as the development of a flag system for modern slavery indicators on the DWP database.

7. Section 54 of the Act (Transparency in Supply Chains) should be tightened, as the impact on supply chain transparency has been limited so far. The Government must introduce measures to increase compliance with Section 54, as well as effective ways to scrutinise and hold to account companies that fail to tackle slavery in their supply chains. This is particularly important in order to prevent an increase in labour exploitation in the aftermath of COVID-19, as companies rush to recoup their losses. Furthermore, the Home Office must now publish its report following the Transparency in Supply Chains consultation held in July – September 2019. It is long overdue.

8. The Government should prioritise international action and coordination to dismantle criminal networks, support recovery and prevent trafficking in the first place. Post-Brexit, innovative European partnerships for information-sharing and cross-border investigations for the purposes of pursuing and convicting traffickers are vital. We cannot allow political tensions to prevent action against organised crime, though we must challenge the European Union to fight this crime with even greater vigour and focus. Modern slavery must remain a top priority for the UK’s overseas aid and development budget, targeting key source countries for the UK and global hotspots and with a special focus on addressing underlying vulnerabilities to modern slavery exacerbated by COVID-19. The soft power of overseas aid should be exerted, particularly in post-Brexit trade talks, to move key countries forward, as happens with the US Government’s annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report.