

Impact of providing technology to survivors of modern slavery in the UK

Research Summary

June 2023

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Research by:

This is a summary of the report **Evaluating the provision of distributed technology to adults with lived experience of modern slavery**, based on research conducted by the **University of Liverpool** in partnership with **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** and **Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance (TARA)**. The project was funded through an open call for proposals by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC), which in turn is funded and supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The full report can be accessed on the Modern Slavery PEC website at modernslaverypec.org/resources/technology-survivors.

The Modern Slavery PEC has actively supported the production of this Research Summary. However, the views expressed in this summary and the full report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery PEC.

Findings

- It is becoming increasingly important for people with experience of modern slavery to have access to technology to use services aimed to support recovery from exploitation and reintegration into society.
- Digital access, via devices such as smartphones and laptops as well as data packages, is necessary for survivors not only to access support services but, equally importantly, to undertake essential tasks such as paying bills or shopping, engaging with groups and counselling, connecting with friends and family, and pursuing professional opportunities.
- Using digital technology is vital for helping survivors to find communities and gain their independence.
- Whilst some survivors enter the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) owning their own devices, provision of digital devices to survivors in receipt of NRM support is inconsistent, dependent on funding or donations, insufficiently monitored and provision is often temporary.
- Survivors of modern slavery need both internet safety and digital skills training. This can reduce the potential risks of re-trafficking that can arise from using smartphones and other devices. Safety and skills training supports survivors' access to and use of services delivered online. Current training provision is often *ad-hoc*, varies across providers, and lacks a balance between individualised, tailor-made support and formal training.
- While organisations value the efficiency inherent in using digital technologies to manage information and referrals, the survivors involved in this study were largely unaware of the NRM itself, despite receiving NRM support, illustrating a lack of informed consent.

Background

The UK Government has a statutory obligation to identify and support survivors of modern slavery in order to assist with recovery from past experiences of exploitation. The UK Government's NRM plays an essential role in this context. Many organisations provide support to adults with lived experience of modern slavery both within and outside of the NRM. Their support includes many aspects that are crucial to survivors' process of recovery and reintegration (including, for example, accommodation in a safe house, financial support, translation services, healthcare, and legal advice). However, while delivery of and survivors' access to these services often rely on the use of digital technologies, there is no specific requirement for the provision of these technologies within current regulations and processes. What is more, little is known in the current research about such provision and the challenges that both organisations and survivors face.

To fill this gap in the research, this report addresses the question of how adults with lived experience of modern slavery use and access support services through digital technologies. This question is important if we are to better support survivors within and outside of the NRM, and in the wider context of tackling issues of digital inequalities. As in the case of other marginalised groups, survivors of modern slavery are likely to experience issues of limited access and skills to use digital technologies, which can hinder their ability to reintegrate into society. Ironically, for a group that requires more support than others in terms of digital inclusion, little is known about the challenges that they experience and the ways in which they are digitally excluded.

Methodology

After conducting a review of relevant literature, this study adopted a mixed method approach to collect and analyse data from both organisations supporting survivors and survivors themselves. To explore the views and experiences of organisations, as well as the challenges they face in the context of supporting survivors through digital technologies, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 18 organisations across the UK. These were followed by the administration of a Delphi review survey among organisations - i.e., a survey designed to elicit their feedback on initial findings from the interviews. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 11 survivors so as to capture their views and experiences of using digital technologies, with a focus on the benefits and risks of their use.

Findings

1. It is becoming increasingly important for people with experience of modern slavery to have access to technology to use services aimed to support recovery from exploitation and reintegration into society.

During the interviews, stakeholder organisations highlighted the necessity for survivors to have access to digital technologies to engage with support services delivered both within and outside of the NRM. This is especially important since most of these services moved online during the Covid-19 pandemic and this trend continues following the lifting of restrictions. Stakeholders emphasised that survivors need the internet in order to access services such as legal advice, translation, financial support (e.g. social benefits) and the NHS.

Given the expectation that survivors use digital devices to engage with support services, ensuring that survivors are aware of the features of digital devices and can comfortably use these devices is paramount. While most survivors had access to a mobile phone (either one that they already possessed or that they were given as part of the NRM support package), both stakeholders and survivors recognised the limitations of smartphones. In particular, the small screen is a significant limitation when engaging with support services such as counselling appointments. Laptops, by contrast, are better suited for online meetings and for accessing Microsoft Office applications as well as educational content and job applications online. However, irrespective of the type of device used, survivors agreed enthusiastically that digital access and the internet were an essential part of their lives and using support services.

"[digital access] 'is very important, I can do anything [with it]... We don't need to go to the bank or we don't need to go to the GP because we can email them... It's making my life easy"

Interview with survivor



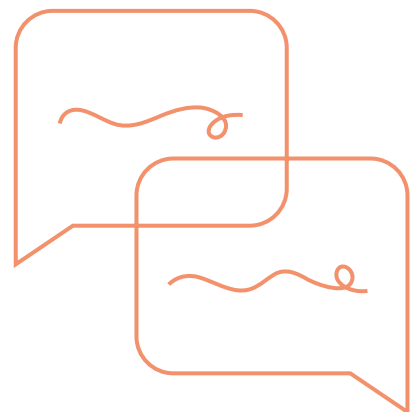
2. Digital access, both via devices such as smartphones and laptops, as well as data packages, are necessary for survivors not only to access support services but, equally importantly, to undertake essential tasks such as paying bills or shopping, engaging with groups and counselling, connecting with friends and family, and pursuing professional opportunities.

Stakeholder organisations highlighted that digital access is particularly important for the wellbeing of survivors. Having faced exploitation and/or trafficking, adults with lived experience of modern slavery will need support to recover and participate fully in society. This includes engaging with groups and counselling, connecting with friends and family and pursuing professional opportunities. Many of these activities are now fully or partly digital.

Survivors commented that they use the internet for a range of everyday tasks including learning, paying bills, shopping, entertainment, leisure, booking healthcare appointments, locating information and communicating with friends and family through social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), and finding employment. Particularly important for all participants interviewed is the use of WhatsApp and other communications applications (e.g., Zoom, FaceTime) not just to contact friends and family but to contact others such as support workers or their children's teachers. They often use the internet to use Google Maps, which enables them to familiarise themselves with their local area and find directions. Finally, they use digital devices to overcome language barriers either through the informal use of translation applications in everyday conversations or through taking part in formal English courses online.

"I don't know the language, so [the internet] helps me a lot... Without the internet, I wouldn't be able to learn the language, which is a very big barrier socially"

Interview with survivor



3. Using digital technology is vital for helping survivors to find communities and gain their independence.

Stakeholder organisations spoke of the importance of digital technologies for enabling survivors to build connections with different communities and keeping in touch with external support such as solicitors and support workers. Some felt it was important that survivors be actively encouraged to join support networks both offline and online. Most provided a space for survivors to engage with others who have had similar experiences, which in turn helps them to build resilience and move forward.

Similarly, survivors expressed that joining online communities is one of the advantages of using the internet, as it enables them to interact with people with similar experiences or from a similar background. Equally, the internet enables survivors to gain independence and confidence, and develop soft skills and connections. Stakeholders discussed the importance, if not centrality, of digital technology in helping people affected by modern slavery to move on to independent living. Given the contemporary roles of digital systems, media and services, a lack of access and skills significantly limits their independence.

“[Not having access to digital technology] is a barrier to independence because it’s so annoying if you feel like you have to keep bugging someone like ‘oh, I can’t do this. Can you make this appointment for me or can you do that, do this?’ Oh, yeah, I think it’s hugely important for independence ... because you can build so many skills, whether you’re taking classes online, reading things, you know, accessing groups or Zoom calls online, having that kind of contact with people, and potentially a lot of them will have family in different places”

Interview with stakeholder organisation



4. Whilst some survivors enter the NRM owning their own devices, provision of digital devices to survivors in receipt of NRM support is inconsistent, dependent on funding or donations, insufficiently monitored, and often temporary.

A key finding of this study is that provision of technology to survivors lacks consistency. This holds both within the NRM support process and amongst those providing support outside the NRM. Support varied: in some cases, it included a rounded package of technology (laptop and smartphone) with access (data packages) as well as training, while in other cases, devices were on short-term loan, or only data packages were provided and access to training was inconsistent. In some cases, only a basic phone was provided with no internet access. This inconsistency in the provision of technology and support reflects and is exacerbated by inconsistencies in funding. To provide digital support, many organisations rely on donations or undertake their own fundraising, which is not guaranteed.

During the Covid-19 period, more funding initiatives were launched by government agencies, for example the Home Office in England and Wales and Connecting Scotland in Scotland. However, stakeholder organisations acknowledged that there are now questions about whether funding for digital technology will continue now that Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted.

"[During the Covid-19 period], we found that the Scottish Government gave a lot of money for people to be given smartphones [and] data for the year..., all that came in quickly, because those organisations needed to be able to see their clients"

Interview with stakeholder organisation

At the same time, some organisations also remarked on the problem of a lack of centralised distribution and monitoring of digital technology provision across the UK. Interviews with survivors corroborated these findings. While most who were provided with technology reported being able to keep any devices they received, this was not consistent across the board. Similarly, while many organisations considered it necessary that provision of digital technology be permanent rather than temporary, most reported that this kind of permanent provision is often hindered by lack of funding, representing a considerable barrier to survivors' reintegration into society.

5. Survivors of modern slavery need both internet safety and digital skills training. This can reduce the potential risks of re-trafficking that can arise from using smart phones and other devices. Safety and skills training provides survivors with the support they need in order to access and use services delivered online. Current training provision is often ad-hoc, varies across providers and lacks a balance between individualised, tailor-made support and formal training.

Stakeholder organisations were generally aware of the safety issues that surround the use of technology by survivors, key concerns being the risk of re-trafficking along with inappropriate sharing of personal information. Most organisations agreed that more needs to be done to educate survivors about the risks inherent in using digital technologies. However, a clear finding is the lack of consistency in the provision of either formal training or informal advice by organisations about internet safety. The research found that some organisations offered survivors structured programmes about online risks and others provided only informal advice. Both training and advice are crucial to educating survivors around safe internet use.

Just as important as training survivors in internet safety is the development of their broader digital skills. Some survivors, especially at the start of their reintegration journey, may not have the digital skills to apply for jobs, communicate with caseworkers or friends and family, nor access educational opportunities. Again, the research found that provision of training by organisations is largely informal and offered on an *ad-hoc* basis. Though this may allow for more tailor-made support for individual survivors, it is seldom delivered in parallel with more structured opportunities for learning. As is found with the UK population as a whole, survivors valued different informal ways of developing digital skills, including learning from friends and family. Equally, when opportunities for formal training courses and programmes are presented, they were eager to pursue such opportunities and recognised the importance of developing their digital skills:

“I did the course and after the course I begin to be able to familiar to the internet, and everything was quite open and simple to me now to be able to use the internet on my own without getting any help... And I’ll go on, do a course as well that [my] children’s school called me how to be safe online. So yes, so that one is quite really helpful as well”

Interview with survivor

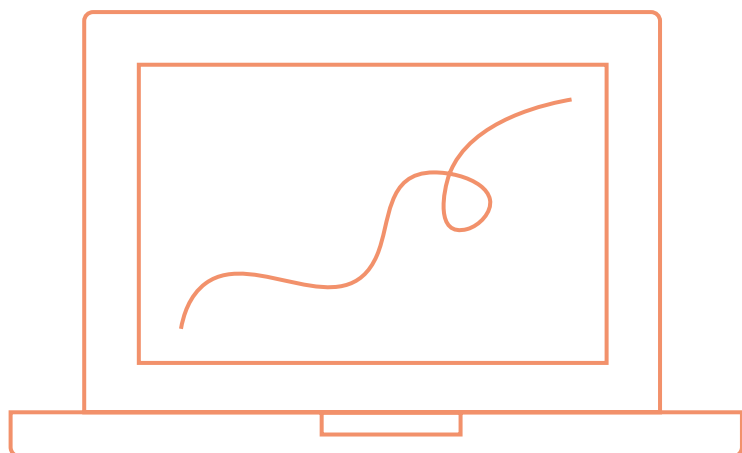
6. While organisations value the efficiency inherent in using digital technologies to manage information and referrals, the survivors involved in this study were often largely unaware of the NRM itself, despite receiving NRM support

Stakeholder organisations tend to use case management systems to ensure that all of their clients' details, including information about gender, age and number of dependents, are recorded. Stakeholders emphasised how this helps them to manage information more effectively and the convenience of these systems. For example, they explained that the task of sharing information about potential survivors with the Home Office and referring people to either the NRM or the Duty to Notify (depending on consent) is no longer a separate process but is part of the same system.

However, while digital technologies have simplified the ways in which organisations identify potential survivors and make referrals, survivors themselves are often largely unaware of the NRM itself, despite receiving NRM support. This lack of awareness has implications in terms of whether survivors know about their rights and entitlements and are able to provide informed consent. The issue of awareness was raised by stakeholders and reflected in the interviews with survivors themselves.

"I think there's kind of wider problems with the NRM referral process, survivors' involvement in that, and really understanding what they're signing up to, whether that is paper or online"

Interview with stakeholder organisation



Recommendations

For the UK Government

1. Provide increased and more consistent funding for digital support.

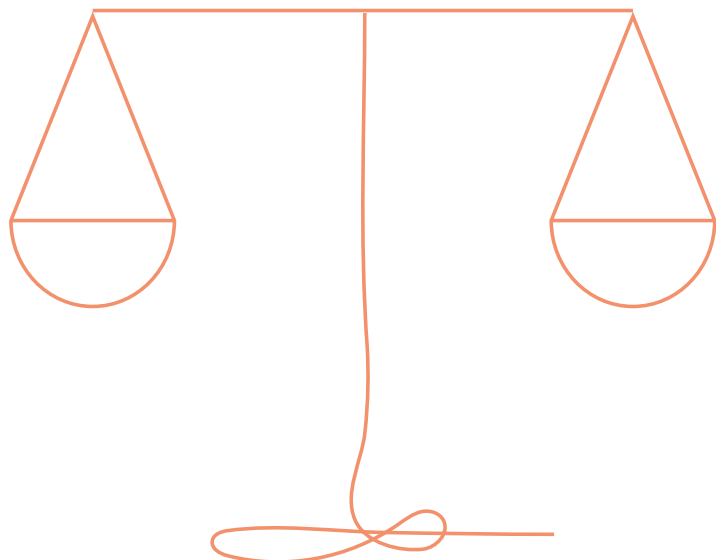
More opportunities are needed for funding the work and initiatives of civil society organisations supporting survivors, in particular to support their digital access and skills. Currently, funding in this area is inconsistent. We recommend that the UK Government allocates increased and more permanent funding to support the provision of digital technology and data to survivors as well as supporting opportunities for digital training. In addition to providing more funding, policymakers should also explore how to make it easier for technology companies to donate devices and data. A useful framework that could be drawn upon with a view to recycling technology for this purpose is the [National Device Bank](#) produced by Good Things Foundation.

2. Implement a minimum digital requirement for survivors as part of the NRM support package. This study found that provision of digital technology by organisations is essential for survivors to access support services and participate in society. However, this is currently inconsistent and insufficiently monitored. We recommend policymakers implement a minimum digital requirement for survivors as part of the NRM support package and provide guidance to organisations providing support. This would consist of at least one entry level smartphone, entry level laptop, and a data package. Considering the increase in moving public and NRM support services online (e.g. GP services) following the Covid-19 pandemic, to enable access to these services survivors need to be provided with the necessary equipment, data and training required to access these services. A useful instrument for producing guidance for such requirement could be the [Minimum Digital Living Standard](#) developed by the University of Liverpool, Loughborough University and partners (see [Blackwell et al., 2023](#) for further details). As for digital training for survivors, guidance should also be produced and shared with all organisations supporting survivors, including both those that deliver some form of digital training and those who currently do not, with clear emphasis on the type of training required. Again, it is important to ensure that survivors have both digital access and the relevant skills needed to use devices safely, to reduce the risk of online harms such as scams and re-trafficking. Guidance for digital training for survivors should be produced on the basis of examples of best practice, including IOM's Skills Training and Reintegration programme (STAR) (2022), as recommended by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2022) for providing centralised employment support. Another example of good practice could be the Connecting Scotland programme launched by Scottish Government (see Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2023), which includes

a package provision of digital devices and digital skills training. This means that the guidance produced by policymakers should incorporate signposting to existing support services – including, also, Good Things Foundation’s national data bank and device bank as well as ‘Learn My Way’ training resources.

3. Explore the creation of an online support portal. This could be helpful for organisations to better manage referrals and information, as well as for survivors to monitor their own progress and be more actively involved throughout the NRM process. We recommend policymakers explore the creation of an online portal for both organisations and survivors that needs to be highly secure and safe to use (see also below recommendation 5 for support organisations).

4. Encourage organisations to provide information in multiple languages. Funding and guidance should be provided by policymakers with a view to supporting organisations to provide information on their websites in multiple languages, especially when it comes to the types of support services that they provide. Such a measure would alleviate language barriers experienced by survivors, which are among the key predictors of digital exclusion, and should also apply to the design of the online portal suggested above.



For support organisations

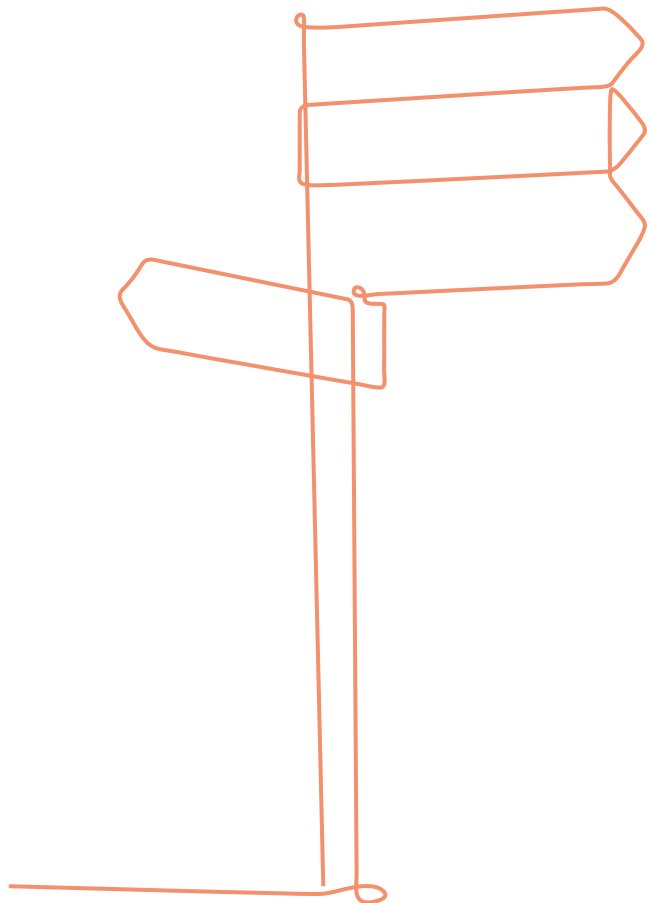
5. Explore use of an online portal. To aid survivors' reintegration into society, we recommend organisations explore the use of a centralised online resources portal (see also above recommendation 3 for UK government). This should be highly secure and safe to use and should include links to vetted external support services such as mental health websites, as well as features that enable survivors to refer themselves to such services. The portal could also provide survivors with access to their own details and the ability to monitor their own progress once they enter the NRM. This will give survivors an element of control over their own recovery and help them in developing independence. Survivors could each be allocated with login credentials to manage their own progress. The portal could incorporate a traffic-light feature for organisations that identifies those survivors that are vulnerable to and/or at risk of re-trafficking.

6. Take a balanced approach to digital training. Organisations should be committed to taking a balanced approach to digital support and training. This would include providing access to both structured digital training as well as individualised digital support that is specifically tailored to the needs of survivors of modern slavery. This support should be aimed at equipping survivors with the skills and knowledge, with a focus on online safety, they need to live in our current digital society. Structured training aimed at developing survivors' more functional skills (e.g., to apply for jobs or search for information) and knowledge of online safety should be provided. Informal *ad-hoc* guidance (e.g., one-to-one meetings or informal drop-in sessions) should also be made available by organisations so as to support survivors in terms of troubleshooting and developing digital confidence.

7. Explore the creation and use of a centralised body supervising the delivery of digital training. Organisations should provide both formal and informal training (see above) in ways that are supervised by a specific body that may be established through the Modern Slavery Victim Care and Coordination Contract (MSVCC) and equivalents in the devolved administrations, whose responsibility would be to have oversight and ensure consistent provision of such training.

Areas for further research

- Future qualitative work could draw on this research in order to further explore the challenges experienced by organisations in this area as well as the views and experiences of survivors using digital technologies in the process of reintegrating into society.
- Quantitative research could build on this study to design and administer a UK-wide survey to map both the best practices and challenges of organisations working in this area. Such a survey could also provide a more detailed understanding of the patterns and variability in the current provision of digital technology to survivors, with a focus on the current gaps and where more work needs to be undertaken.
- International studies could also build on this research to explore questions around survivors' use of digital technologies and the support they receive within different contexts, and with a focus on different populations.



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