

Framing modern slavery

Closing the gaps in the public's understandings of exploitation in the UK

July 2024

Author: James Robertson



Research by:

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This is a report on the research aimed at improving the communication of modern slavery in the UK. It was conducted by the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) in close collaboration with the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC), which commissioned the project. The project also produced guidance on effective ways to communicate modern slavery to the British public, which can be found on the Modern Slavery PEC website at modernslaverypec.org/resources/framing-modern-slavery.

The Modern Slavery PEC is funded and supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

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.

The report is written by James Robertson with support from Jakub Sobik from the Modern Slavery PEC. Project support by Shan Stephens and Ant Jarret at PIRC. The focus groups were co-designed, facilitated and analysed by Jane Carn at Survation.

Background

Modern slavery affects estimated tens of thousands of people in the UK, yet it is not widely understood. Current terms and ways of describing modern slavery are problematic and widely contested, from 'modern slavery' with its historical and post-colonial connotations (framing slavery as 'ownership' of one person by another and a person who experienced it a 'slave'), to the conflation of 'trafficking' with people smuggling and migration.

There is evidence suggesting that a large part of the British public have a relatively narrow view of modern slavery, why it's happening, where it's happening and who's involved. This view shapes perspectives on what should be done about modern slavery which tend to focus on punishing the perpetrators and supporting those at risk to better avoid exploitation. While clearly this is part of the picture, what's left out of this frame is how systemic drivers create the conditions that cultivate and sustain exploitation at scale.

There is also growing evidence that language used to describe modern slavery is not accepted by some people with lived experience. The language used by policymakers and law enforcement can alienate rather than resonate with those at the sharp end of the problem and so can deter those experiencing exploitation to come forward or seek support in their local communities.

Project aims

- Identify frames and narratives that would be more effective in increasing the understanding of modern slavery by the British public, enabling a more evidence-based and survivor-informed public debate.
- Develop language in collaboration with survivors that resonates with survivors of modern slavery in the UK, enabling better and more meaningful engagement with authorities, support services, research and other areas of work addressing modern slavery.

Method

The project aimed to interrogate the following questions across six distinct phases of work:

1. What are the public perceptions of modern slavery?
2. What are the different ways modern slavery is framed right now in the public debate?
3. What can we learn from existing research into other relevant issues such as poverty, immigration, or criminal justice that could help developing frames?
4. How do survivors describe their own experiences of modern slavery and what do they think about different ways of framing the issue?
5. Which frames are potentially more effective in increasing the understanding of modern slavery and of the experiences of survivors?

The phases of work were as follows:

1. **Objective setting:** As modern slavery is such a complex and multifaceted issue, it was necessary to try to narrow the first of the project aims and identify what aspects of modern slavery the members of the Modern Slavery PEC team felt it was most important that the British Public understand.
2. **Research and Analysis:** Using desk-based research to gain a basic understanding of public perceptions of modern slavery, the different ways modern slavery is framed in the public debate and what we learn from existing research into framing other relevant issues such as poverty, immigration and the criminal justice system.

3. Workshop one with people with lived experience of modern slavery: Bringing ten people with lived experience together and supporting them to collectively identify what they want the public to understand about modern slavery, what language should be used and how it should be framed.
4. Message development and three focus groups with members of the British public: Drafting messages based on the work conducted during phases one to three then working with a research company (Survation) to conduct focus groups to test them. Though mixed in terms of demographics, focus group participants were split into three attitudinal groups: liberal, mixed/ neutral and authoritarian.
5. Workshop two with people with lived experience of modern slavery: Bringing people with lived experience back together, gathering their views on the messages drafted at stage four and the questions raised by the focus groups around the use of specific terms and frames.
6. Analysis and write up: based on an analysis of the findings from phases one to five, develop [guidance](#) for practitioners around which frames could help increase the public's understanding of modern slavery using language that resonates with those who've experienced it.

Ethical approval for the research was received through the British Institute of International and Comparative Law (BIICL), a host organisation of the Modern Slavery PEC. All people with lived experience were remunerated with a voucher for their participation in the workshops.

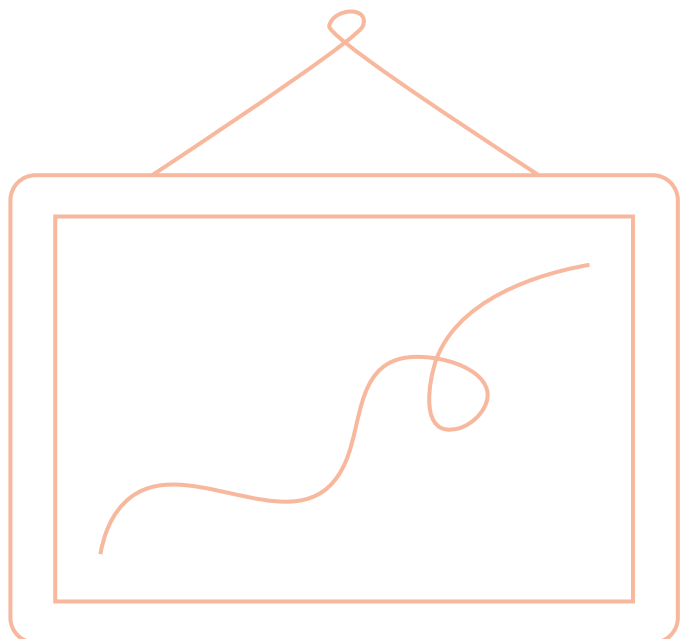
While great care and thought were taken across these phases, it's important to note the limitations of this project. Modern slavery is a broad and complex issue, an umbrella term for distinct forms of exploitation that were tied together by the construction of the term, each multidimensional with unique characteristics and sensitivities. A project of this size could only consult a limited number of people with lived experience of the issue, only so many members of the public at a particular moment in time. We could only review a limited amount of existing research and analyse so many examples of how modern slavery is framed in the press. Therefore the framing guidance developed should be taken as a starting point for a conversation about framing of modern slavery in a public debate. Different frames could work for different audiences, different communicators may have different framing goals, beyond simply "increasing understanding". More research needs to be carried out to have a more comprehensive picture of framing of modern slavery. We hope that this report can help spark the conversations that lead to that work.

What is framing?

“Frames are ways of packaging and making sense of information. They involve choices about how an issue is presented—what is and isn’t emphasized, how it is explained, what connections are made, and which commitments are invoked. We make framing choices all the time—in both formal and informal communications—from the values we invoke to explain why something matters (e.g., justice or freedom) to the metaphors we use when talking about how things work (e.g., knowledge as sight or life as a journey). We can think of these different types of framing choices as frame elements that together can be combined into a cohesive framing strategy.

The frames we use shape how people make sense of and respond to what we’re communicating. They affect people’s understanding of the issue—what’s going on, and how does it work? They affect people’s support for solutions and the actions they’re willing to take (e.g., their level of support for needed policies). They also affect people’s attitudes—like who they see as responsible for an issue and whether they feel a sense of personal or collective efficacy.”

Frameweorks Institute, [“What Does Caring Mean? A New Framing Strategy to Shift Thinking about Kids and Families. Research Report.”](#)



Phase 1: objective setting

One way to understand framing is that it's 'where we choose to shine the light'. Like framing a photograph, we can make choices about what's included in the frame and what's left out. This process, alongside how the story is narrated; the characters involved, their relationship to each other, what we're told is important and the moral of the tale, can have significant implications for what we understand about an issue as a result. With an issue as complex and broad as modern slavery we cannot reasonably hope to illuminate it in its entirety. Therefore, we held a workshop to invite Modern Slavery PEC staff to reflect on what common misconceptions are promoted about modern slavery and how this project might seek to redress them. Some of the misconceptions identified were:

- That modern slavery is the same as historical slavery, whereby people are considered someone's property and physically locked in chains;
- That modern slavery is only perpetuated by criminal gangs/ trafficking rings;
- That modern slavery only happens overseas, to foreign nationals (not UK citizens) and is therefore primarily an immigration issue;
- That modern slavery is about sexual exploitation and primarily affects women;
- That the primary solution is to police and punish the perpetrators and rescue the victims;
- That people can't be forced to commit crimes and should be able to say no to being exploited;
- That everyone is as likely as anyone else to be a victim.

In this context, some understandings identified as important to promote were:

- That modern slavery occurs when people are deceived or coerced into a situation where they're exploited - this exploitative situation is often maintained through blackmail, threats and coercion, which can be as powerful or more so than physical means i.e violence and/or chains;
- That modern slavery is happening right now in the UK to both UK and foreign nationals;
- That modern slavery is underpinned by wider structural problems like inequality, social welfare and immigration policy - these problems contribute to individuals sometimes choosing to enter or remain in exploitative situations as it's the best out of a bad set of options;
- That we can change modern slavery by changing policies which address these underlying structural problems;
- That modern slavery has a huge impact on people (men, women and children) and their loved ones - recovery is a long term process that requires significant ongoing help and support;
- That modern slavery is perpetrated by individuals and employers as well as criminal gangs.

Phase two: research and analysis

The second phase of the project focused on the following three questions:

1. What are the public perceptions of modern slavery?
2. What are the different ways modern slavery is framed right now?
3. What can we learn from existing research into other relevant issues such as poverty, immigration, or criminal justice that could help developing frames?

To understand how modern slavery is being framed in the media a range of articles were studied, from more right-wing tabloids like the Daily Mail to more liberal print media like the Guardian. In simple terms, this involves looking at who the 'characters' are in the story, what their relationships are to each other, what has been left in the story and what is left out, what language is used and what narratives and deeper beliefs about how the world works are being promoted. This research was combined with reviewing relevant [previous studies](#) with similar aims.

We found that modern slavery is often framed in a way that evokes the relationships in the drama triangle below. In short, the story is: the government (the heroes) are cracking down on the villains (evil gangs of people smugglers) who are kidnapping the victims of (women from overseas) who are being sexually exploited. The government (the heroes) are doing their best to rescue these 'slaves' (victims) (fig. 1).

How Modern Slavery is often being framed in the media/government

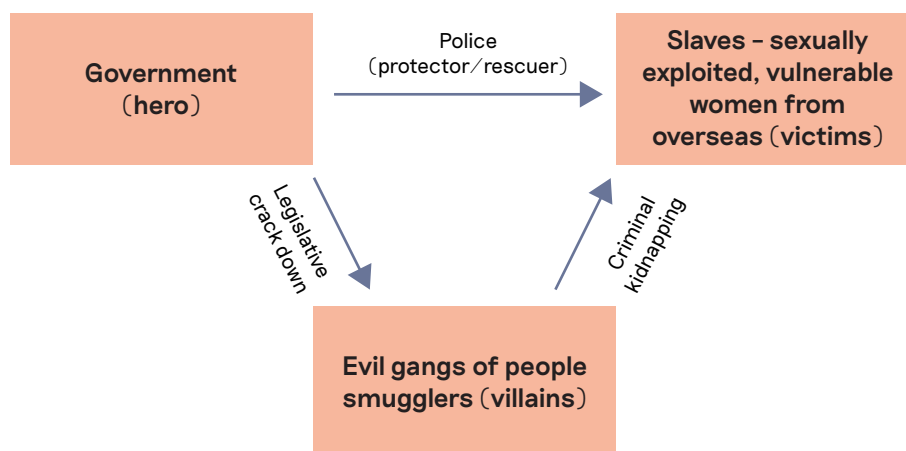


Fig.1. Drama triangle: how modern slavery is often framed in the media and by the Government.

Some print media that we looked at expanded this story to involve the public (helpers) and people who are migrating to the UK (villains). In these instances the role of the public is framed as being limited to helping the government/ police (the heroes) to 'rescue' the victims by raising the alarm. Migrants, in particular those from Albania, are framed as hindering the government (the heroes) by opportunistically abusing their 'good will' (fig. 2).

How Modern Slavery is often being framed in the media/government

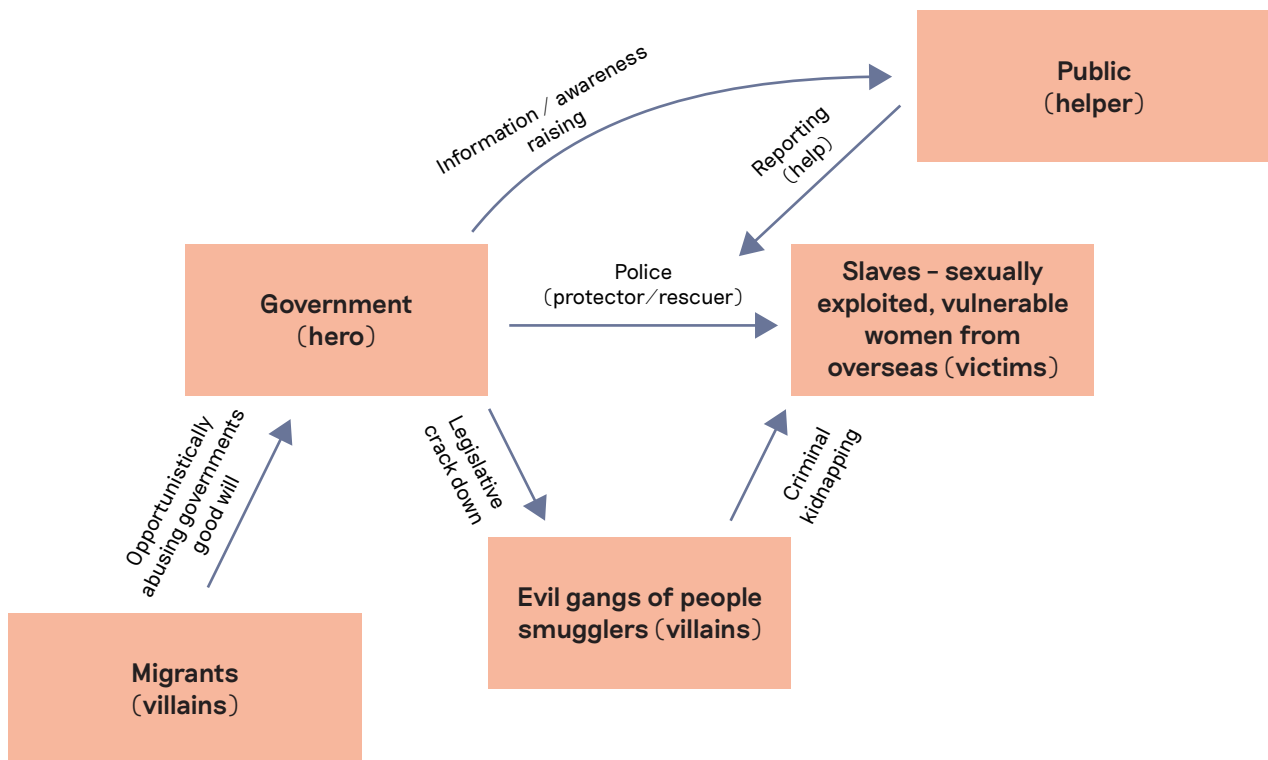


Fig.2. Expanded drama triangle: the role of the public as 'helpers' and some migrants as villains hindering the 'heroes' efforts.

Reviewing a range of surveys by academics, civil society organisations and research companies revealed that while some aspects of this framing seem to have 'stuck', the media framing of modern slavery doesn't map neatly onto public perceptions of the issue. A summary of these public perceptions follows:

1. What is modern slavery?

- The public think of slavery as the removal of choice and freedom and an inability to control their own lives.¹
- The majority of the public are concerned about modern slavery. The British public is more likely than the global average to emphasise the need for freedom from slavery or forced labour.²
- The public commonly associate modern slavery with trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced prostitution, but also forced labour such as domestic work, agriculture and construction.³

2. Where is Modern Slavery happening and to whom?

- On the whole, modern slavery is perceived as happening to migrants rather than UK nationals, primarily affecting women and associated with sex work.⁴
- The UK public recognise modern slavery happens in the UK, but not much and not much in their local area and if it does it's not part of 'everyday life'.⁵
- They think a person's characteristics such as 'being uneducated', 'having a low IQ', and 'having low self-confidence' make them vulnerable to becoming a victim.⁶
- The public tend to think that children are more vulnerable to modern slavery than adults and women are more vulnerable than men.⁷



1. Carrington, Chatzidakis, Shaw, 'Consuming Modern Slavery', 2018.

2. Ipsos. 'Britons split on whether human rights abuse in the UK is a problem', 2018. Hull University and YouGov 2016.

3. Birks and A Gardner, 'Introducing the Slave Next Door', Anti-Trafficking Review, issue 13, 2019. Hull University and YouGov 2016.

4. Dando, Walsh, Brierly, 'Perceptions of Psychological Coercion and Human Trafficking in the West Midlands of England: Beginning to Know the Unknown', 2016. Hull University and YouGov 2016.

5. Carrington, Chatzidakis, Shaw, 'Consuming Modern Slavery', 2018. YouGov How much, if any, modern slavery do you think there is in your local area? 2017. Sharapov, 'Understanding Public Knowledge and Attitudes towards Trafficking in Human Beings' Part 1 2014.

6. Dando, Walsh, Brierly, 'Perceptions of Psychological Coercion and Human Trafficking in the West Midlands of England: Beginning to Know the Unknown', 2016.

7. Carrington, Chatzidakis, Shaw, 'Consuming Modern Slavery', 2018.

3. Why is it happening

- The public recognise 'situational factors' such as poverty, homelessness, war, caring responsibilities, make people more vulnerable.⁸
- The public commonly think people make a calculated risk to enter modern slavery because of the conditions they're living in (often abroad).⁹
- They commonly understand human trafficking as: organised criminals moving people into prostitution and labour exploitation to make money.¹⁰
- Some acknowledge how modern slavery is driven by the capitalist system fuelling greed, materialism, cheap disposable goods and the normalisation of low wages.¹¹

4. What should be done about it?

- Most feel the responsibility to fix the problem is external to them; that the UK government, the police and businesses should do more to tackle it.¹²
- The 'countries of victims' origin' should do more to increase standards of living as a way of preventing economic migration.¹³
- The public sometimes don't report potential victims of modern slavery because a) they think it could make matters worse b) don't trust the police c) don't want to be discriminatory and make assumptions d) fear repercussion from traffickers e) are unsure who to tell.¹⁴
- They believe people who've experienced modern slavery need to be provided with assistance, but should be deported after a recovery period if they have crossed international borders.¹⁵

8. Dando, Walsh, Brierly, 'Perceptions of Psychological Coercion and Human Trafficking in the West Midlands of England: Beginning to Know the Unknown', 2016.

9. J Birks and A Gardner, 'Introducing the Slave Next Door', Anti-Trafficking Review, issue 13, 2019.

10. (Dando, Walsh, Brierly, 'Perceptions of Psychological Coercion and Human Trafficking in the West Midlands of England: Beginning to Know the Unknown', 2016. Sharapov, 'Understanding Public Knowledge and Attitudes towards Trafficking in Human Beings' Part 1 2014).

11. Carrington, Chatzidakis, Shaw, 'Consuming Modern Slavery', 2018.

12. Carrington, Chatzidakis, Shaw, 'Consuming Modern Slavery', 2018; Coalition to Stop Slavery/ Zappi 2022.

13. Sharapov, 'Understanding Public Knowledge and Attitudes towards Trafficking in Human Beings' Part 1, 2014.

14. J Birks and A Gardner, 'Introducing the Slave Next Door', Anti-Trafficking Review, issue 13, 2019; Coalition to Stop Slavery/ Zappi 2022.

15. Sharapov, 'Understanding Public Knowledge and Attitudes towards Trafficking in Human Beings' Part 1, 2014.

Gaps in the public's understanding of modern slavery

It is worth noting when reading this list of public perceptions that it is normal to find lists like these somewhat inconsistent. Human Beings are capable of holding conflicting beliefs about different issues simultaneously. Nevertheless, at this stage of the project, it was possible to identify three gaps between common public perceptions of modern slavery and views of Modern Slavery PEC based on the [official statistics](#) about referred potential cases of modern slavery, reported by the government (fig.3):

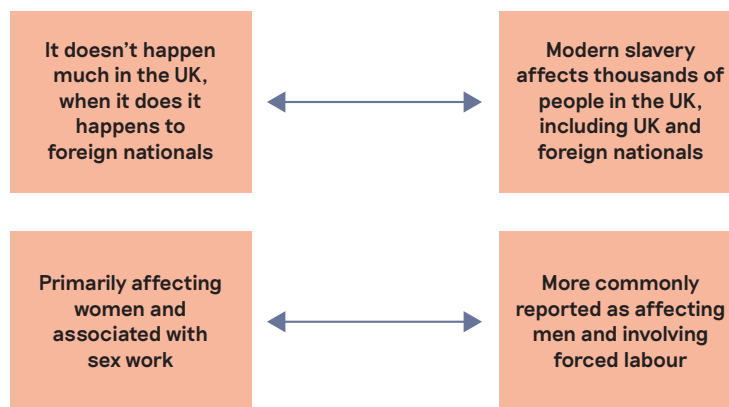


Fig 3. Gaps between the reality and the public understanding of who is affected by modern slavery.

For example there's a gap between the public perception (in the box on the left) that modern slavery doesn't happen much in the UK and when it does it happens to foreign nationals and the view based on government statistics (in the box on the right) that in fact it affects thousands of people in the UK and (from 2016 and 2021) most often, those identified are UK nationals.

Another gap is that the public commonly associate modern slavery with women and sexual exploitation, but it's most commonly reported to the National Referral Mechanism as involving men and labour exploitation.

These two gaps are concerned with who is being exploited and where the exploitation is happening. The third gap is more around why modern slavery is happening and what should be done about it (fig.4).

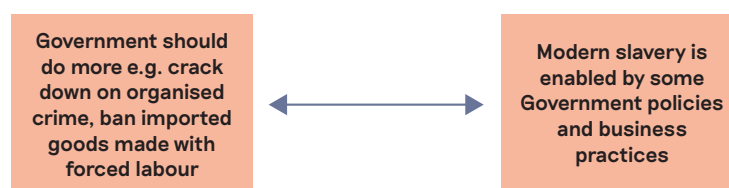
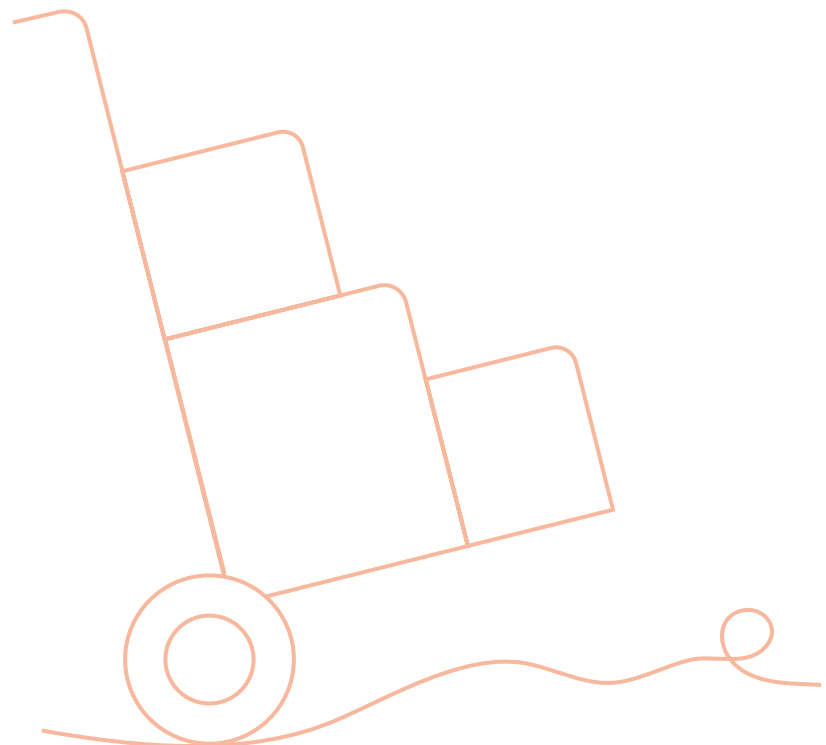


Fig. 4. Gaps between the reality and the public understanding of why modern slavery happens and what should be done about it.

The public perceptions echo a common story (also told by some actors in the sector) that the government should do more to tackle modern slavery such as ban the import of goods made using forced labour. However, by focusing on imports, this message subtly risks reinforcing the perception that modern slavery is something that only happens overseas. This story is also consistent with the 'government as hero' framing promoted through representations of modern slavery in the media.

This belief is in tension with considerable evidence that modern slavery is both compelled and perpetuated by structural drivers shaped by government policies and business practices. While this does not necessitate framing government as 'the villain', it complicates the story by recognising the government's role in creating the conditions that make it more likely for harm to occur. Closing this gap would help modern slavery appear less 'free floating', happening simply because 'people are evil and/or greedy' so gangs roam the streets targeting people in a way akin to the Child Catcher in the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.



Learnings from elsewhere

We also reviewed considerable framing research on relevant issues including work by FrameWorks Institute on how to talk about [poverty](#),¹⁶ young people at risk of [educational exclusion](#)¹⁷ in the UK and [Crime and Justice](#).¹⁸ The recent messaging guide on [asylum](#)¹⁹ from Freedom from Torture was very useful as was the guidance of Anat Shenker Osorio and the ASRC on [asylum](#)²⁰ and [human rights](#).²¹ Many of these findings were used to shape the messages we developed in phase four but some examples of useful findings included:

- Members of the public assume that when a student gets excluded, it is because they must have behaved poorly and violated school rules (Frameworks, 2021)
- To believe a problem can be fixed through human action, people must believe human action caused it. Using verbs like choose, create and decide can help imply current conditions deliberately constructed (ASRC, 2017)
- Describing asylum seekers as 'vulnerable' people risks othering them and blocking seeing them as equal – Communications that evoke pity may bring about short term wins, like donations for a one-off campaign, but they erode the idea that refugees and our audience are equals, united by our shared humanity and deserving of respect (Freedom from Torture, 2021)
- People think of crime as violation of people or property. They think that people weigh up the pros and cons of committing crime (including if they can get away with it) and make a rational choice. So people believe harsher punishments will prevent people (re)offending. They also understand proximity to criminals can sweep people into a powerful stream of crime. (Frameworks, 2017)

16. *How to Talk about Poverty in the United Kingdom. A FrameWorks MessageMemo.* Frameworks Institute, 2018. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/how-to-talk-about-poverty-in-the-united-kingdom/>

17. *Communicating About Young People at Risk of Educational Exclusion in England. A FrameWorks Strategic Brief.* Frameworks Institute, 2021. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/UK_Educational_Exclusion-brief_10-6-21.pdf

18. *Reframing Crime and Justice – A Handy Guide.* Transform Justice, 2017. <https://www.transformjustice.org.uk/publication/reframing-crime-and-justice-a-handy-guide/>.

19. *Changing the Conversation on Asylum: A Messaging Guide.* Freedom From Torture, 2021. <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/changing-the-conversation-on-asylum-a-messaging-guide>

20. *Words that Work. Making the best case for people seeking asylum.* Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. 2017. <https://www.asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ASRC-Words-that-Work-4pp.pdf>

21. *A Brilliant Way of Living Our Lives: How to Talk About Human Rights.* Anat Shenker-Osorio, 2020. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BZdI9-VQSYUe-HCCc_PCY-189T8rnpEO/view

Phase three: workshop 1 with people with lived experience

Ten people with lived experience of modern slavery were invited to a workshop in Birmingham. The purpose of the workshop was to understand what survivors wanted the public to understand about modern slavery and how it should be framed.

When asked what they most wanted the public to know about modern slavery, the themes that emerged were:

- That's it's happening now in the UK
- That it's not only happening to migrants or people of colour
- That it's not the survivors' fault that it happened to them.

The group were given the public perceptions identified in phase one and asked what beliefs they wanted to challenge or change, reinforce or emphasise and strengthen or add. The most common outcomes of this process were to

Challenge – that it has to do with who you are – i.e. your age or level of education or migration status

Reinforce – that modern slavery is the removal of choice, freedom and control over their lives

Strengthen – That recovery takes a lifetime and that people shouldn't be put in harm's way again

In terms of how this experience is described to the public:

- The term 'person with lived experience' was generally preferred to 'survivor' and both were preferable to victim. Some also preferred 'controlled person'
- Generally using the terms slave, slave labour and to some extent modern slavery were disliked
- The term 'exploitation' was generally preferred e.g. 'child exploitation' rather than 'child labour'

There was also a conversation about how organisations in the sector can align with the principles of being non-tokenistic, trauma-informed and preventing harm if/when using the stories of people with lived experience in their messaging. The overwhelming outcome of the discussion was that people with lived experience should have control over their own story including but not limited to: how it's told, what it's used for, where it appears, how long it's in the public domain and how long it takes to write and sign off.

Phase four: message development and focus groups

Closing the gaps

By stage four of the project we had a clearer understanding of how the British public currently understand modern slavery and the gaps between this perception and the views of those with lived experience, Modern Slavery PEC and the government's narratives. Based on this we sought to develop messages that would strengthen the following narratives amongst the public:

- Many people are being controlled and exploited against their will in the UK and abroad;
- The thing that makes people more likely to be coerced or deceived into exploitation (or to exploit others), is not who they are (e.g. gender) or where they're from (e.g. nationality) but rather the social conditions they live in (e.g. poverty);
- Government and business policies can change these conditions and therefore reduce harm;
- Those who've already been controlled and exploited must not be blamed for what happened to them or put back in harm's way.

All the messages we developed to test in the focus groups aimed to close the gaps in the public's understanding of modern slavery by promoting these four narratives above. For example, every message sought to explain how a policy choice made by government increased the risk of exploitation. In doing so we hoped to reduce the tendency to blame individuals for their own exploitation.

However, the framing strategy we utilised was that some messages aimed to strengthen certain narratives more than others. So for example, to help promote the narrative that modern slavery affects UK as well as foreign nationals we developed message 3 (below) about county lines that talked specifically about the exploitation of young British people. In total we developed five messages, each message followed the same structure of opening with a value statement, outlining a problem that prevented that value from being realised and a short and longer term solution. Each message utilised some form of metaphor to describe the problem and messages 1 and 3 sought to help the audience visualise the scale of modern slavery in the UK. The differences between each of the messages is outlined in the table below, followed by each message in full.

	Message 1	Message 2	Message 3	Message 4	Message 5
Value	Freedom (for all): Everyone, regardless of who they are or where they're from, deserves a life free from abuse and exploitation	Security: No matter who you are or where you're from, wanting to guarantee the safety and well-being of your family is as ordinary as breathing	Opportunity (for all): Most of us believe that with the right support, all children can thrive	Freedom (for all): Everyone should have the right to go about their lives freely without fear or harm	Security: No matter who you are or where you're from, wanting to guarantee the safety and well-being of your family is as ordinary as breathing
Scale	A small stadium's worth of people	The Low Pay Commission estimates that over 420,000 workers received less than the minimum wage	Picture a packed concert arena filled with British children and young people	n/a	n/a
Problem	The government's choice not to properly enforce labour laws	The government has chosen to withhold the right to work from those seeking to rebuild their lives in our communities	The government's decision to cut school funding for those with additional needs and a cost of living scandal	The lack of government investment in public services	A lack of oversight, visas tied to specific employers and too few labour inspectors
Metaphor	Leaving the back door open to exploitation	Set the stage for exploitation	Cast adrift and swept into a current of crime	A hotbed for exploitation	Daylight exploitation
Solution	Increase the number of inspectors and expand the social safety net	Placing a firewall between immigration and labour market rule enforcers and a fair and effective asylum process	A schooling system that prioritises young peoples' well-being, stopping expulsions and a proper social safety net	Safe ways for people to find work in other countries abroad under fair and worker-friendly regulations and the sustainable development goals	Allowing those who've been invited to work and live in our communities to switch jobs and increasing the number of inspectors

Message 1

Everyone, regardless of who they are or where they're from, deserves a life free from abuse and exploitation. Yet in the UK, a small stadium's worth of people are trapped working for little or no pay in harsh conditions, facing threats and violence if they try to escape. Often these are people facing financial hardship who resort to working off the books, labouring, cleaning or harvesting to meet the rising cost of essentials like food, heating and rent. The government's choice not to properly enforce labour laws throughout our economy has left the back door open to everyday exploitation in our workplaces.

We can begin to stop the spread of modern slavery by ensuring there's enough workplace inspectors to make sure no one is being exploited and the rules are being followed. Long term, the government must secure and expand the social safety net to ensure the freedom and dignity of every individual in the UK.

- In 2022, labour exploitation was the most common form of exploitation of adults in the UK reported to the governments' National Referral Mechanism for modern slavery ([39%](#); [3,433](#)), most of these were men.
- According to [the TUC](#), the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate is currently expected to regulate around 40,000 employment agencies operating in the UK with just 19 inspectors – this means British employers are likely to face minimum wage inspections only once every 500 years

Message 2

No matter who you are or where you're from, wanting to guarantee the safety and well-being of your family is as ordinary as breathing. However, the government has chosen to withhold the right to work from those seeking to rebuild their lives in our communities after being forced to leave their homes overseas. With no wage to support their families, people often resort to working off-the-books in car washes, construction, and agriculture. This sets the stage for exploitation, where the threat of being reported and forced to leave the UK holds them captive, working in harsh conditions for little or no pay.

We can begin to prevent modern slavery in the UK by placing a firewall between immigration and labour market rule enforcers so that people who are exploited can speak up and get support without worrying about being put back into harm's way. Long term the government must create a fair and effective asylum process that allows families seeking sanctuary to safely reconstruct their lives in our communities

- The Low Pay Commission estimates that over 420,000 workers received less than the national minimum wage in April 2019
- There is clear evidence that workers are deterred from making complaints for fear of being referred to immigration enforcement

Message 3

Most of us believe that with the right support, all children can thrive. Now, picture a packed sports arena filled with thousands of British children and young people – that's about how many are currently trapped and exploited against their will in the UK. These are often kids who've been expelled or suspended from school and cast adrift in the streets where they're swept into a current of crime and exploitation. Drug traffickers might use the promise of new trainers, fast food or easy money to manipulate them into growing, selling or moving drugs across the country. If they try to quit, they face threats of violence or their actions being reported to the police.

Children in the UK have been let down by our government's decision to cut school budgets and social services for those with additional needs and a cost of living scandal that means more families are finding it hard to afford things like school uniforms, a good breakfast, or internet for homework. To begin to stop modern slavery in the UK, we need a schooling system that prioritises young peoples' well-being and ensures every child gets the support they need to fulfil their potential. Long term, we need to keep teenagers in schools and off the streets and bolster the social safety net for struggling families.

- In 2022, children suspected of experiencing modern slavery were most often referred for criminal exploitation involved in county lines cases ([43%; 3,013](#)) the vast majority of these were UK nationals.
- [Government statistics](#) show that children with special educational needs are up to five times more likely to be expelled
- More than 1 in 5 people were in poverty in 2021/22 [source](#)

Message 4

No matter who you are or where you're from, wanting to guarantee the health and well-being of your family is as ordinary as breathing. But imagine if you worked non-stop and still couldn't afford to send your child to school or get your mum the medical help she needs. In some countries, where there's no free healthcare or education and a shortage of decent jobs, this can be a reality. The lack of government investment in public services creates a hotbed for exploitation. Without other options for supporting their families, people may feel pushed to seek opportunities overseas but end up trafficked into forced labour, stripped of their passport, paid next to nothing and become trapped in modern slavery.

To begin to stop human trafficking we need to create safe ways for people to find work in other countries abroad under fair and worker-friendly regulations. All while aiming for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals to reduce inequality, discrimination, and gender-based violence, and to ensure decent jobs for everyone, everywhere in the long run.

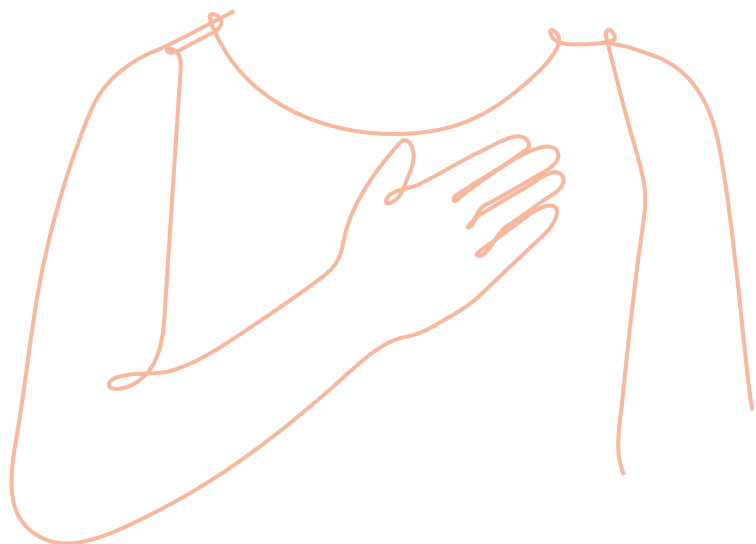
- India spends barely 1.5% of its GDP on healthcare for its 1.3 billion population, but which is amongst the lowest in the world.
- In 2015, all the members of the United Nations welcomed the Sustainable Development Goals as a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future

Message 5

Everyone deserves a life free from abuse and exploitation, regardless of their background. However, currently, when the UK invites people from overseas to fill workforce gaps, particularly in crucial sectors like agriculture and social care, the government's framework sets the stage.

Firstly, a lack of oversight allows unscrupulous agents to charge unfair recruitment fees, trapping workers in debt. Then, because their visas tie them to specific employers, these workers can't seek other jobs even if they're mistreated. With too few labour inspectors in the UK to ensure compliance with the law and limited avenues for workers to voice concerns, daylight exploitation is all too common.

Together we can begin to stop modern slavery in the UK by allowing those who've been invited to work and live in our communities to switch jobs like anyone else and ensuring there are enough workplace inspectors to prevent exploitation



Focus Groups

In order to gain an insight into the effectiveness of these five messages in closing the gaps in the public's understanding of modern slavery we commissioned three online text-based focus groups. This methodology has commonly been used to discuss framing of sensitive topics such as sexual violence or immigration, as participants can take part in the research in their own surroundings and they are more open and honest in the anonymised setting.

These were conducted with participants (10 in each group) from a broad range of demographics (age, gender, class, race) and people living in the north and south of the country. Focus group participants were selected based on their attitudes to crime and immigration and segmented into three attitudinal groups:

- Liberal
- Mixed/neutral
- Authoritarian

We used attitudes to crime and immigration to segment participants as phase two of this project led us to suspect that these attitudes might shape their view of modern slavery.

Before being exposed to each of the messages, participants in the focus groups were asked to respond to the following specific terms:

- Exploitation
- Forced labour
- Human trafficking
- County lines
- Modern slavery

While there was some variation across the three focus groups, a short summary of responses to these terms and the associated perceptions can be found in the table below.

Term	What is it	Who is affected	Why is it happening
Exploitation	<p>Low or no pay and poor working conditions.</p> <p>Can be by government e.g. 'underpayment of workers in the NHS' but also of government e.g. 'people exploiting the benefit system' (Authoritarian group)</p>	<p>'Vulnerable people' from both the UK and overseas.</p> <p>Understood to be vulnerable both because of their personal characteristics (e.g. age) and their situation (e.g. poverty)</p>	<p>Greed, money and power</p> <p>Gangs</p> <p>Government allows the rich to exploit the poor as well as the poor and immigrants to exploit the the immigration and welfare systems</p>
Forced labour	<p>Unsafe work for poor or no pay.</p> <p>Associated with specific types of works such as sex workers or indentured servants</p>	<p>In particular 'illegal' immigrants and people who've been trafficked or smuggled into the UK but also 'vulnerable people' from the UK such as young people.</p>	<p>"Dodgy or rogue" employers in the UK</p> <p>Weak government - insufficient enforcement permits it to happen</p>
Human trafficking	<p>People are promised a better life, moved from overseas into the UK and exploited to make money for others.</p> <p>Recognise that debt is used to coerce people.</p> <p>Closely associated with modern slavery .</p>	<p>'Vulnerable people' - non English speaking, young people, women and immigrants</p> <p>Uneducated people - "knowing no better" and thinking it's "normal to be treated this way"</p> <p>People are desperate due to poverty, oppression and a lack of opportunities (Liberal Group)</p>	<p>Greedy organised criminal gangs - "drug lord men"</p> <p>A lack of policing and punitive sentencing - "people think they can get away with it"</p>
County lines	<p>Young people moving drugs for criminal gangs - from larger cities to smaller towns</p> <p>Not a term known to everybody</p>	<p>Vulnerable young people from poorer backgrounds or with 'learning difficulties' - from the UK. Not associated with foreign nationals or adults.</p>	<p>Greedy criminals making 'easy money'</p>
Modern slavery	<p>Most commonly associated with immigration and human trafficking but to a lesser extent forced labour and county lines</p> <p>Recognised as "more common than we think" in the UK but also "not where I live"</p> <p>Something that's talked about in the media "it's all over the news" and businesses.</p> <p>Some from the liberal group expressed a rejection or desensitisation of the term e.g. "Heard it too many times, does not mean anything to me" and "A slave is a slave, nothing modern about it makes it different."</p>	<p>More associated than the term 'exploitation' specifically with foreign nationals but some recognise it happens "even to the British"</p> <p>'Vulnerable people' - particularly those seeking a better life in the UK who are taken advantage of.</p>	<p>A lack of regulation of companies, in particular smaller businesses like nail bars (liberal group)</p> <p>Organised crime gangs (particularly amongst the authoritarian group)</p> <p>Lack of policing and the deterrent of harsh sentencing</p> <p>Lack of good jobs and opportunities e.g. "they have been attracted to a better life in other country from a job offer on social media for example and then they go there and get underpaid and can be abused but no-one is there protecting them"</p> <p>Lack of education of those most at risk</p>

Terms for people affected by modern slavery

Across all three groups, the following terms evoked the following responses:

Victim – tends to evoke pity, sympathy and sadness that a vulnerable person has been taken advantage of

Survivor – someone who has been exploited but has had the strength to live through it, despite the odds being stacked against them

Person with lived experience – someone who has been through it but is now in a better situation and has expertise and leadership to offer others.

Across all three terms some (in the authoritarian group in particular) named that, while they certainly didn't deserve to be exploited, they were nevertheless complicit if they entered the UK illegally. And, furthermore, that their respect was contingent on survivors living a "legitimate and crime free lifestyle".

Here is a brief summary of responses to each of the messages.

Message 1

- Perhaps because it didn't focus on immigration, this message was relatively non divisive across the three focus groups.
- The specific solution around increasing the number of labour inspectors was received positively, although some concern was raised around "how the taxpayer" pays for more inspectors. Increasing the number of inspectors alone was not perceived to be proportionate to the scale of the problem and the second larger solution about the social safety net was too broad and abstract.
- While participants mentioned that they didn't like the informality of talking about "leaving the backdoor open to exploitation" and "a small stadium's worth of people trapped in exploitation", nevertheless they also reported learning that "there's more modern slavery than we anticipate". It may be that the stadium gave participants a structured way of visualising the scale of the issue even if they found it distasteful. Liking messages and being affected by them are by no means the same thing.

Message 2

- This message underestimated how hard it was for members of the public, particularly with more authoritarian attitudes, to condone a situation when people break the law, no matter how sympathetic they are to their motivation and situation. This became heightened when discussing foreign nationals who, in the minds of some, were already suspected of already “being illegal”. However, this was by no means the view of everyone, for example more liberal participants said, “it is sad that we could do something different and allow people to work but we choose not to. When you have been bombed out of your home country or forced to move you cannot apply”.
- Using the right to work policy as an example of how the government’s migration system increased the risk of exploitation made the message ‘about’ the politics of migration rather than the prevalence of forced labour in the UK. In other words, by tapping into an already polarised issue in broader society, people seemingly took their side based on their predetermined position, for example one participant said, “I believe that currently most people claiming asylum in the UK have not genuinely been forced to leave their countries, so the first paragraph annoys me”.
- The statistic around nearly half a million workers estimated to not be receiving the minimum wage seemed to be effective within the context of the message of broadening and communicating the scale of the problem.

Message 3

- The focus on children and young people evoked responses like “I think when it comes to children, nobody can really argue that more needs to be done” and, “Yes it immediately feels even more heightened when it involves kids.”
- Most participants from all three attitude groups agreed with the problems being outlined, including holistic approaches with funding for social services, activities for children outside school time, as well as directly addressing poverty to remedy the cause. A link was also made to austerity and how “cutting to the bone” services such as youth clubs disproportionately affected people from poorer backgrounds.
- Some participants in the authoritarian group felt that responsibility should be placed on parents, not just the government. Perhaps this would not have been raised if the role of parents had been more explicitly laid out in the message.
- As the solutions were less specific and tangible, despite their support for the message, some fatalism crept in that change wouldn’t happen, evoking responses like “it does resonate with me, but I have given up that the government will do anything and, “Boring – heard it all before, and still nothing has changed.”

Message 4

- This frame was relatively well received by all three groups, in part this seemed to be because it invited empathy around how it must feel to work non-stop and still not be able to look after your loved ones. Therefore, the opening paragraph helped to build a bridge between people experiencing modern slavery and the participants.
- Some talked positively about the frame having a “normal person” and more down to earth tone than some of the other framing ideas. One person specified that opening with “no matter who you are or where you’re from” helped to set that tone.
- However, while the liberal and mixed group seemed to appreciate “the effort to help people understand the circumstances that have driven people to have to make these choices”, some members of the authoritarian group seemed to get hooked on the statistic about India, perhaps connecting with preexisting narratives around “corrupt foreign governments” and how the “UK should take extra care not to become the world’s shelter to make up for other countries’ poor systems”.
- This message fitted with the dominant view that modern slavery is predominantly about human trafficking and immigration, but helped participants understand how people can be trafficked into forced labour, not just sexual exploitation.
- The solution around the UN and sustainable development goals was far too distant and abstract to land with a majority of participants.

Message 5

- The value statement was played back by participants, but rather than it being about freedom, it became about the freedom to pursue opportunities for a better life, e.g. “everyone deserves an equal opportunity but some of them are taken advantage of”, “everyone deserves a better life”.
- In the ‘Liberal’ attitudes group, the positive response was that the frame felt clear, solutions focused, comforting, direct and accountable. The success of this frame is that it clearly presents the issue as a systemic failure focusing on process, which helps to shift perspectives towards a solution focused approach. This was a frame which edged the ‘Authoritarian attitudes’ group more towards understanding the systemic factors at play. It was easy for people to see how not being able to leave your job is being “set up for exploitation”.
- Framing visas as “invitations” from the government helped to set up a responsibility on behalf of the government to safeguard their guests, prompting responses like “I don’t necessarily think we should stop those invitations, but if we are doing so as a government, it’s their job to ensure that what we are offering is safe and not abusive”. However, it also prompted questions like “My honest feelings are why are we so eager and keen to invite workers from abroad and all the issues that brings”.
- The frame left a gap around explaining why the UK has gaps in its labour force, this left space for pre-existing narratives around ‘lazy people exploiting the benefit system’ to make sense and subtly undermine the message.

Overall

At the end of the focus groups, participants were asked "so from all the things we have talked about today, what has stood out in your mind, did anything surprise you". In response, participants talked about the scale of exploitation and that British people were involved: "modern slavery seems much more widespread and in different forms that I previously thought", "I just think for me it has really highlighted the severity of the situation" and "I think knowing how many British children are currently in modern day slavery." Others expressed their surprise that "even legit workers are still getting caught up in slavery" and "that it made me look wider than the narrow perspective I had".

Many participants at the end of the focus group talked about government and businesses and the need to change particular policies e.g. To "change the current system of tying an employee to only one employer makes me hopeful", "regulation in businesses and how there are only like 19 inspectors". However, as the participants had seen all the messages, one after another by this point it is difficult to identify which message, or part thereof, had an effect. When participants were asked again at the end of the session to describe what modern slavery is, none of them talked about sexual exploitation or gangs, but many, particularly in the authoritarian group, still talked about immigration, the need for tougher sentences for perpetrators and to educate both the public and those most at risk of exploitation. So while it seemed that exposure to the messages broadened some people's perceptions about modern slavery to a certain extent, it was not enough to shift some deeper narratives at play around immigration, vulnerable people and individual responsibility. Indeed the more messages uploaded associations with more polarised issues in society such as immigration, the more the focus of the conversation seemed to shift away from exploitation as people took up their pre-existing sides on the issue and rehearsed the related arguments. Messages that evoked empathy (such as message 4) with those experiencing modern slavery seemed to be more effective at reaching beyond the politics and connecting with participants on a human level, but this empathy seemed to only be extended to those who obeyed the law, no matter how unfair they might deem the policy to be.



Phase five: workshop 2 with people with lived experience

Five people with lived experience of modern slavery attended a second online workshop after the focus groups. The purpose of the workshop was to gather their perspective on the messages and key terms when framing modern slavery.

We began the workshop talking about specific terms or phrases. Many of these had arisen through the process of either writing the messages or noticing what words the public used to describe certain aspects of modern slavery in the focus groups. A summary of the discussion on particular issues is outlined in the table below.

Term	Rationale	Response
Trapped in modern slavery	This was a phrase tested in focus groups to describe how exploitation was maintained	People with lived experience generally objected to the term as it suggested that there was 'no way out of getting out' and that it evoked 'animals trapped in cages'. Instead they suggested using the term ' stuck '
To describe certain conditions such as poverty, the hostile environment for migrants or expelling children from school as ripe for exploitation or set up for exploitation	Both these phrases were used by the public in focus groups to describe how certain policies increased the risk of exploitation	People with lived experience much preferred the term " set up for exploitation " as " set up " is more intentional
To describe people in these conditions as vulnerable or use the phrase vulnerable people	This was a phrase used by the public in focus groups	People with lived experience preferred to describe people as ' at risk ' of modern slavery but didn't object to the term ' vulnerable '
Where possible and appropriate, to use the term forced labour instead of modern slavery	Because the term modern slavery tends to be associated more with human trafficking than other forms of exploitation	The group was quite split on this, with some endorsing the idea and others objecting, in part due to a risk that's associated with the slave trade
To use the phrase being held to ransom as a way of describing the coercion	This was a phrase used by the public in focus groups	People with lived experience objected to this phrase as it risks leading people to believe if they/ their family pays money they're going to be okay or go home

Next participants were asked to rate each message out of five, with 5 signalling that they liked the message and 1 signalling that they disliked it. Participants preferred:

- Message 4 on trafficking to other countries (4.5 median, 4.5 average)
- Message 5 on tied visas (4 median, 4.13 average)
- Message 2 the right to work for migrants (4 median, 4.1 average)
- Message 3 on British children (3.25 median, 3 average)
- Message 1 forced labour and the lack of inspectors (3 median, 3 average)

Tensions and lessons

Practising what we preach

A central recommendation in the guidance produced by this project is that when talking about modern slavery, communicators should honour the request of those with lived experience that they maintain control of their story, not least how it is told, by whom, for what purpose and for how long.

While no one was asked or has voluntarily shared stories of their exploitation as part of this project, they were still asked to offer a view on the articulation of an issue that has deeply affected their life. Therefore, arguably the same rule should apply and people with lived experience should have had the opportunity to sign off on how their contributions in workshops were represented in the outputs of this project, rather than just providing their views on the messaging. However, as this consideration was not accounted for when planning the project, they have not, even if ensuring those who'd experienced modern slavery could shape what was being said and how was a key driver for this project from the beginning. In a sense this illustrates that these principles and recommendations, in practice, will only ever be aspired to and abided by to lesser or greater extent. The obligation is to practise and get better, not to be perfect.

People with lived experience may not favour the messages that are favoured by the public

Message 3 that was received broadly positively by all three focus groups received a more muted response from people with lived experience who attended our workshop. These workshop participants scored messages two, four and five more highly which were more divisive amongst focus group participants. Notwithstanding the point above regarding strategy, these findings could be understood to be in tension with each other. In simple terms, should we go with the messages the public like or the messages those with lived experience like?

Arguably, those with lived experience of the issue should lead the fight against the exploitation they experienced, but for some this is overly simplistic. As philosopher Olufemi O. Taiwo argued in his book *Elite Capture* their perspectives, shaped by their experience of exploitation, offer invaluable insights into this problem, at the same time this does not mean the answer is simply to defer to their view as this lets communicators off the hook. "The thing I believe most deeply about deference politics is that it asks something of trauma that it cannot give, it asks the traumatised to shoulder burdens alone that we ought to share collectively, lifting them up onto a pedestal in order to hide below them" writes Taiwo. In other words, communicators working on modern slavery who don't have lived experience of the issue must do the messy work of working with those who've experienced exploitation to develop a strategy together which takes into account research like this and others.

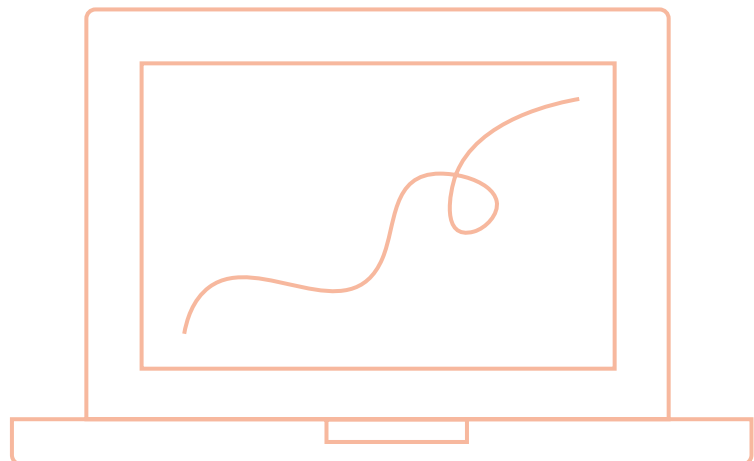
Remunerating workshop participants with lived experience

We sought to remunerate everyone with lived experience of modern slavery who participated in this project. As we were keen to include both people who do and do not have the right to work in the UK (and therefore cannot legally be paid) in the workshops, in order to treat the whole group equally, we decided to remunerate everyone with a voucher. On reflection, this was not the right choice: the ultimate inequality was not within the group, but with researchers who led the project – we were still paid normally. We should pay those who hold the right to work a full consultancy rate for their expertise, even if it means that those who don't – for reasons outside of our control – can only be remunerated with a voucher of a lower value.

It all depends on your strategy

Framing is commonly used by groups or individuals to promote narratives that support their aims. Many civil society organisations in the UK have adapted an approach to messaging influenced by political strategist and communications consultant Anat Shenker-Osorio (ASO) of “engage the base, persuade the middle, isolate the opposition”. This strategy, grounded in research and practise, seeks to develop messages that activate existing supporters and convince the undecided while irritating the opposition.

The strategy seeks to build public support to such an extent that it becomes the ‘common sense’ position and the opposition looks out of touch with the norm. Organisations utilising ASO’s strategy may therefore see it as “a good thing” that some of those in the authoritarian focus group objected to some of the messages, in particular those involving migration. Others who have a different strategy may seek to avoid more divisive messages for a whole host of reasons. But it is important to read the information in this report and the guidance with your strategy in mind as it is your strategy that should guide what communications choice you make.



Further research

As is often the case in civil society, the ambition of this project was far larger than the resources available to achieve it. Due to its size and the limited number of people consulted, it's important to note the limitations of this project and the guidance taken more as suggestions for frames that are potentially effective. Different frames could work for different audiences and more research needs to be carried out to gain a comprehensive picture on effective framing of modern slavery. Three very specific next steps in terms of research are outlined below.

Gangs are 'free floating'

This project sought to develop frames which connected modern slavery with the policy decisions that increase the risk of exploitation. However, just like in the dominant media narrative outlined in the drama triangle (See Fig. 1), without any explanation of criminal gangs in our messages they remain a shadowy free floating threat.

The current explanation for the behaviour of these gangs is that they are simply 'evil'. While this is not in any way to negate the severity of harm caused by their action, if perpetrators of modern slavery are framed as just evil, then the solution is logically limited to government 'crackdowns' i.e. more policing and punitive measures. Ultimately, the 'evil gangs' narrative is an incomplete picture, what's missing from the story is what social factors are driving people to form gangs and deceive others into exploitation. If this gap in the story could be filled in, perhaps it could further help set up a more nuanced conversation around what policymakers could do to reduce gangs forming and exploiting others. Further research into what social factors predict gang activity and how that can be communicated is key to developing a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the issue.

A/B Testing

As well as running more focus groups, if there had been the resource available, the next stage of the frames testing and development would have been to do quantitative A/B testing. This is usually done using a survey where different respondents are exposed to different messages and a statistical analysis is used to see if it shifts their attitude towards the issue. This method has the benefit of being able to more easily detect when a message is effective at temporarily shifting a respondents thinking even if they're not conscious of it. Of course, it's unrealistic to expect exposure to five messages once to create such a profound shift. It's only through repeated exposure to frames like these that we could realistically hope to shift the dial.

Communicating the scale of the issue without trivialising it

As outlined in phase four of this report, one of the aims of this project was to develop messages that communicated the scale of modern slavery in the UK. To meet this aim we tried to develop ways for the public to visualise the number of people affected by modern slavery. This is because research suggests that, when it comes to numbers, human beings find it easier to compare rather than count, so rather than just saying “thousands of people” we might say “imagine a sports arena full of thousands of people”. While it’s certainly true that focus group participants reported “the amount of British residents impacted” and that there was “lots of exploitation” as something that stood out for them in the focus groups the visualisation of “a small stadium’s worth” was also something that some felt trivialised the issue. More research needs to be conducted into finding ways to visualise the scale of the problem.

Vulnerable people

In focus groups, the public repeatedly referred to ‘vulnerable people’ as those at risk of exploitation as well as, in part, why modern slavery was happening. Further research into how the public think about ‘vulnerable people’ would be useful in terms of unpacking if they think of them as people who are vulnerable because of the conditions they’re in or somehow people who are intrinsically vulnerable, or both, and to what extent.

Conclusions

This project sought to identify frames and narratives that would be more effective in increasing the public’s understanding of modern slavery using language that resonated with those with lived experience. However, to attempt to increase the public’s understanding of every aspect of modern slavery is unfeasible. Early on in the project it was necessary to narrow down which understandings of modern slavery we were aiming to increase amongst the public. The narrower but still ambitious aims focused on helping the public to understand the following:

- **The scale of exploitation in the UK** (Many people are being controlled and exploited against their will in the UK and abroad)
- **The root causes of modern slavery** (The thing that makes people more likely to be coerced or deceived into exploitation, is not who they are e.g. gender or where they’re from e.g. nationality but rather the social conditions they live in e.g. poverty)
- **The potential for government and businesses to tackle these root causes** (Government and business policies can change these conditions and therefore reduce harm)
- **Shifting blame away from survivors** (Those who’ve already been controlled and exploited must not be blamed for what happened to them or put back in harm’s way)

Across the six phases of this project pursuing these aims we concluded that:

1. The drama triangle masks the breadth and complexity of modern slavery

As outlined in Fig 1. media representations of modern slavery often position the government as the hero, gangs as the villains and (most often) women being trafficked from abroad into sexual exploitation as the victims. While this is part of the picture, the drama triangle masks that modern slavery is an umbrella term for a vast array of different forms of exploitation, each with their own unique characteristics, complex drivers and dimensions which are not present within this simplistic frame.

2. The public have a broader understanding of modern slavery but the drama triangle shapes the primary associations

On the whole, the British public's understanding of modern slavery is somewhat broader and more nuanced than the common media narrative outlined above. For example, they also associate it with forced labour and domestic servitude and understand that situational factors such as poverty or homelessness can increase the risk of exploitation. However, while these broader understandings exist, the dominant associations do tend to align with the media narratives, that while modern slavery happens in the UK, it primarily affects people trafficked to this country by gangs into exploitation behind closed doors.

3. Outlining how specific government policies increase the risk of exploitation can help *reduce* the blame placed on individuals

By outlining how choices made by government created conditions that put people at risk we were able to shift the emphasis towards the structural drivers of modern slavery and set up a conversation around how policy change is part of the solution. The more specific we were about both the policy problem and the policy solution, the more receptive the public were to the message. But while these messages evoked responses like how modern slavery is "predominantly to do with labour market and opportunities for coercion" and driven by "poverty, and just the routes of access to the country", a great deal of emphasis by the public was still placed on the characteristics of 'vulnerable' individuals and the need for *them* to change; to 'be more educated' and 'to know what to look out' for.

4. Dominant narratives around immigration and crime shape understandings and attitudes to modern slavery

By far the most powerful narrative that seemed to block or get in the way of shifting blame away from survivors was if they are 'an illegal migrant'. Even if the public were sympathetic to how 'desperate' their situation was and how much they disagreed with the government's immigration or labour policies, some expressed that people were 'complicit' with their exploitation because they broke the law either entering or once in the UK. Describing people as 'an illegal migrant' is a frame that has [been found to](#) increase the public's hostility towards migration into the UK.

One way to explain this is, as research by Transform Justice and Frameworks Institute found, that “people think that crime is committed by those who logically weigh up the chances of being caught, and the punishment that would follow, against the potential benefit of committing the crime. If this belief is triggered, people will exclude social and health factors as drivers of crime, since they will be focussed on individual motivation”.

So perhaps the tendency amongst some members of the public to blame ‘illegals’ for their own exploitation is because a) they are being framed as criminals and b) that crime is an individual choice that you rationally choose to commit rather than something that environmental factors contribute to. This is ultimately why modern slavery communicators must collaborate with and learn from those working on migration, asylum, criminal justice reform and issues such as knife crime. There are deep narratives around race, nationality, identity, individual responsibility and rationality at play here which cut across all three issues (and more).

5. Evoking empathy can help shift public attitudes towards modern slavery

Our research suggests that using shared values and simple, relatable language to evoke empathy with people experiencing trafficking can be used to disrupt or temporarily dislodge the blocking narrative around ‘illegal migration’. Message 4 (above) opened with the shared value of “No matter who you are or where you’re from, wanting to guarantee the health and well-being of your family is as ordinary as breathing” before asking the public to “imagine if you worked non-stop and still couldn’t afford to send your child to school or get your mum the medical help she needs”. This message was well received by the liberal and mixed audiences in the focus groups, shifting blame away from survivors because it built empathy for people whose circumstances necessitated making some very difficult choices.

6. The term ‘victim’ evokes pity – not empathy – amongst the public and is disempowering for people with lived experience

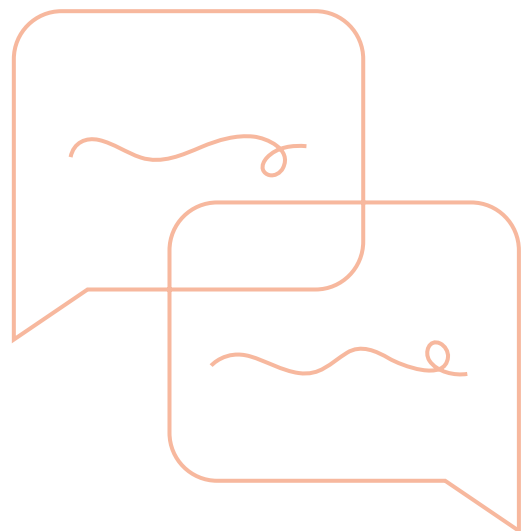
Alongside values and simple language, the terms used to describe people who’ve experienced exploitation seemed to have an effect on the empathy the public felt towards survivors and their attitudes towards their role in tackling modern slavery. Amongst the public, ‘victim’ evoked sympathy rather than empathy, whereas ‘survivor’ evoked respect for the individual’s strength and resilience. ‘Person with lived experience’ elicited that such a person had a role in leading change. This correlated with the preferences of people with lived experience who found the term ‘victim’ disempowering and warned that the term ‘survivor’ can be gendered and associated with particular forms of exploitation (particularly sexual exploitation) and an obligation to share traumatic stories.

7. Modern slavery is not a neutral frame

It is important to hold in mind that 'modern slavery' is in itself a frame, a metaphor likening multiple contemporary forms of exploitation to the transatlantic slave trade. Returning to the first of these conclusions, a question this project has raised is, to what extent can the frame modern slavery be divorced from the drama triangle that has so often been used to narrate it? It was this consideration that led us to open each message naming a specific form of exploitation then later refer to it as an example of modern slavery. However, in the focus groups, this sequencing was not enough to swerve the associations of modern slavery with criminal gangs (villains) who must be punished by the government (the hero) who must save the women trafficked from overseas into exploitation (the victims). So, we weren't successful in dislocating the phrase 'modern slavery' from the narrative outlined in the drama triangle.

However, this is a narrative about modern slavery that the public has been exposed to for well over a decade. When the British government passed the Modern Slavery Act in 2015, it was the first piece of national legislation in the world to use the term 'modern slavery'. The Act was accompanied by government [articles](#) utilising the same framing positioning government as hero stating, "Just as it was Britain that took on a historic stand to ban slavery two centuries ago so Britain will once again lead the way in defeating modern slavery and preserving the freedoms and values that have defined our country for generations".

So, the frame modern slavery isn't neutral, it has been utilised in order to cast the government in a particular light and in doing so helped to obscure a more complex picture of the issue. Part of this more complex picture is that the same government led a policy agenda explicitly aimed at creating a hostile environment for migrants which put people at greater risk of exploitation. Communicators seeking to fill the gaps around the public's understanding of modern slavery must be mindful of this and act accordingly. This may not mean abandoning the term modern slavery altogether, but it does mean understanding that it is not a neutral frame.



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The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre is funded and actively supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

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