

Internal trafficking and exploitation of children with special educational needs and disability

Research summary

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Research by:



This is a summary of the report: **Internal trafficking and exploitation of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) within England and Wales: Understanding identification and responses to inform effective policy and practice**, based on research conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Portsmouth in partnership with Portsmouth City Council. 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/children-special-needs-disabilities.

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.

Key findings

1. Despite children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)/additional learning needs being at increased risk of exploitation and trafficking, there is inadequate attention to the specific needs of young people with SEND in national safeguarding or modern slavery policy.
2. A lack of robust training may mean that practitioners may not be aware of the impact and interrelation between SEND and modern slavery.
3. There is a lack of data collection and a lack of understanding of modern slavery and SEND, impacting on opportunities for prevention and early identification, or to understand the scale and nature of how SEND and modern slavery interact.
4. There are missed opportunities for early intervention and disrupting patterns of exploitation, for example when responding to reports from parents of missing episodes for young people with SEND.
5. Engagement with education services is one of the most significant factors in keeping children with SEND safe from exploitation. Practitioners and parents were very clear that the most significant factor in keeping children and young people safe from modern slavery was their engagement within an education system that met their SEND needs.
6. Responding well and responding early requires parents' concerns being listened to, with training and multi-agency support being in place.

Background

Children and young people with SEND may have vulnerabilities due to communication, learning or neurodivergent needs which are often unmet by current service structures. These needs are often not recognised or well understood by multi agency services who rarely receive specific training in communicating or working with this group of children. Many of these children and young people have not had their needs formally diagnosed, and many are on long waiting lists for diagnosis and assessments. This group of children and young people often experience; higher rates of poverty, social and school exclusion, isolation, bullying and discrimination. They are also over-represented in the care system and face particular challenges when housed in unregulated accommodation. This is coupled with often high levels of unmet needs and generally a lack of empowerment and agency. All indicators which correlate to increased risk of exploitation.

Practitioners are also rarely trained in understanding, and/or recognising the risks, or presence of abuse and exploitation in this group. Given the lack of understanding and training it can be assumed that responses and requirements, under the Modern Slavery Act (2015) and related statutory guidance often do not recognise the additional vulnerabilities and risks, address this group's needs, nor provide appropriate policy and practice responses.

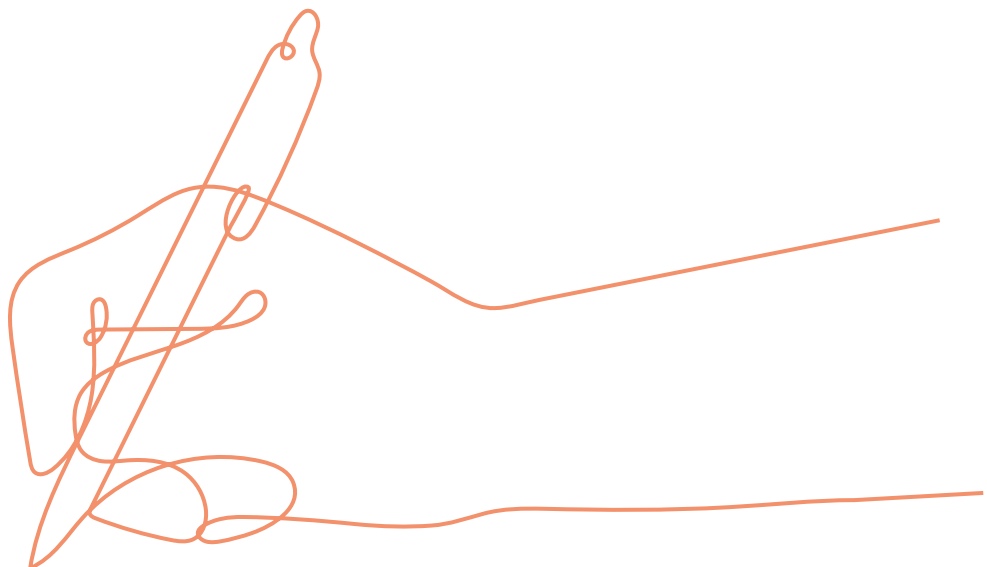
This qualitative exploratory study sought to provide evidence to identify and address gaps in safeguarding policy, guidance and legal frameworks in relation to specific risks of modern slavery for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England and Wales (aged up to 25 years). Furthermore, the study sought to explore whether policies and guidance provide the mechanisms for appropriate strategic planning and practical responses to modern slavery for this group of children and young people.

The focus of this study, internal trafficking (within UK borders), of children and young people comprises a significant and increasing portion of UK national statistics on human trafficking in the UK each year. The latest statistics identifies that nearly 7,500 children were referred to the NRM in 2023¹. Our study sought to explore all forms of child exploitation as defined by the modern slavery typology, however, the data collected focused predominantly on two forms of exploitation: child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) as these appeared to be at the forefront in practice issues. Child trafficking occurs frequently in both types of exploitation, and they often overlap. This is not to say that other forms of exploitation are not occurring, but perhaps these remain more hidden.

1. Modern Slavery: NRM and DtN statistics, end of year summary 2023 – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

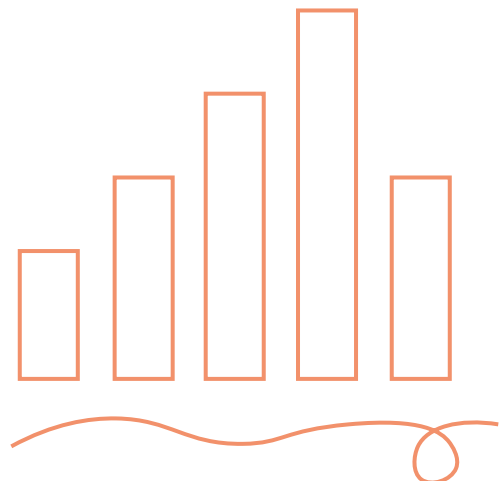
Specific aims were to:

1. Identify gaps in relevant law, policy, guidance and evidence to support the better protection of children and young people with SEND in England and Wales who have experienced internal trafficking and forms of harm as identified under the Modern Slavery Act (2015).
2. Examine practice responses from the perspectives of practitioners and parents/carers to better identify the risks, indicators and responses in cases of suspected, or known trafficked and exploited children with SEND.
3. Consult with strategic and frontline multi-agency practitioners to better understand barriers and facilitators to improve policy, guidance and practice.
4. Develop legal, policy and practice recommendations that will support improved guidance and policy development, and practice responses for this group to meet their specific needs.



Methodology

1. **Mapping and analysis of relevant law, policy and guidance** to identify any gaps to support the better protection of children with SEND in England and Wales to internal trafficking and exploitation. A 15-point critical appraisal framework was developed to examine areas such as; recognition of increased vulnerability; specific duties to meet additional needs; direction for policy and practice responses including data collection and training; and whether evidence-based.
2. **Interviews with parents/carers of children with SEND where children have experienced exploitation.** Online semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 12 parents/carers of children with diagnosed and undiagnosed SEND who had experienced exploitation, to better understand the multi-agency responses received, any unmet needs, the levels of involvement of the child and family in decision-making and what support would aid continued safety and recovery.
3. **Four multi-agency focus groups in local authorities** to explore the translation of policy and guidance into practice at a local level (n= 26 practitioners). The focus groups explored; understanding of modern slavery and SEND, use of legislation, policy and guidance in identifying risks, indicators and responses in cases where children have a diagnosed or suspected SEND, and who have experienced trafficking, exploitation, or episodes of missing where forms of exploitation are suspected, and how current policy and guidance supports practice or could be improved.
4. **Three online multi agency consultation events** to better understand barriers and facilitators and suggestions for improved law, policy, practice and guidance at a national level (n=14 practitioners).



Findings

'...someone's got to do something. We can't just sit back and pretend this isn't happening'

Parent

1. Despite children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)/additional learning needs being at increased risk of exploitation and trafficking, there is inadequate attention to the specific needs of young people with SEND in national safeguarding or modern slavery policy.

There is little recognition of increased vulnerability and risk for children and young people within SEND in policy and guidance, and discussion of appropriate preventative measures and responses. Additionally, there is an absence of specificity within safeguarding and modern slavery policy and guidance to this group's needs, beyond a cursory nod to increased risk and vulnerability of disabled people (not children specifically), for example, within the Modern Slavery Act Statutory Guidance and within statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (2014).

2. A lack of robust training may mean that practitioners may not be aware of the impact and interrelation between SEND and modern slavery

When SEND and/or modern slavery is not understood by practitioners, opportunities for prevention and early intervention may not be recognised. For example, autism or ADHD will impact a person's understanding of risk and social cues and on their communication. Practitioners can also make assumptions based on misconceptions of SEND, such as behaviour which they may define as 'challenging' and not see as a form of communication of stress, anxiety, fear and possible indicators of exploitation. Participants who work with children and young people described very different training opportunities around SEND and some reported misconceptions amongst colleagues that *'physical impairments were disabilities, but learning needs were not'*, and that *'autism and neurodiversity were not counted as a disability'*

“Either you are a victim of modern slavery, exploitation or you can have SEND”

Practitioner

These concerning gaps in understanding and training can lead to missed opportunities to recognise early, report and respond to cases of modern slavery. For example, some practitioners and parents described that a lack of understanding, bias, and cultural competence could lead to under-identification of modern slavery, and an over-focus on criminality, gang-membership, or behaviour deemed ‘violent’ amongst black boys, which in turn impacted on young people’s trust and engagement with services.

The research revealed a range of different levels of understandings of SEND and the term modern slavery. Some SEND practitioners and families participating in the research did not identify with the term modern slavery due to its cultural connotations, perceptions around it not applying to trafficking within the UK, or only to sexual exploitation and not other forms. Some parents of children who had experienced exploitation were not familiar with the term modern slavery or the NRM, others raised concerns about exploitation that had been ignored. Parents and practitioners indicated that young people with SEND may find a sense of belonging in the community through gang membership and not see themselves as a victim and take a longer time to process and express their experiences, which in turn requires longer term support once identified. There was a shared belief by practitioners and parents that modern slavery is in fact child abuse, and if named as such, would bring a more appropriate response.

3. There is a lack of data collection and a lack of understanding of modern slavery and SEND, impacting on opportunities for prevention and early identification or to understand the scale and nature of how SEND and modern slavery interact.

National (or even local) statistics on modern slavery and SEND are not routinely collected. Referral to the NRM was often dependent on practitioners’ understanding of modern slavery and SEND. The format of the NRM referral process and reporting processes does not give practitioners specific guidance to explain the impact of a child’s SEND on their understanding and processing, and communication around their exploitation, and their increased vulnerability and risk, including into adulthood.

The reported high numbers of children and young people with SEND amongst the caseloads of practitioners in this study, in addition to a lack of diagnosis or recognition of SEND, indicates that it is a known risk factor to trafficking and exploitation that is not being adequately monitored, recorded and thus addressed. This is especially concerning as disability is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act (2010).

4. There are missed opportunities for early intervention and disrupting patterns of exploitation, for example when responding to reports from parents of missing episodes for young people with SEND.

Parents in the study reported that they had identified early concerns around exploitation of their child, but needs were unmet. Families had rarely received information regarding modern slavery, and the emphasis was placed on the young people with SEND to self-disclose. No child should be required to disclose exploitation to receive a child protection response. Yet a lack of self-disclosure had a detrimental impact on access to services and mental health support. Throughout this study, 'risk' of exploitation was not enough for early help and support and parents described how help only came (if at all) when they were at crisis and harm was being done.

Practitioners involved in this study indicated high numbers of children and young people with undiagnosed SEND, which in turn increases vulnerability to exploitation. Whilst no statistics are collected on the number of children who experience modern slavery with SEND, practitioners indicated a majority of their caseloads included children and young people with diagnosed SEND and that there were high numbers of children and young people subjected to modern slavery with undiagnosed, awaiting diagnosis and/or unrecognised SEND.

The research indicated that missing episodes were often considered in isolation, with children and young people who frequently go missing not necessarily being treated as high risk. Other risk factors, such as online grooming, are not systematically considered alongside missing episodes. The guidance and policy on managing missing episodes is not clear or specific enough and is not being implemented in ways to identify and protect this group of children.

Parents reported many issues and concerns impacted by disjointed policy and practice across the 'transition' from childhood to adulthood, with detrimental effects including access to accommodation, mental health support and issues with providing informed consent to enter the NRM as an adult. The transition from child to adulthood is further convoluted for young people with SEND considering parental rights of involvement in decision-making. The assumption of capacity aged 16 leaves young people with SEND vulnerable to coercion from exploiters.

Parents reported services often did not understand the complexity and extent of manipulation inflicted by the 'gangs' to turn their children 'against them' as part of their exploitation. Parents also spoke of the need for support for the whole family, including siblings, as they had also experienced the trauma of exploitation.

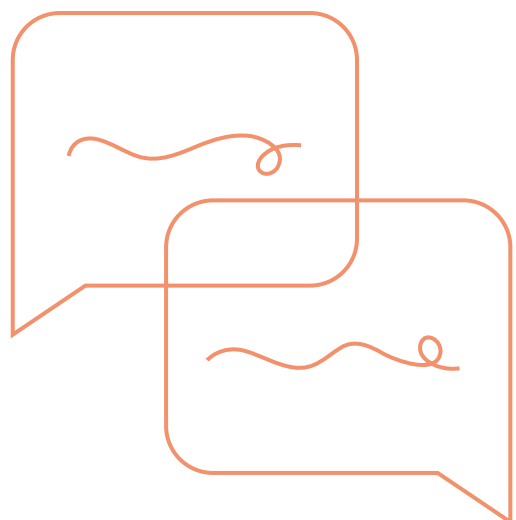
5. Engagement with education services is one of the most significant factors in keeping children with SEND safe from exploitation. Practitioners and parents were very clear that the most significant factor in keeping children and young people safe from modern slavery was their engagement within an education system that met their SEND needs.

Pathways from school exclusion to exploitation could be seen clearly, with a lack of SEND diagnosis and long waiting lists for assessments and mental health support leading to disengagement, isolation and exclusion in school, Pupil Referral Units or Alternative Provisions. Both practitioners and parents noted that poor relationships with peers and professionals can increase a child's vulnerability to exploitation.

Misconceptions of SEND, such as 'challenging' behaviour can lead to a lack of unmet educational, trauma, or mental health needs, impacting on vulnerability to exploitation and reduced identification opportunities. Falling behind, poor self-esteem, not feeling accepted, or that they belonged meant children started to disengage which further progressed them down a pathway making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Parents suggested that sometimes perpetrators deliberately engineered school breakdowns so that children were more readily available to exploit. School aged children and young people out on the streets within school hours are easily identifiable and parents spoke of this being a 'flag' helping exploiters seek out children and young people to befriend and recruit.

"Two things that enormously contributed [to his exploitation] were being clever and constantly academically failing and being othered and disregarded as a problem. They (school) just regarded him as being a problem, not having a problem."

Parent of an autistic child



6. Responding well and responding early is dependent on parents' concerns being listened to, with training and multi-agency support being in place.

Once risks and/or early indicators of exploitation for children and young people with SEND are identified addressing those needs appropriately and preventing entrenchment within modern slavery is vital. Parents' repeatedly recounted examples where a response meant to be positive in keeping children safe actually put them at further harm and did not take into account specific needs associated with SEND. This was shown by the evidence gathered to be dependent on three key inter-related and inter-dependent factors:

- a. Parent's being listened to concerning their child's SEND needs (which were often undiagnosed/unrecognised/unmet by services).
- b. Parent's being listened to regarding concerns they had around their child's safety and experiences of exploitation.
- c. Parents not being judged, but instead being supported and seen as protectors of their child when harm is being committed outside of the family home. For parents of children who have SEND, there needs to be additional importance placed on understanding the often unmet and unrecognised SEND which can influence how untrained practitioners view the child, and their family relationships and circumstances. This interpretation by practitioners may not always take into account that parents have already spent years asking for help regarding SEND, prior to any exploitation - years which may have already caused pain and trauma.

For example, many parents involved in this study reported struggling with residential and out of area placements as the parent felt they were being punished and their children felt 'rejected', adding to the trauma already experienced by these families as a result of the exploitation.

Parents often had to act as an intermediary between multiple support services, which could include exploitation, SEND and mental health services, with one parent reporting having 17 services at one point. However, a high number of services did not always lead to positive outcomes for children.



Recommendations

The following presents a series of important recommendations for national and local policymakers and strategic managers. Unfortunately, many of these are not new.

All indicate an urgent need for joined up government policy and approaches to modern slavery and harm of children and young people with SEND, with an urgent need for implementation of improved support for this group.

1. The Department for Education should update the Safeguarding Disabled Children and Young People Guidance:

The Department for Education should commission and publish renewed multi-agency practice guidance to replace the out of date: *Safeguarding Disabled Children and Young People Guidance (2009)*. This would bring it into line with new evidence, emerging innovative practice and updated guidance across all other areas of harm including modern slavery. This would support training, highlight key legal and policy issues such as mental capacity, duties under the Equality Act (2010) including the need for reasonable adjustments, transition planning to adult services and provide good practice examples. As demonstrated current guidance does not provide specificity nor direction for improved practice, targeted guidance could draw attention to the need for improved assessment that includes cumulative and overlapping trauma, whole family support and a strengths- based approach based on understanding of SEND.

2. Implementation of Safeguarding Children with SEND champions.

Local Safeguarding Partnerships should be tasked to identify a champion for safeguarding children and adults with SEND in their area to ensure scrutiny and analysis to reduce risks of modern slavery. Their remit should include urgent work to audit and review modern slavery training and prevention work and assess local service provision for children and young people with SEND who are exploited to ensure availability of appropriate responses for this group to avoid continued risk and harm.

3. The UK government should improve information sharing and data collection that helps agencies understand prevalence and nature of SEND on children and young adults' safeguarding needs.

Local Safeguarding Partnerships need to audit the quality of information sharing across all agencies within referrals and assessments to ensure appropriate reference to a child or young person's SEND and to include information to ensure that reasonable adjustments to working with the child to meet their needs are recorded.

Specific and urgent requirements are needed to ensure that the NRM referral process allows SEND to be recorded and a narrative description required to understand needs is added to the form. This would enable the Home Office to be able to report national statistics on NRM numbers of children and young people with SEND (a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, 2010), and aid better understanding of prevalence and required resource allocation. Similarly, DfE Children in Need statistics which record cases of child criminal and child sexual exploitation should also capture whether children have SEND to enable more sophisticated understanding of prevalence.

It is recommended that the policies and practice of the Devolving Child Decision Making Pilots be further investigated in due course to ensure equality in access and outcome in response to modern slavery of children and young people with SEND.

Improved information sharing is also required across LAs and Police forces to ensure that when a child is placed (or picked up) in another area that information regarding their vulnerability and SEND needs travels with them.

4. The Home Office and DfE should jointly commission and roll out national multi-agency mandatory training across all services to address lack of understanding of modern slavery and SEND amongst frontline workers and managers across statutory and voluntary sectors.

Given the nuanced understanding required, and the need for many multi-agency practitioners to adapt their practice and approach towards special educational needs, disability and vulnerability to harm, training should be mandatory and wherever possible face-to-face to enable full discussion and constructive challenge to some currently held beliefs and practice. This should also include those involved as first responders and decision-makers within the NRM.

5. The Department for Education should support the earlier identification of SEND and support to meet needs through multi agency working.

The established links between increased risks of harm and unmet or unidentified SEND needs requires concerted attention through earlier identification and support to reduce challenges faced in education which lead to exclusion and isolation; this needs urgent attention from DfE. This requires quicker access to, and availability of, key services to support children and their families when risk is first identified. Although the SEND reforms promise some increased resources, without a multi-agency focus which also provides a safeguarding lens, opportunities to reduce risk and respond to harm will be missed. This requires improved multi-agency working and partnership with parents to identify and respond to early concerns around SEND and should be reflected in updated safeguarding guidance.

6. The Department for Education should lead multi-agency work to prevent school breakdowns and establish accountable safeguarding processes for young people with SEND.

Urgent multi-agency work, led by DfE, is needed to set up a specific set of resourced actions required nationally by all strategic partners to work together in order to prevent breakdowns at school leading to increased risks of harm for children and young people with SEND when placed in PRUs, Alternative Provision or outside of education. This requires multi-agency working to ensure that there is quality and targeted prevention work including resourced support within ECHPs, and for those children without EHCPs but who may be at risk. Specific work is needed to locate and work with all off-rolled, excluded, home-school and persistently absent children with SEND to ensure they receive their right to an education and are adequately safeguarded. This should be seen as part of disruptive measures to prevent exploitation and trafficking.

7. The Home Office and Department for Education should support local safeguarding partnerships to work with parents as a resource for protection and to fund and produce resources to support parents.

Local safeguarding partnerships should lead a change in practice to seeking to work with parents of children and young people with SEND as a resource for protection, and review with parents how agencies within their area work with and respond to parents in partnership; and address a failure in some parts to listen effectively to parents. This requires a lead agency to aid communication and approach and accountability. In addition, parents and their children should be provided with accessible information which highlights risk of and promotes understanding of modern slavery. For children and young people this should be appropriate to age and understanding.

8. Local Safeguarding Partnerships should undertake an urgent review of how risk is assessed in children and young people with SEND.

Practice within multi-agency service hubs (MASH) and duty social work systems needs to be urgently reviewed by all Local Safeguarding Partnerships with respect to how risks are assessed when a child or young person has SEND. This is required to improve understanding of patterns of cumulative harms, unmet needs and layers of trauma, use of chronologies, and hearing the concerns of multi-agencies and parents when children are at risk of, or being, exploited. This should have ongoing monitoring by the champion recommended at local safeguarding partnership board level.

9. The Department for Education and the Home Office should update guidance and develop training to support improved practice concerning missing children and young people with SEND.

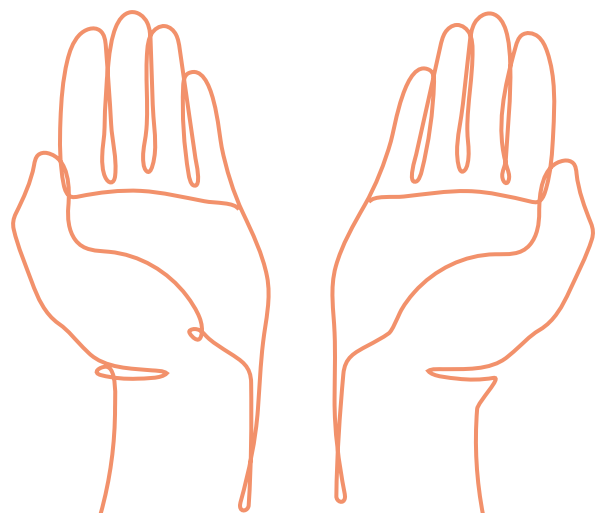
There needs to be recognition within national guidance of the increased risks for children and young people with SEND when they go missing, and the need for early intervention and improved communication across multi agencies to minimise harm to missing children and young people. Improved return interviews are required which take into account a child or young person's SEND needs and make necessary adaptations to ensure that children and young people can fully participate - this requires training for those conducting the interviews and a multi-agency approach. There is an urgent need for cumulative risk for this group of children to be taken into account when missing incidents are reported and recorded.

10. Local Authorities should reduce distant out of authority placements and their breakdown as a response to exploitation and trafficking.

Alongside a review of local service responses, out of area placements for children and young people with SEND who are exploited outside of the family needs to be reviewed, and as far as possible moves should be kept to a minimum and be subject to good, ongoing planning and Independent Review Officer scrutiny to ensure safety nets are not fractured. No child should be placed at a long distance from home and specifically not in unregulated accommodation where needs associated with SEND and where risk of exploitation are not supported and monitored. Rather than removing a child from their family or community emphasis should be placed on prevention, disruption and prosecution of offenders.

11. All agencies should improve professional understanding of communication and behaviours of children and young people with SEND.

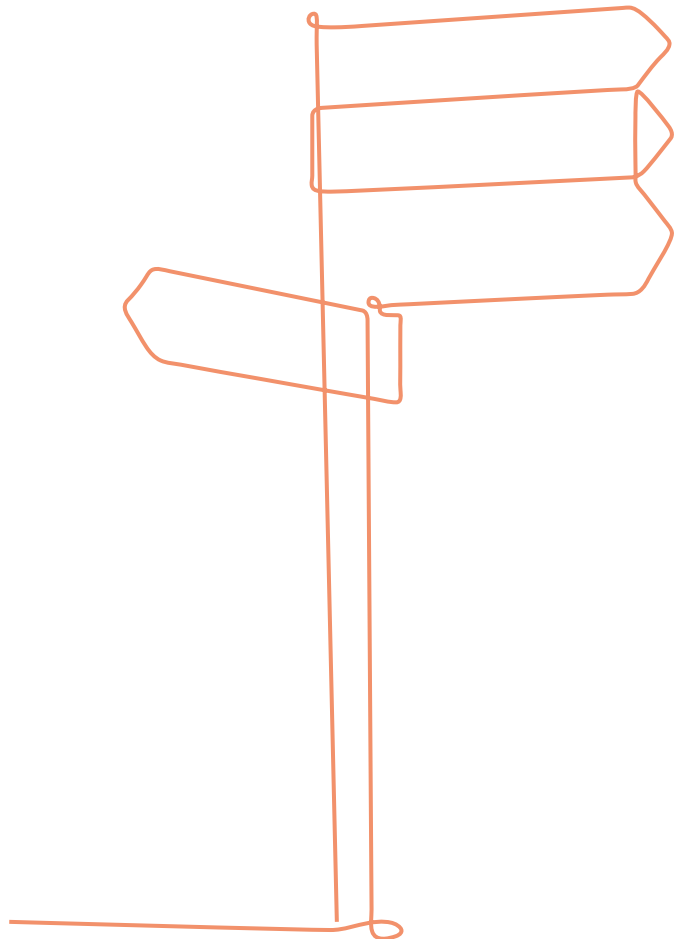
Data collected identified many situations where children have shown or indicated through their 'behaviour' that their needs were not being met, and/or that they were experiencing exploitation and/or trafficking. Listening to children and young people's communication is required at all stages when working with any child, however, training and improved understanding is required when working with children who may communicate, present, or behave in what may be seen as an 'atypical' manner. Greater efforts are needed to build and maintain relationship-based practice with a stable multi-agency workforce. Misconceptions such as relying solely on a child to disclose, and/or as a means to access support needs to be challenged.



Areas for further research

The lack of evidence to improve prevention, response and recovery from modern slavery for this group of children and young people is palpable. This study has highlighted several immediate urgent areas for evidence development. This list is by no means exhaustive. Further research is required concerning:

- Improved understanding of transition to adult services for this group (including the outcomes for those who do not reach the high threshold for vulnerable adult services).
- The prevalence and practice responses for children and young people with SEND who go missing.
- The effectiveness of different models of practice and their outcomes for children and their families.
- The impact on siblings and their support, particularly as reported here many of these siblings also have SEND.



MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Centre is hosted by the Humanities Division at the University of Oxford. The Centre is a consortium of three universities consisting of the Wilberforce Institute at the University of Hull, the University of Liverpool, and the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights at the University of Oxford.

Between 2019 and March 2024, the period when this project was awarded funding, the Centre was led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law (part of the British Institute of International and Comparative Law (BIICL)) and was a consortium of six organisations consisting of the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, the Wilberforce Institute at the University of Hull, the University of Liverpool, the Bonavero Institute on Human Rights at the University of Oxford and the Alan Turing Institute.



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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