

Creating Stable Futures: Human Trafficking, Participation and Outcomes for Children



Department for Education Briefing

Background

Child trafficking is child abuse and a severe violation of human rights affecting countries worldwide, including the UK. Children who fall victim to trafficking are subjected to various forms of exploitation including criminal, labour, and sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude. These children often experience severe trauma, both physical and psychological, which can have long-lasting effects on their development and wellbeing.

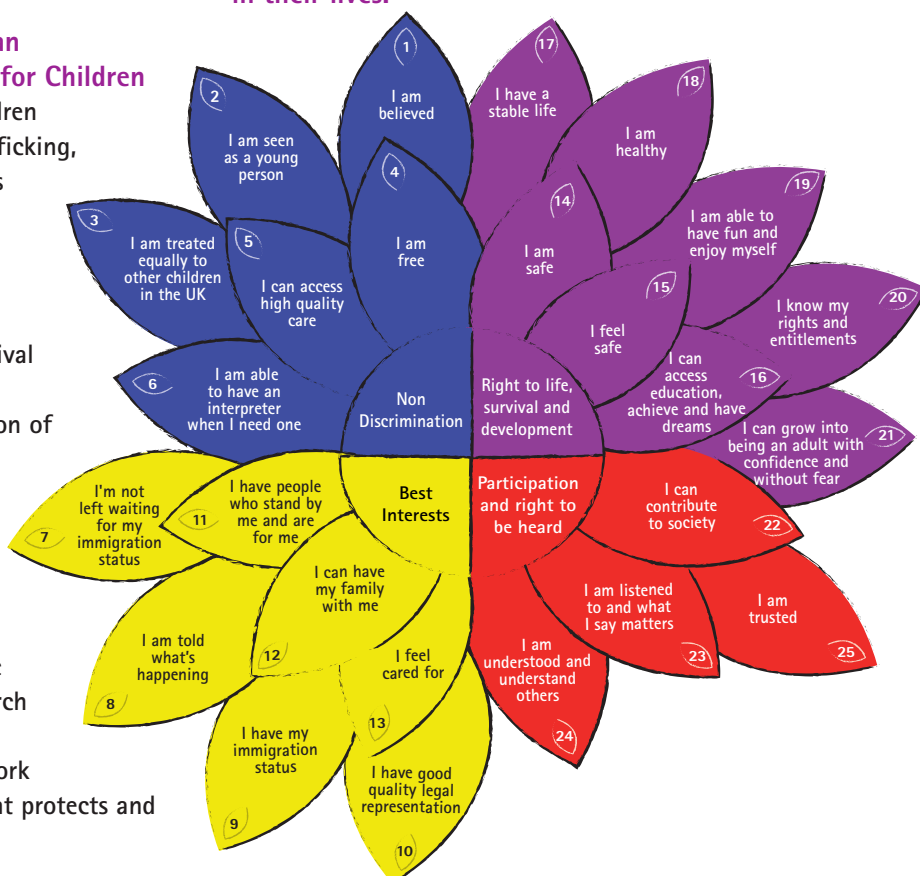
Ensuring the safety and welfare of children is a fundamental duty of local authorities in England and Wales, and for which the Secretary of State for Education has oversight through regulations and guidance. For children and young people who have experienced trafficking, exploitation and modern slavery, promoting their welfare and positive outcomes requires a tailored approach which addresses their specific recovery and protection needs.

The report **Creating Stable Futures: Human Trafficking, Participation and Outcomes for Children** explores participation and outcomes for children and young people who have experienced trafficking, exploitation and modern slavery. The findings of the research are structured around the four main principles of the United Nations Convention relating to Children – non-discrimination (Article 2), the best interests of the child (Article 3), the right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and the right to participation (Article 12). A significant portion of the report focuses on the way young people highlighted the need to be and feel safe as an important outcome, recognising how this was a foundation for the realisation of other outcomes. It was also found that there are barriers to this that were identified by young people as being structural, systemic and discriminatory. The findings of the research and views of young people allowed for the development of a Positive Outcomes Framework for supporting children and young people that protects and promotes their rights.

The Creating Stable Futures Positive Outcomes Framework (CSF-POF) is a practical and strategic tool

designed with young people across three locations in England and Scotland to evaluate and enhance the effectiveness of services provided to trafficked children. It is the first time we know directly what young people consider necessary for meaningful change to happen in their own, and others, lives both now and in the future. Its implementation focuses on ensuring that these children achieve positive, sustainable outcomes in various aspects of their lives, including safety, health, education, and emotional wellbeing.

The Creating Stable Futures Positive Outcomes Framework (CSF-POF) was developed with young victims of trafficking and details outcomes important and meaningful to them for positive changes to happen in their lives.





Key issues identified in the report within the remit of Local Authorities include:

1. Inconsistent Identification and Response to Trafficked Children

Local authorities often face challenges in consistently identifying and responding to trafficked children. This inconsistency can result from a lack of training and awareness among professionals, leading to missed opportunities to protect vulnerable children.

2. Resource Constraints

Many local authorities are constrained by limited resources, which affects their ability to provide comprehensive support services to trafficked children. This includes shortages in funding, staffing, and specialised training necessary to address the complex needs of these children.

3. Service Quality and Availability

There is significant variability in the quality and availability of specialist services for trafficked children across different local authorities. This inconsistency can lead to unequal access to necessary care and support, such as safe accommodation, health care, and education.

4. Discriminatory Attitudes and Practices

The report identifies instances of discriminatory attitudes and practices among professionals working with trafficked children. These attitudes can lead to a lack of belief in the children's experiences and contribute to further trauma, undermining the trust and support essential for their recovery.

5. Lack of Child-Centred Approaches

A recurring issue is the insufficient use of relationship-based practice and child-centred approaches in the planning and delivery of services. The best interests of the child are not always the primary consideration in decision-making processes, which can negatively impact the effectiveness of the support provided.

6. Participation and the Right to be Heard

The report detailed how little participation young people had in informing legislation, policies and/or practice that directly affected their lives.

Inconsistent Identification and Response to Trafficked Children

Local authorities play a crucial role in the identification of trafficked children. Effective identification involves being vigilant and aware of the signs of trafficking, which can include indicators of physical abuse, neglect, or psychological trauma. It also requires understanding the various contexts in which trafficking can occur, such as criminal exploitation, domestic servitude, labour exploitation and sexual exploitation. Responses also include a need to recognise that children and young people may have limited or constrained choices available to them which may create a risk of their going missing and further exploitation.

Ensuring that all professionals who come into contact with children, including educators, healthcare providers, and law enforcement, are trained to recognise the signs of trafficking is vital. This includes understanding the cultural and linguistic barriers that may prevent children from disclosing their experiences.

Once identified, trafficked children require a comprehensive range of support services tailored to their specific needs. Local authorities are responsible for coordinating and providing these services, which are critical for the recovery and reintegration

of the child. Access to healthcare, including specialised services for mental health, is essential as trafficked children often suffer from trauma-related conditions. Access to counselling and psychological support is crucial for their recovery.

Ensuring that trafficked children have access to education and vocational training opportunities is vital for their long-term integration and independence. Local authorities must work to remove barriers to education, such as legal restrictions or language barriers. Efforts must be made to integrate trafficked children into the community, which includes fostering supportive relationships and networks. Community programmes and initiatives can help children build new skills and social connections.

Resource Constraints

Local authorities face significant challenges due to limited financial resources. Adequate funding is crucial to support a wide range of services necessary for trafficked children, including safe and appropriate accommodation, trained foster carers, specialised healthcare, and educational support. Financial constraints can limit the capacity of local authorities to employ sufficient staff, invest in training programmes, and develop infrastructure that supports comprehensive care.



There is a need for regular and compulsory training for social care, social work, education, health, housing and criminal justice professionals to ensure empathetic and informed practice predominates. Effective management of trafficking cases requires a workforce that is not only sufficient in number but also appropriately trained and specialised with human trafficking embedded into social work, social care, law and policing curriculum.

Continual professional development and specialised training are vital for staff working with trafficked children. Training programmes should cover areas such as recognising signs of trafficking, trauma-informed care, professional curiosity, legal rights and protections for victims, and cultural competency. This should include knowledge of the ways in which child-specific forms of human trafficking take place. Enhanced training equips staff with the necessary skills to respond effectively to the diverse and often complex needs of trafficked children.

Adequate physical infrastructure, including safe accommodation, is essential for providing comprehensive support to trafficked children. This infrastructure must be secure, accessible, and equipped to handle the specific needs of these children, including privacy considerations and the capacity to provide intensive support services.

Service Quality and Availability

The report highlights the need for local authorities to ensure that trafficked children have access to comprehensive, good quality and specialist support services. These services include safe accommodation, mental health support, and education. Providing such services is essential for the psychological wellbeing and physical recovery of child victims.

Having a safe home is key to feeling safe for young people. Stable and secure accommodation is a critical factor in the recovery process for trafficked children. The report recommends that local authorities provide safe and appropriate housing options for these children, protecting them from further exploitation and helping them rebuild their lives.

Being able to trust and feel safe with the professionals supporting them is also important to their sense of safety. Disbelief, distrust and victim-blaming have a significant impact on young people's sense of safety, whereas trauma-informed, relationship-based approaches enhance their sense of safety. Feeling valued and loved in nurturing environments and having a sense of belonging and community are all factors that promote healthy development. Young people need stability and psychological support for their recovery from trafficking to find the sense of peace and stability essential for achieving good outcomes.

Discriminatory Attitudes and Practices

Young people expressed that structural inequality shapes professional practices and attitudes, and that this creates barriers to achieving positive outcomes. They highlight not

being believed as a key issue permeating their encounters with professionals. Some described issues of overt discrimination, such as being told by a social work manager "why don't you go back to your country?" when they raised complaints about inappropriate accommodation. All young people have the right to equality of opportunity and outcomes, regardless of their status, and this should be enshrined in all decisions and actions taken with regard to their care. Ensuring empathetic and compassionate practice at all times was highlighted by young people as essential to their sense of care and safety.

Lack of Child Centred Approaches

Young people going through asylum and immigration processes feel that their immigration status is the most important issue affecting their lives. Receiving support as they navigate this process was identified as central to their best interests. This means ensuring they have access to high quality legal advice to progress with their claims. Having an independent guardian to support them and advocate for their best interests helps children and young people to feel listened to and heard in the decision-making process. There is also a need to continue care, support and recognition of victims of human trafficking as they transition from child to adult services.

Crucially, relationship-based practice was emphasised by young people who feel that having good relationships with professionals who are specialist, trauma-informed and well-trained helps them to feel confident that the people supporting them are acting in their best interests. Outcomes for young people are contingent on work with them being participatory, child-centred, and with a rights and entitlements approach. The views of children and young people must be present in all Care Planning and Pathway Planning.

Participation

Young people involved in this participatory research wanted their views to be taken seriously. The study found few examples of young people's participation in informing practice or policies that directly affected their lives. Further investment in facilitating and providing opportunities to enable their meaningful participation is needed. Young people welcomed an approach of working 'with' rather than 'on' or 'for' them.

Conclusion

The report underscores the need for local authorities to enhance their response to trafficked children by improving identification practices, addressing resource constraints, and ensuring consistent service quality. It calls for better multi-agency coordination and the adoption of child-rights approaches to ensure that trafficked children receive the comprehensive support and protection they need.



Recommendations

1. The UK Government and devolved administrations must ensure that all decisions about children in their individual cases and in the development of law and policy are made with their best interests as the primary consideration.
2. The UK Government and devolved administrations must ensure mechanisms are in place for the meaningful participation of child victims in policies and interventions that affect them. These include providing child-friendly information, undertaking Child Rights Impact Assessments on emerging policies, building in a monitoring and impact evaluation process following the implementation of those policies and developing meaningful consultation with young people.
3. The UK Government and devolved administrations must ensure that child victims of trafficking are always treated as children first and afforded their rights to the protection and care they need.
4. The UK Government and devolved administrations must commit to supporting positive outcomes for child victims in care, education and immigration as well as measuring the impact towards positive outcomes of the National Referral Mechanism.
5. The UK Government and devolved administrations should consider operationalising the Positive Outcomes Framework in a pilot study to measure the effectiveness of current policies in achieving positive outcomes for identified child victims.
6. Local authority children's services, with the full support of the Department for Education and equivalents in the devolved administrations, must provide quality care for migrant child victims to ensure they are afforded specialist support and the same opportunities as other young people. There is a need to reframe debates around the migration of children and young people to ensure the quality of care they need.
7. Local authority children's services must enable psychological and physical recovery for child victims, particularly in the provision of safe accommodation and access to mental health services.
8. The ADCS and local authority children's services should support universities to include human trafficking, its causes and consequences, child-specific forms of trafficking, how children and young people are affected by it in terms of their social development, and best practice responses to it in social work, social care, education, law and policing curriculum.
9. Statutory chief officers and safeguarding partners in each local authority area must ensure they develop relationship-based practice that builds trust with children as fundamental to their ability to have their voices heard and for them to feel safe.
10. All professionals working with children and young people who have been identified as trafficked must ensure a positive non-discriminatory practice and use non-discriminatory and non-stigmatising language when working with them.

ECPAT UK (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking) is a leading children's rights organisation working to protect children from trafficking and transnational exploitation. Our vision is that *children everywhere enjoy their rights to be protected and to lives free from trafficking and exploitation*. Our mission is to promote and uphold children's rights in the UK and outside of the UK by informing, educating and researching child trafficking and exploitation, increasing awareness of and campaigning to end child trafficking and exploitation, standing with children and young people affected by exploitation and working collaboratively for change. Our work is rights-based, child-centred and trauma-informed.

The Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice at Sheffield Hallam University is a leading centre for human rights and social justice. The Centre is home to a range of applied research, projects, education and scholarship including work around social justice, rights, law, policing, community justice, gender-based violence, refugee rights, human trafficking and modern slavery.

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