

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

Northern Ireland Government Briefing



Background

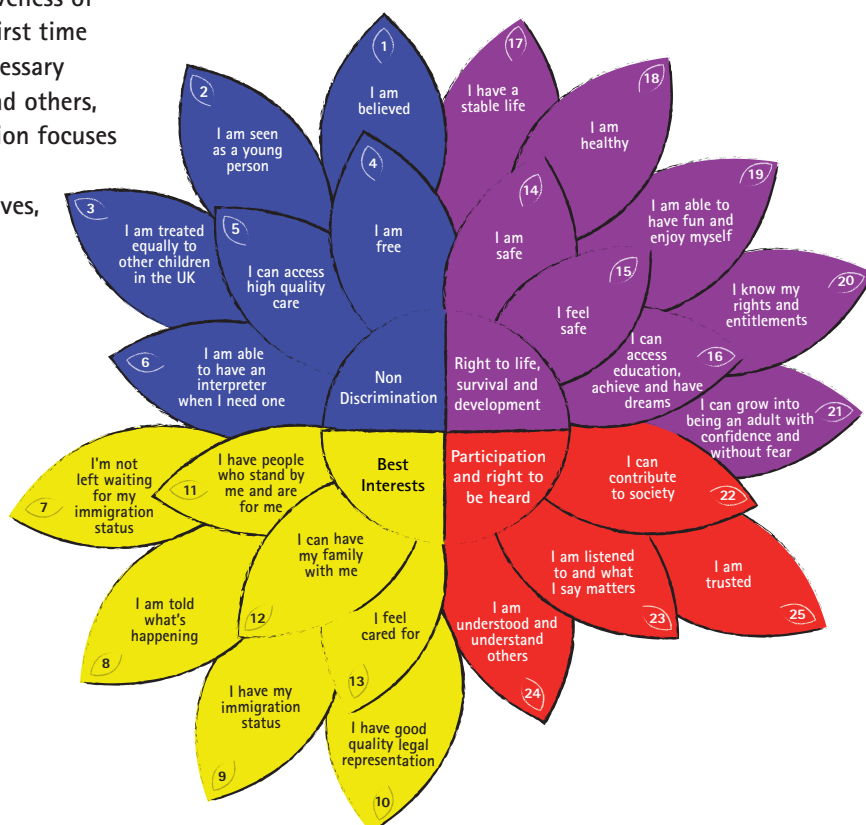
Child trafficking is child abuse a severe violation of human rights affecting many countries worldwide, including within Northern Ireland. Children who fall victim to trafficking are subjected to various forms of exploitation including criminal, labour, sexual, and domestic servitude. These children 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 the Northern Ireland Government. 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 **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 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). The findings of the research provide a framework for supporting children and young people that protects and promotes their rights. The framework is practical, child and young person-centred, and has wide applicability for local authority practice.

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 the government of Northern Ireland include:

1. Inconsistent Identification and Response to Trafficked Children

The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts often face challenges in consistently identifying and responding to trafficked children. This inconsistency can be found within team practices, between regional processes and across different Trusts and can result from a lack of training and awareness among professionals, leading to missed opportunities to protect vulnerable children.

2. Resource Constraints

Many of the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts 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 trusts. 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 policies and/or practice that directly affected their lives.

Inconsistent Identification and Responses to Trafficked Children

The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts 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.

The current rate of identification for potential child victims in Northern Ireland remains extremely low with only 110 children identified as potential victims in 2023, the majority of which were Somali followed by Eritrean. Of these, the Health and Social Care Trusts were responsible for only 14 of those referrals which emphasises the urgent need for training to be provided to first responders within children's social care. Although different forms of child sexual exploitation (CSE) are known and documented, cases of CSE of children and young people born in Northern Ireland are rarely included in referrals into the National Referral Mechanism.

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 also essential. 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 wellbeing, recovery and integration of the child. Access to healthcare, including specialised services for mental health, is essential. Trafficked children often suffer from trauma-related conditions, and 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. A range of community programmes and initiatives, including through sport, can help children build new skills and social connections.

Resource Constraints

The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts often 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 accommodation, specialised healthcare, educational support and access to legal services. 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, health, education, 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, education, law and policing curriculum. This is an area that the Northern Irish government could lead on in terms of ensuring curriculum development.

Continual professional development and specialist training are vital for staff working with trafficked children. Training programmes should cover areas such as recognising signs of trafficking, trauma-informed care, legal rights and protections for victims, professional curiosity 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 better understanding and the necessary skills to respond effectively to the diverse and often complex needs of trafficked children.

Adequate physical infrastructure, including safe and appropriate 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

There is a need for the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts to ensure that trafficked children have access to comprehensive support services in a consistent, cooperative and coordinated manner. 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 for their recovery from trafficking in order to find the sense of peace and stability essential for achieving

positive outcomes.

One of the key recommendations is the prompt assignment of independent guardians to children identified as potential victims of trafficking. These guardians would provide dedicated support and advocacy, ensuring that the children's best interests are represented in all legal and policy decisions.

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 – or professional suspicion – 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. Professional curiosity around where young people are coming from can promote better understanding of their needs and necessary support.

The outbreak of racist violence and riots which took place in August 2024 left young people feeling unsafe and increased their sense that discriminatory attitudes and practices towards migrants persevere. These incidents highlighted the need for leadership to defend the rights of all those who choose to make Northern Ireland their home, and to offer support and protection for those affected.

Lack of Child-Centred Approaches

Young people going through the 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.

Participation

Young people involved in this participatory research wanted their views to be taken seriously. The views of children and young people must be present in all Care Planning and Pathway Planning. The study found few examples of young people's participation in informing practice or policies that directly affected their lives. 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 the Government of Northern Ireland 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 Government of Northern Ireland 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 Government of Northern Ireland 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 Government of Northern Ireland 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 Government of Northern Ireland must ensure children identified as potential victims of slavery and trafficking are promptly assigned an independent legal guardian.
5. The Government of Northern Ireland 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.
6. The Government of Northern Ireland 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.
7. The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts with the full support of the NI Government must provide quality care for migrant child victims to ensure they are afforded specialist support and the same opportunities as other young people.
8. The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts must enable psychological wellbeing and physical recovery for child victims, particularly in the provision of safe accommodation, access to legal support, access to educational opportunities as well as access to mental health services.
9. The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) should ensure better cooperation and coordination is paramount in future human trafficking work.
10. Statutory chief officers and safeguarding partners in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust 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. They should also ensure greater consistency, coordination and cooperation with other Trusts.
11. The Government of Northern Ireland and the HSC Trusts should support universities across Northern Ireland to embed human trafficking related topics into their social work, social care, education, law and policing curriculum.
11. All professionals working with children and young people who have been identified as trafficked must ensure positive non-discriminatory practice and use non-discriminatory and non-stigmatising language when working with them while ensuring professional curiosity to understand needs and necessary support.

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 live 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.

Laura Durán, Head of Policy, Advocacy and Research
ECPAT UK
l.duran@ecpat.org.uk
www.ecpat.org.uk

Patricia Hynes, Professor of Social Justice,
Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice, Sheffield Hallam University
p.hynes@shu.ac.uk
www.shu.ac.uk