

Submission for consideration by the Covid-19 All Party Parliamentary Group from the Office of the Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester

Key issue facing modern slavery and human trafficking survivors during Covid-19

The emergency response to Covid-19 by organisations supporting victims and survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking across Greater Manchester has been outstanding. The mobilisation of alternative methods of contact and levels of adaptation that have been displayed evidence the commitment and expertise they have in supporting vulnerable and high risk communities.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority have facilitated online weekly drop in sessions for organisations working in this arena to raise issues, share solutions and collectively problem solve. Although we do work with providers of support services to children and young people across Greater Manchester, the issues facing these age group, in comparison to adults, does differ based on feedback we have received. We would encourage reference to the submission from Barnardos in particular, but also other organisations working with survivors under the age of 18, to ensure consideration of the needs of the broadest range of victims.

The key issue that has been raised, both through our weekly contact direct phone calls with service providers, is the impact of Covid-19 measures on the isolation levels and mental health of survivors who are accessing support services. The concern stems primarily from the inconsistent lack of access that clients have to the online platforms that these, and almost all other forms of contact and engagement, have moved to.

The movements and contact restrictions that have been put in place have almost entirely removed face to face contact between survivors and their case workers, except in emergency situations, as well removing contact with wider networks and, where they were in employment, their ability to work. Direct support activity has moved online, and the variety of provision that is able to be accessed to help reduce isolation and impact on mental health is increasing every week. Organisations are developing bespoke wellbeing and activity materials to support those they are working with, providing online group drop in spaces, and working with online counsellors and therapists to broaden the range of therapeutic based interventions, including 1-1 counselling and group art therapy, that can be accessed.

Although necessity has helped to revolutionise availability of these services online, a key barrier faced is the lack WiFi access that clients of these services have. This does not only impact their ability to access these specific services, but also health and care provision, and engage more broadly with other support networks they may have, including friends and family. Where individuals would have previously been able to access free WiFi through public hotspots and libraries, they are now unable to access these spaces freely. One service reported to us that a client of theirs had travelled into the centre of Manchester to access free WiFi and was moved on by the police for not adhering to current movement restrictions. A

second service who provides support to NRM clients, reported that lack of access to WiFi affected as many as 50% of their clients.

Some organisations have been able to redirect their own funds or are applying for grants to purchase appropriate phones for clients to overcome hardware limitations. They are also trying to provide data packages to facilitate access, although this remains limited and could soon become prohibitively expensive for providers. A longer term, sustainable solution is required focusing on the root cause, which is lack of access to WiFi, to minimise the negative and longer term impacts of restrictions on the isolation and mental health of victims and survivors of modern slavery.

We are aware that the Single Competent Authority has been able to quickly adapt and provide pre-paid cash cards to NRM service providers to facilitate continued access to financial support during this time, and we welcome this centralised provision of support. A similar, national approach is required regarding access to WiFi. This could take the form of directly providing WiFi access or data packages from a central point to individuals currently being supported through the NRM, although this would limit such support to those clients who are currently accessing NRM provision, and would not impact on the number of survivors who are accessing support from non-NRM providers. An expansion of free WiFi hotspots throughout the country would support the provision of access to a wider range of survivors, and minimise the impact on isolation and mental health. We are aware that digital poverty is an issue that is significantly impacting swathes of the country, and taking a broader approach to making WiFi available would help to address the same issue faced by some of the most vulnerable and high risk communities and individuals across the country. We would welcome any progress on this issue that can be provided, to better support the victims and survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking residing in Greater Manchester and beyond.