



## **APPG on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking COVID-19 Inquiry**

### **Submission from Justice and Care**

#### **1. About us**

Justice and Care is a charity that works to bring freedom to women, men and children who have been enslaved, trafficked and brutally exploited. We help them to restore their lives. We fight slavery, pursuing and dismantling criminal networks and bringing perpetrators to justice. We work with governments and law enforcement agencies to fight slavery. We use all our learning from the front line and share that expertise with the people in power and other agencies to spark a systemic change.

Justice and Care's Victim Navigator Programme is a pioneering concept embedding specialist NGO staff within senior policing teams to broker support and act as a trusted bridge between victims of modern slavery and police investigations. The Victim Navigator is there to be the primary contact for rescued victims, to provide wrap around support and independent advocacy for victims, and at the same time act as a bridge between the victims and the police to help support investigations and bring traffickers to justice. Currently, a Victim Navigator is embedded with Essex Police, Kent Police, Surrey Police, Greater Manchester Police, UK Border Force in Glasgow.

#### **2. Issues that we are seeing on the ground**

As we are in the midst of an unprecedented global crisis, it is hard to assess the mid-term and long-term impact. But what is already clear is that current survivors of modern slavery have been made even more vulnerable by the Covid-19 and cannot fully access support services they need. Their long-term recovery has been jeopardised as many charities providing critical support have been adversely affected and had to close their services. Ultimately, they will be at higher risk of being re-trafficked due to decrease in critical services, lack of employment opportunities whether they choose to stay in the UK or return home.

Through our operational work supporting victims on the frontline, we have identified a number of challenges that are interrupting victims' recovery and could potentially place them at risk of re-trafficking. The lockdown and social distancing measures enforced as a result of the pandemic have negatively affected the support victims are able to receive. This is already causing negative psychological and emotional impact jeopardising victim's recovery, for example:

- Delays in accessing safe accommodation when victims are identified and rescued. Example of this is a case where a victim was placed in temporary accommodation due to

the delay in accessing the NRM support and safe housing. This means that victims might be unnecessarily exposed to the risk of contracting COVID-19 which could jeopardise the victim from entering the safe house once one was found.

- Inability to access healthcare has caused destabilisation in the victims' wellbeing. In a number of cases victims were not able to see a GP or Mental Health services. Lack of use of technology has been identified as a gap that could be addressed.
- No access to psychological counselling, immigration advice, obtaining new documents from the Embassy. All of these services have been temporarily shut down and are not available to victims. For example, we have a victim whose visa is due to expire and no immigration solicitors are available to support the case due to being closed, placing the victim at risk of being arrested for Immigration offences.
- In terms of progression of police investigations, the pandemic has put a pause on the cases that were going through courts as the trials were stopped. Victims are waiting to give their Achieving Best Evidence interviews. Police officers working on modern slavery have been redeployed to other policing areas decreasing the capacity and capability to do proactive detection and investigations. Having said that, we have seen that things are gradually improving. For example, police officers are now using technology more, including for ABE interviews whereas before it would only be a face-to-face process.
- Repatriations have been paused due to COVID-19 and the borders being closed. Victims, who do not consent entering the NRM, are left to their own devices to find their way back home through means that may create further vulnerabilities. Lack of alternative provision to the NRM support services is more acutely observed. In the locations we operate such as Dover and Glasgow, we have observed that minibuses are used to exit the UK and return people to source countries such as Romania. This has caused a backlog of processed entries at the borders with the source countries creating a vulnerable situation for individuals who are already in desperate positions.
- Loss of jobs within survivors' families due to Covid-19 puts the entire household into precarious situations of extreme vulnerability. In one of our cases, the family were left without any income and had no money to buy food or pay the bills. They were eligible for benefits, but the waiting time was in excess of 2 weeks. Food-banks were not accessible either due to increased demand and partial closures. We were able to support the family during this acute crisis.
- While many premises where slavery and exploitation were taking place, such as brothels, car washes, nail bars and massage parlours, criminals are changing their modus operandi as they are not prepared to lose their profits. Sexual exploitation has moved on-line. Industries for labour exploitation are changing as well with the increased demand for food production and packaging, delivery services. We have also heard from the victims themselves that traffickers are becoming much more aggressive and abusive in confined premises with their victims. In addition, victims find themselves in increased debt bondage, as their traffickers are charging for food, coffee, cigarettes and rent that victims will have to pay for at the end of the lockdown.

- Detection rates have gone down due to decreased capacity and restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In the absence of official statistics, we are hearing that the number of potential victims identified has gone down. During the first few weeks the police have seen a decrease in referrals and intelligence, as their capability to do proactive work has been reduced by the precautions and restrictions due to the pandemic. Some police officers working on modern slavery have been redeployed to other policing areas.

### **3. What needs to be done**

The social and economic impact caused by COVID-19 have led to the disruption of anti-slavery efforts and Government response. Modern slavery has rapidly drifted down the agenda and got lost among other competing priorities.

#### We must ensure:

- A fresh sense of urgency, commitment and leadership from Westminster to drive the modern slavery response up the agenda
- Immediate access to safe accommodation for all suspected victims to prevent them from becoming destitute or going back to their traffickers
- Emergency funding for front line services, both statutory and non-statutory, to ensure critical services are available for vulnerable victims to prevent further re-traumatisation and possible re-trafficking, including better use of technology.
- Better understanding of the changing trends and criminal behaviour by the Government and law enforcement agencies to target their resources and actions accordingly. This also needs to be shared with charities who are supporting victims to inform their services accordingly.
- Adequate resources for pro-active and intelligence led detection by the police forces to ensure vulnerable victims do not remain in the hands of traffickers during the lockdown
- More national awareness raising and educating frontline charities working with vulnerable communities to be the 'eyes and ears' to spot and report modern slavery cases