



service not servitude

MODERN SLAVERY IN THE
HOSPITALITY SECTOR



foreword

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The hospitality sector has faced unprecedented challenges in recent years, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the sector began to reopen, businesses struggled with staffing shortages, and many roles became available to migrant workers through the skilled worker visa. Unfortunately, this has led to widespread exploitation and unethical practices, especially among those in low paid roles.

The government's response to these issues has been insufficient and, as a result, modern slavery and labour abuse have become prevalent in the hospitality sector. The statistics are alarming, with increases in the number of potential victims and cases of modern slavery and labour abuse.

In this context, our work through the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline is more critical than ever. The Helpline provides a lifeline for victims, offering support, advice, and a way to escape exploitation. It also plays a vital role in raising awareness and helping to prevent future cases of modern slavery.

As we move forward, it is essential that we continue to

promote and support the work of the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline. Helping businesses in the hospitality sector to understand the risks and opportunities of engaging with this agenda and improving the robustness of their processes and procedures is key. Exploitation can occur simply through failing to implement appropriate checks and balances, particularly in situations where temporary and transient labour is in widespread use. By harnessing data through the Helpline and supporting businesses to better understand those risks, we hope to create an environment that is intolerant to modern slavery.

Together, we can make a difference and help to create a safer and more ethical hospitality sector.

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introduction

Hospitality experienced the largest economic downturn of all sectors in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic because of public health restrictions. Prior to this, jobs in the hospitality sector comprised 7.1% of the UK workforce. As the sector began to reopen in 2021, many businesses began recruiting at once, large numbers of hospitality staff moved on during the pandemic, and many furloughed staff did not return, creating staffing shortages. More so than other industries, average wages in hospitality are low, and staff are often young and from minority ethnic backgrounds or born overseas.¹

In August 2025, analysis of data from the Office for National Statistics by UKHospitality stated that over half of recent job losses in the UK related to the hospitality sector.³ Hospitality businesses have faced challenges included higher National Insurance contributions, rising costs for food, ingredients and energy, and an increase in the national minimum wage. These escalating overheads, combined with reduced demand on the sector because of the cost of living crisis, has put extreme financial pressure on many hospitality businesses. The risk is that these financial challenges may create the conditions for exploitation and modern slavery to thrive.

Many roles within hospitality and other sectors became available to migrant workers through the skilled worker visa, which was introduced in December 2020, as free movement

came to an end after Brexit. As expressed in a report published by the Committee of Public Accounts: 'The Home Office made changes to the skilled worker visa route without a full assessment of the risk or potential impacts, including the risk of non-compliance with visa rules and exploitation of migrant workers.'² As a result of lax safeguards, exploitation has become rife amongst sponsored migrant workers, particularly those in low paid roles such as are prevalent in the care sector and hospitality.

The government response and lessons learnt from widespread exploitation of migrants on the health and care worker visa have been woefully insufficient, which has led to the escalation of the same unethical practices, worker rights and human rights abuses in hospitality.

the issue in numbers*

544

modern slavery
potential victims

174

modern slavery cases

£18,271

average debt from
illegal visa fees

145

labour abuse cases

439

labour abuse
potential victims

¹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9111/>

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48634/documents/254879/default/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c05ey2ypp92o>

*Data relates to reports made to the Helpline from January 2024-June 2025.

the scale of the issue

Hospitality is a sector where exploitation has been indicated consistently, at both ends of the scale from worker rights abuses in labour abuse cases to extreme cases of modern slavery where people feel unable to leave the situation. Many hospitality roles involve unsociable hours, long shifts and low pay, as well as much of the workforce being hidden from public view, making them more susceptible to exploitative practices.

Table 1 Cases and potential victims indicated in modern slavery and labour abuse (January 2020-June 2025)

Modern slavery (labour exploitation)						
Year	All sectors		Hospitality sector			
	Cases	Potential victims	Cases	% of cases	Potential victims	% of potential victims
2020	586	1947	63	11%	179	9%
2021	460	1594	35	8%	73	5%
2022	1044	4009	98	9%	266	7%
2023	760	3403	74	10%	326	10%
2024	696	2645	101	15%	352	13%
2025*	504	1505	73	14%	192	13%

Labour abuse**						
Year	All sectors		Hospitality sector			
	Cases	Potential victims	Cases	% of cases	Potential victims	% of potential victims
2020	-	-	-	-	-	-
2021	-	-	-	-	-	-
2022	461	1740	73	16%	199	11%
2023	516	1810	69	13%	196	11%
2024	779	2672	97	12%	314	12%
2025*	416	1206	48	12%	125	10%

*Data for 2025 only relates to January-June.

**The labour abuse classification was introduced in 2022 so no data predates this.

As can be seen in the table above, the Helpline saw a surge in reports relating to hospitality following the end of covid restrictions in 2022, followed by consistently high numbers since. There was a noticeable 36% increase in modern slavery cases and 8% increase in potential victims relating to hospitality between 2023 and 2024. Even greater increases were observed in this sector in relation to labour abuse cases (41%) and potential victims (60%).

Table 2 Cases and potential victims indicated in modern slavery and labour abuse (January 2024-June 2025)

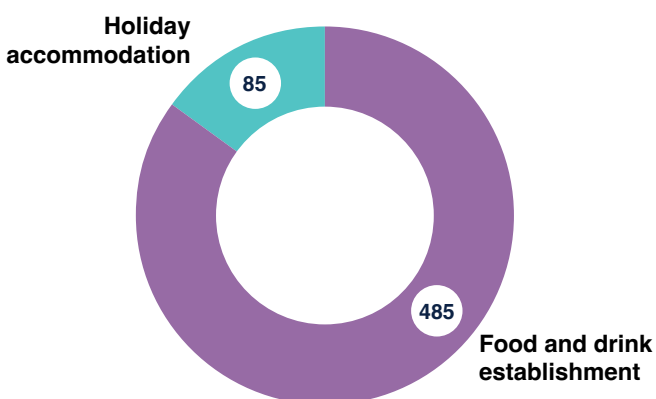
Period covered	Modern slavery cases	Modern slavery potential victims	Labour abuse cases	Labour abuse potential victims
Q1 2024	13	44	24	75
Q2 2024	17	85	24	47
Q3 2024	42	138	25	107
Q4 2024	29	85	24	85
2024 total	101	352	97	314
Q1 2025	35	92	19	53
Q2 2025	38	100	29	72
2025 total	73	192	48	125

Since early 2024, the number of cases has been increasing and changing, with more potential victims in the UK on skilled worker visas. This peaked during the summer months and again in December when seasonal demand increased. Just six months into 2025, modern slavery cases are already 143% higher than they were at the same point the previous year.

hospitality sub-industries

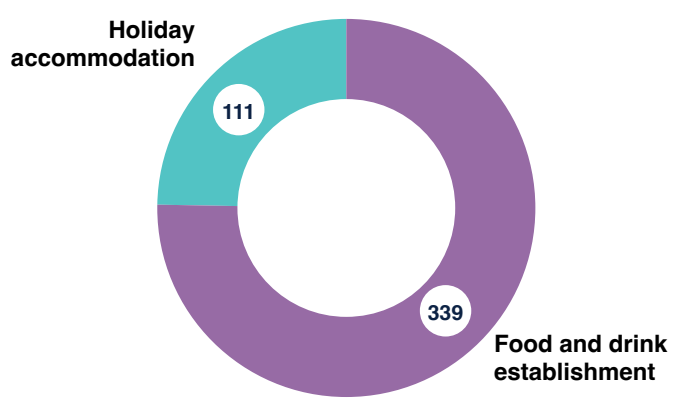
The hospitality sector is broad, comprising a number of business types relating to leisure. Broadly, the Helpline sees cases relating to two sub-industries: holiday accommodation and food and drink establishments. Holiday accommodation includes hotels, motels, campsites and holiday lets. Food and drink establishments include restaurants, takeaways, bars and catering companies.

Figure 1 Modern slavery potential victims by hospitality sub-industries (January 2024-June 2025)*



*Excludes two 'unknowns'. Sum total may be greater than total potential victims as some were exploited across both sub-industries.

Figure 2 Labour abuse potential victims by hospitality sub-industries (January 2024-June 2025)*



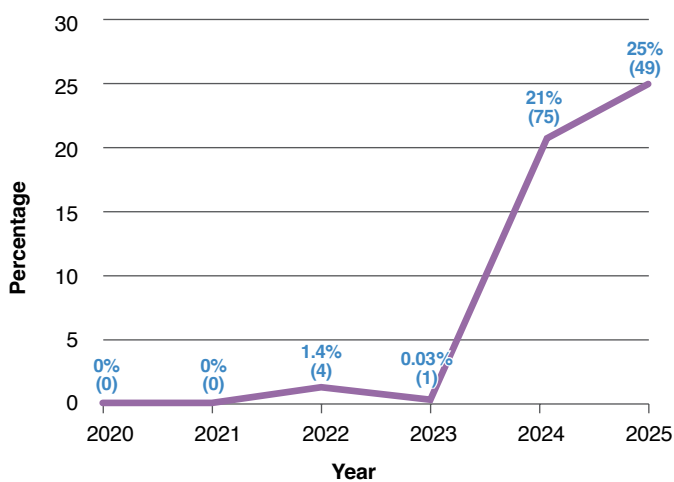
*Excludes one 'unknown'. Sum total may be greater than total potential victims as some were exploited across both sub-industries.

Between January 2024 and June 2025, where the sub-industry was known, most modern slavery potential victims (485, 85%) related to exploitation in food and drink establishments. A significantly smaller proportion (85, 15%) of potential victims were exploited in businesses providing holiday accommodation. In relation to labour abuse, a similar breakdown can be seen with the majority of situations taking place in food and drink establishments (339, 75%) compared to holiday accommodation (112, 25%).

skilled worker visas

Whilst the Helpline has seen a recent rise in reports of individuals exploited in the hospitality sector, the most notable increase is the proportion of modern slavery potential victims that are on skilled worker visas (or Tier 2 Visas in 2020).

Figure 3 Modern slavery potential victims on tier 2 or skilled worker visas (January 2020-June 2025)



As can be seen from the graph above, no modern slavery potential victims indicated in the hospitality sector were reportedly on Tier 2 or skilled worker visas in 2020 or 2021. Small numbers were indicated in 2022 (4, 1.4%) and 2023 (1, 0.3%), followed by a huge jump of 7,400% in 2024 (75, 21%). In the first six months of 2025, 49 potential victims have already been indicated as being on skilled worker visas, comprising 25% of potential victims in the hospitality sector, signaling a likely increase between 2024 and 2025.

The same characteristics that have been evident in modern slavery in the care sector since 2022 have now become apparent in hospitality, with migrant workers experiencing many of the same abuses at the hands of their employers. Key themes relate to a large disparity between what is promised to a worker and the reality once they arrive in the UK. Illegal fees are charged in exchange for visas and certificates of sponsorship; workers are commonly housed on site or in accommodation provided by their employer; workers are threatened with having their visas revoked or being deported.

false promises

Migrant workers are commonly lured to the UK by promises of high salaries, accommodation and company cars. They arrive with ideas of a better life and are met with quite the opposite, forced to work more hours than agreed, for less money and in terrible conditions. Sometimes individuals are hired for a senior role and then forced into a junior role on arrival. In some cases, individuals have even been sponsored to work in high paid roles in entirely different sectors, only to be forced into a low paid hospitality role.

debt bondage

Many migrant workers have entered the UK's hospitality workforce on skilled worker visas. According to the Employer Pays Principle (EPP), employers are required to bear all costs relating to recruitment. In practice, this principle is not being followed by many employers, who have not only made migrant workers pay for their visas and certificates of sponsorship, but also charged exorbitant fees. Qualitative data from the Helpline provides examples of hospitality workers being illegally charged between £4,000 and £30,000 by their employers for 'visa fees', with average debts equaling £18,271. Workers are therefore starting their employment in the UK having accrued huge debt.

In some cases, where workers have paid the fees up front, this debt is in their home country, owed to friends, family or even loan sharks who pose a risk to their loved ones. They are fearful of returning to their home countries for fear of repercussions from loan sharks, unable to make repayments. In other cases, they are in a situation of debt bondage to their employer paying off money owed incrementally through salary deductions. These deductions often leave workers with little to no money to sustain themselves, let alone the resources to leave the situation. Pressure is often exerted to work long hours without breaks or days off to work off the debt.

tied accommodation

As workers come from abroad, they are frequently lured with offers of accommodation provided by their employer, only to find that this is substandard or non-existent. Some workers have reported sharing one-bed accommodation with multiple people, sleeping on chairs or sofa beds in their work premises, and living in storage cupboards or caravans on site. Excessive sums for rent are commonly deducted from salaries, bringing already low earnings down even further, often far below the national minimum wage. Workers can feel incredibly trapped in exploitative situations when leaving their job could also mean becoming homeless.

threats to visas

As with any sponsored visa, there is an inextricable link between an individual's job and immigration status, giving employers huge control over sponsored staff. Many workers have received threats that their visas will be revoked, they will be reported to the Home Office, or deported, should they complain or challenge their employer in relation to the unreasonable demands upon them.



case study



Chetan's story*

Chetan came to the UK on a skilled worker visa for a role in a restaurant. On arrival, his employer told him he owed £5,000 for 'visa costs' and deductions would be made from his salary to repay the debt over time. Chetan's employer kept half of his salary each month leaving him with little to live on. When the employer had claimed £5,000 in free labour from Chetan, he then increased the debt by another £10,000. His employer threatened to cancel his visa if he did not comply.

*Some details changed to protect identity.

control methods

Table 3 Modern slavery potential victims by control methods (January 2024-June 2025)*

Control method	Potential victims
Financial control	347
Tied accommodation	317
Emotional abuse	201
Confinement or restricted movement	145
Monitoring	119
Threat to report to police or immigration	105
Physical abuse	67
Threat - other	60
Threat to harm subject, family or other	58
Isolation	50
Withheld or destroyed important documents	45
Threat to abandon or make homeless	16
Cultural, familial or religious pressure or coercion	14
Induced substance abuse	11
Sexual abuse	3
Other	2
Grand total	1560**

*Excludes 29 'unknowns'.
**Sum of table will exceed total number of potential victims as multiple control methods may be experienced by each potential victim.

The table above illustrates the control methods indicated to the Helpline relating to modern slavery potential victims in the hospitality sector. Financial control (347) is very common, in the form of debt bondage and salary deductions. However, this can also be exhibited through withholding wages, being forced to work additional hours for no money, or being trapped in the role by extortionate exit fees. Tied accommodation (317) is common with workers living on

site or in accommodation provided by their employer, with homelessness feeling like the only alternative to exploitation. Emotional abuse (201) was indicated frequently, with many workers experiencing verbal abuse and manipulation from their exploiters. For some, emotional abuse escalates to threats, the most common being to their immigration status (105). There have also been threats of physical violence to the individual themselves or someone they know (58). Physical abuse (67) has been actualised in some situations and even sexual abuse (3) in a small number. Confinement or restricted movement (145), as well as monitoring (119), isolation (50) and withholding or destroying documents (45) like passports demonstrate practical ways exploiters can inhibit freedom, preventing exploited workers from leaving.

labour abuse indicators

Situations of labour abuse involve worker rights abuses but without the level of control that is characteristic of modern slavery. The Helpline assesses situations for indicators of modern slavery based on the information available. Where only limited information is provided, situations may present as labour abuse. Labour abuse can also escalate into modern slavery as conditions worsen and control tightens. Where businesses are non-compliant in one area, they are commonly non-compliant in others as well; therefore labour abuse can signify risk of greater abuses occurring in a business or sector.

Table 4 Labour abuse potential victims by indicators (January 2024-June 2025)

National minimum wage not paid	333
Long or excessive hours	189
Harassment or intimidation	179
Insufficient breaks	127
Insufficient holiday or leave	101
Deductions from pay	90
Health and safety concerns	23
Inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE)	7
Other	47
Total	1096*

*Sum of table will exceed total number of potential victims as multiple indicators may be experienced by each potential victim.

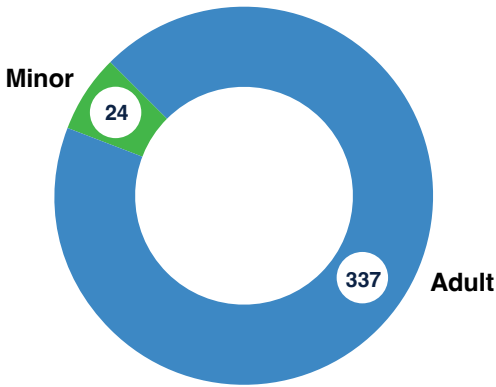
There are a few common indicators seen in labour abuse relating to pay, working hours and poor working conditions. The table above highlights the most common themes reported in labour abuse situations in the hospitality sector. National minimum wage non-compliance (333) was the most common feature of labour abuse, with deductions from

pay (90) reported less frequently. Individuals often reported working long or excessive hours (189), having inadequate breaks (127), or insufficient leave (101). Harassment or intimidation was reported frequently (179), while health and safety concerns (23) and inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE) (7) were reported occasionally.

victim demographics

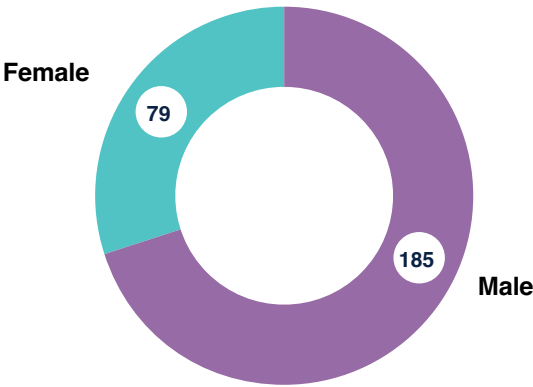
Of the potential victims indicated in modern slavery situations in the hospitality sector between January 2024 and June 2025, the vast majority were adults (337) where age status was known. Within that, the most common age bracket was 20–29-year-olds (63). Where gender was known, 70% were male (185), compared to 30% (79) female.

Figure 4 Age status of modern slavery potential victims (January 2024-June 2025)*



*Excludes 183 'unknowns'.

Figure 5 Gender of modern slavery potential victims (January 2024-June 2025)*



*Excludes 280 'unknowns'.

Table 5 Top 10 nationalities of modern slavery potential victims (January 2024-June 2025)

2024		2025	
Nationality	Potential victims	Nationality	Potential victims
India	57	India	25
Bangladesh	15	Bangladesh	12
China	10	United Kingdom**	9
United Kingdom*	8	Pakistan	4
Poland	8	Nepal	3
Nepal	5	China	2
Türkiye	5	Egypt	2
Pakistan	4	Sri Lanka	2
Vietnam	4	Albania	1
Sri Lanka	2	Bulgaria	1

*In 2024, United Kingdom comprised one from England, one from Wales, three from Scotland and three from the UK where the specific country was unknown.

**In 2025, United Kingdom comprised three from England, and six from the UK where the specific country was unknown.

Similarly to the care sector, the most prevalent nationality indicated in modern slavery situations in hospitality was Indian. Where nationality was known, in 2024, 57 Indian nationals were indicated (40%) and 25 (38%) in the first six months of 2025, comprising 40% (82) overall. The second most indicated nationality in both years were Bangladeshi nationals (27), comprising 13%, followed by Chinese nationals (12, 6%). Seven of the top 10 potential victim nationalities were Asian.

case study



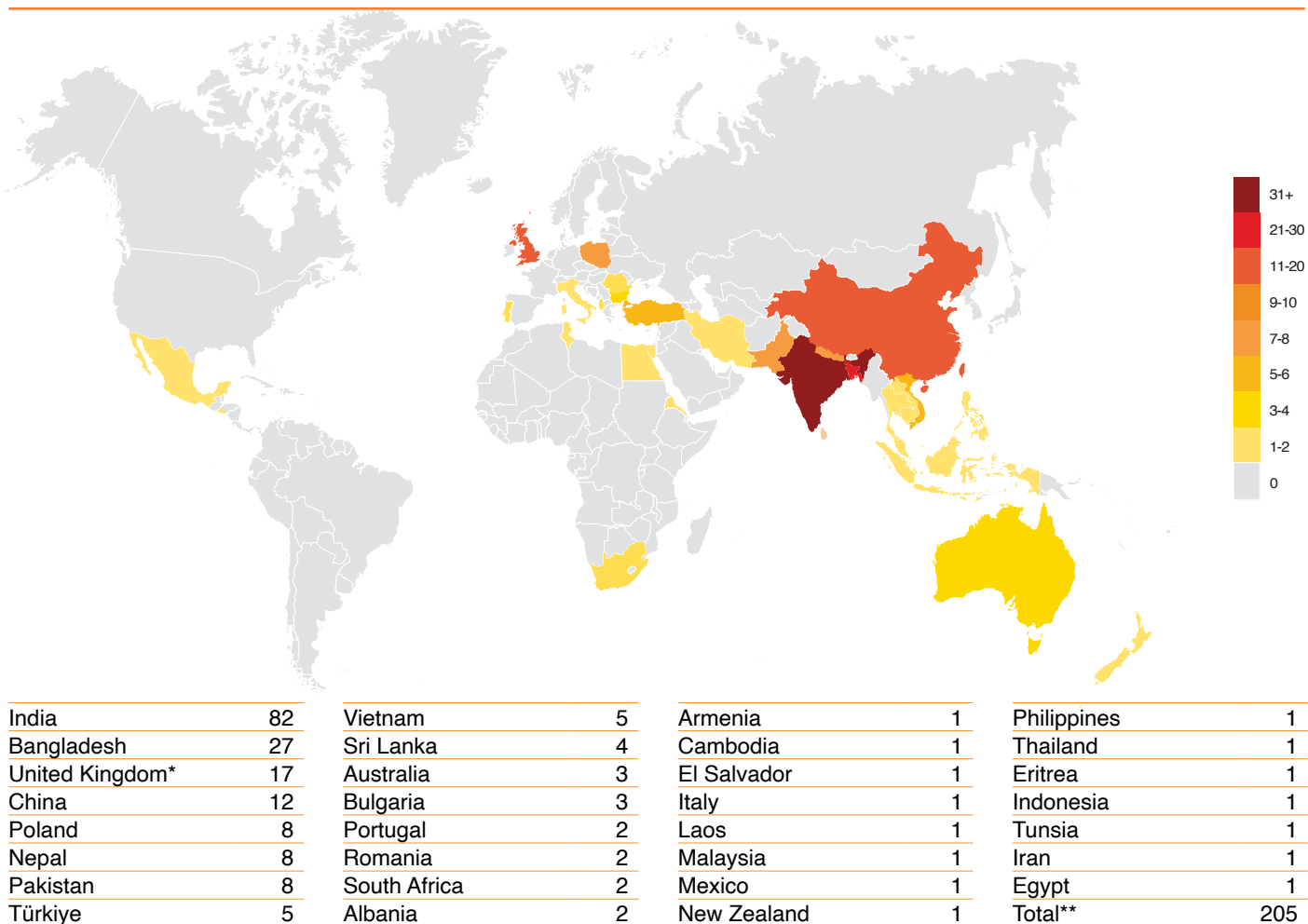
Garima's story*

Garima found an advertisement for a catering job on social media and came to the UK on a skilled worker visa. When she arrived, she found that she was expected to work up to 23 hours a week more than her contract stated. She only received payment once.

In order to isolate her, Garima's employer housed her in a flat on the work premises and threatened her if she tried to socialise with people. She experienced frequent verbal abuse from her employer and received threats of physical violence or visa revocation if she raised concerns about her treatment.

*Some details changed to protect identity.

Figure 6 Nationalities of modern slavery potential victims (January 2024-June 2025)



*United Kingdom comprises four in England, three in Scotland, one in Wales and nine in the UK where the specific country was unknown.

**Excludes 337 'unknowns'.

conclusion

Following the end of free movement in Europe post-Brexit, the UK has become reliant on immigration from beyond the European Union into low paying roles. Skilled worker visas bring people to the UK on the promise of opportunity, but the reality is often anything but. The government appears to have learned little from the explosion of modern slavery in the care sector experienced by thousands of migrant workers on health and care visas, leading to a duplication of the issue in the hospitality sector. Failure to implement more robust compliance checks on the sponsoring businesses leaves exploiters with free reign to extort vast sums of money from unsuspecting migrant workers, trapping them in abhorrent conditions.

The wholly inadequate response to exploitation in the care sector has been focused on reducing immigration into the sector instead of tackling glaring issues relating to the visa system. The same preoccupation with net immigration can be seen in relation to skilled worker visas in the immigration white paper¹ published by the government in May 2025. It lays out changes to the skilled worker visa including increases to the skill and salary thresholds, meaning low paid roles such as those in hospitality may no longer be eligible. However, the introduction of a Temporary Shortage List means sectors with shortages, such as hospitality, can continue to recruit lower paid migrant workers. Proposed increases to Immigration Skills Charges to be paid by employers may see an increase in illegal fees being charged to migrant workers.

In relation to combatting exploitation, the white paper refers to making it easier for workers to change sponsors and enhances enforcement actions such as revoking sponsor licenses for those who act unethically. However, license revocation can lead to migrants being left with debt, without a means of earning money, and notice to leave the UK. Consequences for sponsors exploiting their staff need to be more impactful, otherwise they do not act as a deterrent and leave vulnerable migrants with no recourse to recoup the money taken from them.

case study



Ishani's story*

Ishani came to the UK for a job in a café. She had a skilled worker visa, which her employer illegally charged her for. She was expected to work up to nine hours a week more than was stated in her contract. Her employer paid her correctly, but she then had to withdraw the majority of her salary in cash and return it to him each month. Ishani's employer was verbally abusive towards her and regularly threatened to revoke her visa and have her deported.

*Some details changed to protect identity.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-white-paper>

case study



Usman's story*

Usman secured a role as a catering manager through a recruitment agent in Pakistan. After arriving in the UK on a skilled worker visa, Usman's employer informed him that he owed £20,000 for his visa and was threatened with immediate deportation if he did not pay. He took out a loan in order to pay the sum in full and retain his job.

Instead of working as a catering manager as agreed, Usman was made to work washing pots and cleaning for upwards of 75 hours a week and rarely allowed breaks. He was forced to live in poor conditions on site and was not allowed to leave the premises alone. Usman's employer withheld his passport and was verbally and physically abusive towards him.

*Some details changed to protect identity.

recommendations

- Adequate information about visa costs and worker rights in the UK must be provided to individuals prior to application for skilled worker visas in their native language, to enable them to identify when someone is trying to exploit them. This should include information on how to report concerns and how to change sponsors.
- Accountability and compliance requirements for employers with sponsorship licenses must increase, including periodic premises checks and worker interviews away from the business premises.
- Culpability for exploiting migrant workers should sit with the individuals responsible rather than just the business to act as a deterrent and prevent exploiters starting new businesses in name only and continuing to exploit people.
- Significant fines should be sanctioned on businesses who exploit sponsored workers to act as a deterrent and illegal visa fees reimbursed to exploited migrant workers.
- Criminal charges and prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 should be sought in relation to individuals operating businesses that exploit migrant workers on skilled worker visas.

annex

Table 6 Modern slavery cases and potential victims by police force region (January 2024-June 2025)*

Police force region	Cases**	Potential victims**
ENGLAND***	144	484
Avon and Somerset Police	7	18
Bedfordshire Police	1	3
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	5	14
Cheshire Constabulary	2	13
Cumbria Constabulary	2	9
Derbyshire Constabulary	2	11
Devon & Cornwall Police	7	11
Dorset Police	4	22
Essex Police	6	20
Gloucestershire Constabulary	3	12
Greater Manchester Police	9	25
Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary	5	26
Hertfordshire Constabulary	1	2
Kent Police	3	5
Lancashire Constabulary	3	13
Leicestershire Police	4	24
Lincolnshire Police	2	13
Merseyside Police	4	15
Metropolitan Police Service	22	65
Norfolk Constabulary	4	7
North Yorkshire Police	2	3
Northamptonshire Police	1	2
Northumbria Police	2	7
Nottinghamshire Police	3	12
South Yorkshire Police	3	4
Staffordshire Police	5	37
Surrey Police	4	12
Sussex Police	3	9
Thames Valley Police	5	11
Warwickshire Police	2	4
West Mercia Police	2	9
West Midlands Police	5	24
West Yorkshire Police	5	9
Wiltshire Police	3	10
SCOTLAND	10	30
Police Scotland	10	30
WALES	7	27
Gwent Police	1	2
North Wales Police	1	2
South Wales Police	5	23
NORTHERN IRELAND	1	2
Police Service of Northern Ireland	1	2

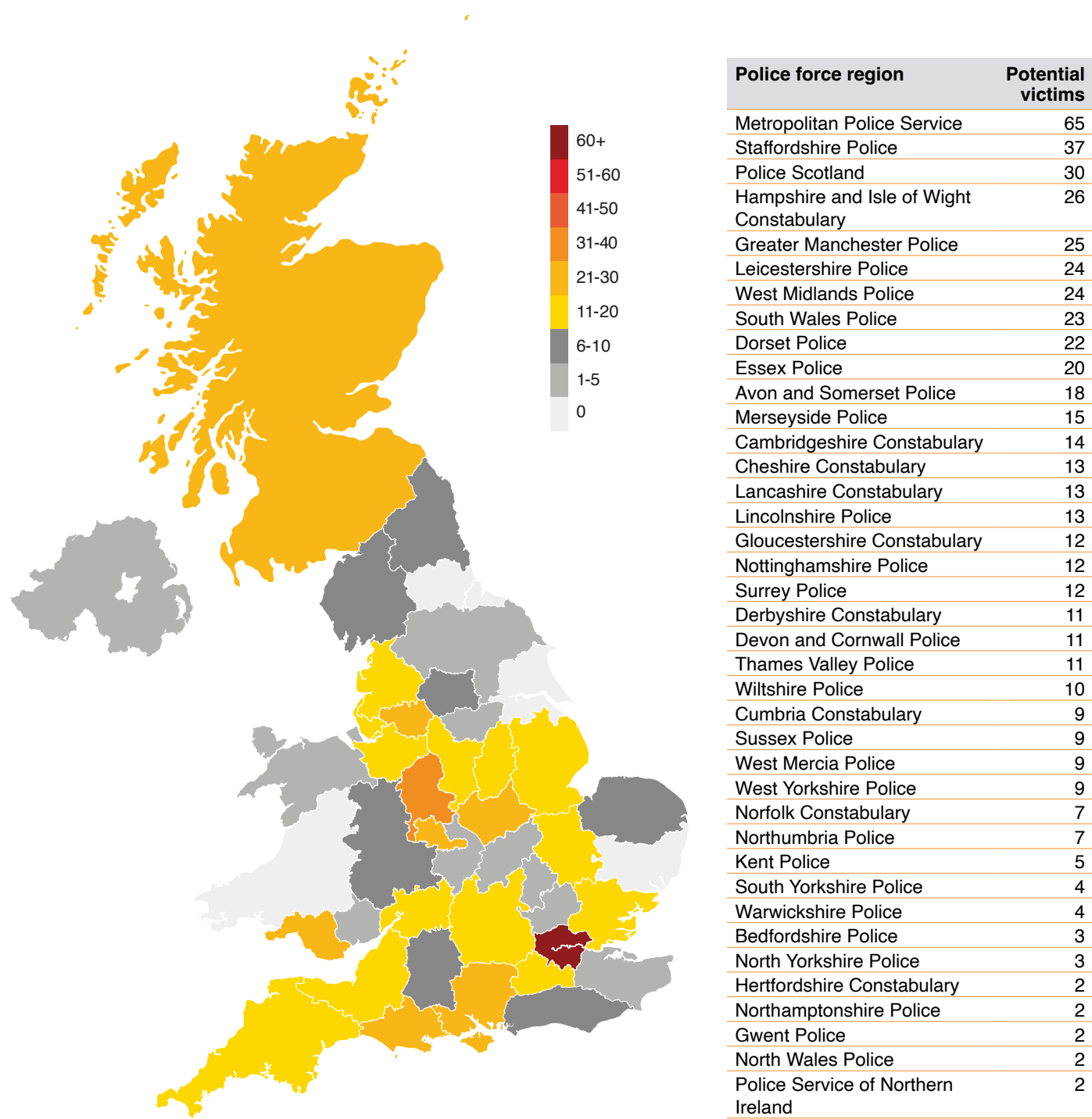
*Excludes 19 cases involving 23 potential victims where police force region was unknown.

**Sum of table may exceed total number of cases and potential victims due to cases spanning multiple police force regions.

***There were three cases involving three potential victims where exploitation took place in England but the police force region was 'unknown'.

annex

Figure 7 Modern slavery potential victims by UK police force region (January 2024-June 2025)



how you can help

Modern slavery has no place in our communities – or our workplaces.




If you're a hospitality business, our specialist business services and training can support you to identify, prevent and respond to modern slavery risks in your operations and supply chains: business@unseenuk.org

If you are a professional in the public sector or an NGO, get in touch about our CPD accredited in-person and online training. See email address above.

If you're an academic or research professional, get in touch with our policy and research team to explore collaboration opportunities: policyandresearch@unseenuk.org

If you're an individual, your support matters. By donating to Unseen, you help fund our vital work supporting survivors, raising awareness and driving systemic change.

You can also join our growing movement:

-  **Visit our website and subscribe to our newsletter** for the latest updates, survivor stories and ways to get involved.
-  **Follow us on social media** and help spread the word – the more people who know, the more we can do.
-  **Learn how to spot the signs of modern slavery** and report concerns via the Unseen app.

Together, we can shine a light on exploitation and create a hospitality sector – and a society – where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.



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