

a survivor's journey

Your guide to recovery for survivors of
modern slavery in the UK in 2026.

the path to independence

Every day, people in communities across the country are leaving situations of exploitation. After experiencing trauma and years of isolation, they seek a place of safety and support so they can start rebuilding their lives. For frontline services that support survivors, the primary goal is to help them rebuild their independence and reduce the risk of re-exploitation.

This is a complex and varied process. Every form of exploitation – from forced labour and domestic servitude to sexual and criminal exploitation – creates different trauma, which will lead to varied recovery needs. Recovery is rarely linear and there are as many different paths to recovery as there are survivors.

While the journey depends on the needs of the survivor, their recovery often follows four steps:

-  Identification and referral.
-  Assessment.
-  Support.
-  Community resettlement.

This guide will map out the journey that survivors can take as they begin their recovery. It will shine a light on the services that Unseen provides to support survivors as they leave exploitation and start rebuilding their lives.

identification and referral

There are many different ways for someone who is in a situation of exploitation to be identified. They could be identified by:

Unseen's Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline: our Helpline is a vital service for providing potential victims and the general public with a pathway through which they can identify potential victims of exploitation.

First responders play a vital role in recognising and supporting people affected by trafficking and modern slavery. They are formally authorised by the Home Office to help individuals safely exit exploitation.

First responders: as first responders, Unseen collaborates closely with agencies to reach out to marginalised communities and give people a chance to speak up about their exploitation. These conversations are often the first time someone has spoken about their experiences at length. First responding also includes safeguarding visits to sites of possible exploitation, like a car wash or brothel, to assess an individual's risk and build trust to get them to safety.



Frontline services: statutory agencies such as the police or NHS, or other charities can identify someone who is potentially being exploited.

Members of the public: everyone can play their part in identifying potential victims of exploitation. Learn how to [spot the signs](#) of exploitation and report your concerns to statutory agencies like the police, or to Unseen's Helpline.

Unseen's go bags

When first responders visit a site of possible exploitation, the individual, if they are ready to leave, often does so with only the clothes they are wearing. That's why Unseen provides 'go bags'. These pre-packed kits include sanitary products, hygiene items, non-perishable snacks, water, a phone card, and a list of key contacts, such as the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline. For some potential victims, receiving a go bag may be the first time they have been treated with dignity and respect in a long time.



As a first responding agency, Unseen collaborates closely with various agencies such as Avon and Somerset Police and the South West Anti-Slavery Partnership to identify potential victims. Once a potential victim has been identified, they are referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

what is the NRM?

Introduced in 2009, the NRM is the UK government's framework for identifying and supporting people in current or historical situations of slavery. It is operated by the Home Office.

who is eligible?

Anyone who thinks they may be or have been in a situation of slavery can be referred into the NRM. Anyone can identify someone in a situation of slavery but referrals into this mechanism must be made by a designated first responder.

how does it work?

step one:

An individual is referred to the NRM by a first responder, such as a police officer, NHS staff, or one of Unseen's first responders. Once the referral is made, a decision should be made within five days.

step two:

The individual receives a positive or negative 'reasonable grounds decision'. If the decision is positive, then they will be assigned a caseworker who will help them access financial and medical support for a minimum of 30 days.

step three:

The individual receives a positive or negative 'conclusive grounds decision'. If the decision is positive, then they will be officially recognised as a victim of modern slavery. They will then exit the NRM and receive tailored support as a survivor.

assessment

Unseen's caseworkers

Our caseworkers ensure that survivors get access to the services, assistance, and support that they are entitled to as they journey through the service, begin the process of recovery, and make the transition into the community.

Our caseworkers take a holistic approach. They build cooperative partnerships with survivors, considering any past trauma they may have experienced so they can identify their risks, needs, and goals.

Depending on what each survivor needs, our dedicated caseworkers can:

- Connect survivors with mental and physical health services.
- Direct survivors to access education or employment.
- Give guidance about how to find accommodation.
- Provide guidance about how to get legal advice.
- Support survivors in developing skills such as attending language classes.

Once an individual has received a positive reasonable grounds decision, Unseen's caseworkers assess and identify what support they need so they can connect them to the appropriate services in the community. This requires trust. Our caseworkers build trusting relationships with potential victims, so they feel safe and comfortable.

Caseworkers check in with survivors regularly to discuss their needs, so that they can act quickly if their circumstances change. For example:

-  If a survivor relapses into poor mental health or substance abuse, then our caseworkers help them access medical support.
-  If a survivor's accommodation falls through, then our caseworkers act quickly to ensure they have somewhere to live.
-  If a survivor is granted refugee status, then our caseworkers can support them as they try to get a job.

rebuilding lives

Survivor needs are changing all the time, so caseworkers need to be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances while always working proactively towards a stable, independent future.

Here is an example of Unseen's caseworkers providing holistic support for a survivor:

One survivor who was in Unseen's women's safe house wanted to start working again. Finding a new job can be very daunting, especially if it's your first job since experiencing exploitation. Our caseworkers supported her throughout the process, providing help with her application, getting her right-to-work documents together, preparing for the interview, and going to the charity shop to look for interview clothes.

Since then, she has started a new role as a full-time health care assistant in the NHS. Not only will this improve her mental and financial well-being – it will greatly reduce the risk of re-exploitation as she begins this new chapter in her life.



support

safe houses

For survivors who are at high risk and require immediate safety, Unseen runs two safe houses, one for men and one for women. Our safe houses provide a welcoming, safe, and supportive environment so survivors can begin to rebuild their lives. They are more than just a place to live – they are a sanctuary of hope, dignity, and renewal.

"It's the first time that you trust somebody because you can come back to your home, because you feel safe."

Survivor and safe house resident

In our safe houses, we support survivors with:

- ☐ Financial, housing, medical, and legal support.
- ☐ Physical and mental health support.
- ☐ Community wellbeing.
- ☐ Advice on managing safety.
- ☐ Developing independence.
- ☐ Education, employment, and training.

We deliver group activities so survivors can establish relationships and a secure foundation for building their futures. These include:

- ☐ Art classes, yoga classes, birthday celebrations, barbeques, gardening, communal cooking lessons, film nights, and games evenings.
- ☐ Visits to museums, theatres, beaches, go-karting, horse riding, and the zoo.
- ☐ Skills development such as CV workshops, English lessons, and local volunteering opportunities.

Unseen's men's safe house

After deciding that the men's safe house garden could do with some attention, staff and residents agreed to form a gardening club. They planned the garden's makeover at fortnightly resident meetings and scheduled regular gardening sessions. Some residents threw themselves into the work, while others were just happy to be outside and share time together as a community.

Unseen's women's safe house

Having heard that some of the residents in Unseen's women's safe house were struggling to afford clothes, our staff made the most of the glorious summer weather and hosted a clothing giveaway. Residents spent the afternoon taking their pick of Unseen-donated clothes and enjoying cold drinks and ice cream in the summer sun. It was the perfect opportunity to spend time together and create a new wardrobe.

Alongside support sessions, Unseen's frontline staff organise regular wellbeing activities and day trips. In recent years, these have included hikes around the Mendips, trips to local football matches at Ashton Gate Stadium, and a trip to Clevedon Pier. When visiting the beach, survivors talked about finding real peace as they looked out to sea.



"I call this house paradise."

Survivor and safe house resident

outreach

Not all survivors who Unseen support live in our safe houses. Some live in Home Office accommodation, while others have set up a life in the community. Regardless of their situation, Unseen's outreach services provide practical and emotional support. We advocate for the survivor's individual needs, from accessing health services, to navigating the immigration and asylum systems.

Outreach can include liaising with other professionals, ensuring survivors are receiving the legal, medical, and financial support they need. It also involves safeguarding duties to make sure their safety is being monitored. For example, if a caseworker hasn't heard from a survivor for a certain period of time, they would:

1. File a missing person's report.
2. Liaise with the police to locate the survivor and ensure their wellbeing.
3. Put a safety management plan in place to reduce the same thing happening again where possible.

Unseen's wellbeing cafe

Unseen runs a weekly wellbeing café in Bristol. Anyone who is or has been supported by Unseen's services can attend for free. The café offers a positive, supportive environment for survivors to come together, make friends, practise their English, and have light-touch support sessions with our caseworkers. They can participate in group activities, play games such as table tennis and pool, and have fun as they regain a sense of community. We host speakers from external charities to develop skills for a safer future and cover the survivors' transport costs.

community outreach support

We support survivors to build community links that reduce isolation and bolster empowerment. This can take many different forms, such as helping them:

- ☐ Move to a new city.
- ☐ Find a new home.
- ☐ Build new social networks.
- ☐ Discover what it is like to have a routine.
- ☐ Get a new job.
- ☐ Discover a new hobby.

survivors rebuilding independence

Sally has been attending a local gospel church once a week. Every week, she comes back from church feeling positive and happy.

Nguyen has completed a welding course, equipping him with essential skills for future employment.

Paula now attends college, learning English and Maths. She's doing cooking sessions and volunteering with a local charity.

Victor got a job in the care sector, where he now cares for people in vulnerable positions.

survivors rebuilding independence

Tania volunteers at various historical sites and with The Salvation Army.

Danh loves cooking meals for the entire safe house and is seeking legal advice so he can eventually return home to be with his family after five years apart.

Peter attends the Hindu temple in Bristol. He got new glasses and registered at his local library. He completed a PTSD management course and, by practising new coping strategies and meditating regularly, he has been able to feel more like himself.

*Names changed to protect identity.

While recovery can look different for every survivor, these are the common pathways that survivors can take on the road to finding safety and regaining their independence. Unseen is proud to be a part of this process as we work tirelessly to make a difference for survivors of modern slavery.



supporting Unseen, supporting survivors

"People should support Unseen because they give us hope, they give us life, they give us a chance to feel human again."

Survivor and safe house resident

None of this is possible without your support. Any donation, big or small, will help us continue supporting survivors as they find safety and start rebuilding their lives.

£7

could provide a day's worth of food for a new survivor in one of our safe houses.

£20

could provide essential toiletries to a survivor arriving in one of our safe houses, helping them to settle in.

£30

could fund 30 minutes of vital interpreter calls to assist vulnerable people in over 200 languages.

£50

could fund a month of activities at the safe house, including art sessions, gardening, and yoga sessions.

£100

could fund three hours of translation services that help our team communicate with survivors of different nationalities.

You can give a one-off gift or become a regular donor [here](#).

There are so many ways to get involved and support our work. Why not organise a [fundraiser](#) or take on a [challenge](#) for Unseen? If you have any questions, don't hesitate to get in touch: fundraising@unseenuk.org.

Thank you for joining us in the fight to end modern slavery. You can also advocate for our work and raise awareness on social media:



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[Unseen & the Modern Slavery Helpline](#)



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