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UK must act now to end ‘low risk, high reward’ modern slavery, major new report warns

A consortium of the leading anti-slavery organisations has warned that the UK is falling behind in the fight against modern slavery, as it unveils a new strategic vision to end what it describes as a ‘low risk, high reward’ environment for exploiters.

The report ‘Decade of dignity: a strategic vision for eradicating modern slavery in the UK’ sets out a comprehensive roadmap to 2036, to move the UK forward to achieve meaningful progress in the fight against this abhorrent crime.

The consortium warns that current systems are failing victims and allowing criminal networks to thrive.

“We produced this strategic vision because, after the government published its modern slavery action plan, it did not follow through on the harder requirement: a long-term, coordinated approach with real accountability,” said Andrew Wallis OBE, CEO of anti-slavery charity Unseen and report co-author.

“No structure has been put in place to own delivery or take responsibility for falling behind in the fight against exploitation. That absence has direct consequences. Without sustained focus, enforcement weakens and survivor support fragments. Exploitation remains profitable because nothing structurally disrupts it.

“This consortium stepped in to fill a void that should never have been left, and to make a clear political point: without a serious, sustained government strategy, the system fails the people it exists to serve.”

Despite the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the report finds that the UK’s response has faltered due to weak enforcement, fragmented policing, ineffective business regulation, and policies that restrict support for survivors.

Four priorities for a decade of action

The report outlines four key priorities for reform:

1. **Stronger corporate accountability:** introduce a new law within two years to replace Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act with legally binding duties on businesses, including mandatory human rights due diligence, bans on goods linked to forced labour, and penalties for non-compliance.
2. **A tougher criminal justice response:** make modern slavery a core policing priority, with sustained investment in specialist teams, financial investigations, and advanced data to disrupt criminal networks.

3. **A survivor-centred system:** reform support to provide long-term, needs-based care for survivors, removing legal and policy barriers to recovery, and ensuring access to safe housing and legal advice.
4. **A national strategy for child exploitation:** create a UK-wide, cross-government strategy to replace fragmented approaches, with a unified framework grounded in children's rights.

Together, these reforms aim to dismantle criminal networks, prevent exploitation, and ensure survivors can rebuild their lives with dignity.

“The UK is standing at a critical crossroads,” said James Clarry, the Global CEO of anti-slavery charity Justice and Care that coordinated and co-authored the report.

“We have a real opportunity to reset our national response to modern slavery and reclaim the global leadership we once held. By investing in prevention, strengthening enforcement, and putting survivor recovery at the heart of policy, we can create a safer society and unlock meaningful social and economic benefits.

“This is a moment for courage and commitment and we cannot afford to let it pass.”

Survivors at the heart of reform

The report emphasises that people with lived experience must play a central role in shaping policy, moving beyond consultation to meaningful co-production.

It argues that embedding survivor expertise will lead to more effective interventions, reduce re-exploitation, and deliver better long-term outcomes. It will also strengthen trust in authorities, encouraging more survivors to come forward and engage with services and the criminal justice system.

One of the survivors involved in the report said: “We are putting out a message in the report that the government should think about long-term and lifelong support strategies for survivors, currently it seems like the focus and support structure within the National Referral Mechanism (the government framework for identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery) is focused only on immediate and medium-term support for victims.”

Eleanor Lyons, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, welcomed the report. “The rising number of people identified as victims of modern slavery in the UK underscores the urgency of this moment and the need for decisive government action,” she said.

“This report is a powerful cross-sector call to action, and its priorities reflect what I am consistently hearing across the system – from survivors, frontline professionals, and law enforcement alike.”

Patricia Durr, CEO at ECPAT (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking), said: “This report recognises that the systems designed to protect children from exploitation in the

UK are dangerously fragmented, leaving young people unprotected and at risk. Protecting children requires working together to safeguard them first and foremost – the report is a testament to that commitment across the consortium. It calls for a UK-wide, cross-government and rights based national child exploitation strategy to provide the consistent and effective safeguarding that every child deserves – no matter who they are, where they live or the type of exploitation they face. The time to act is now.”

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Notes to editors

For media enquiries and interview requests, please contact media@unseenuk.org or call 07951 678152.

The organisations comprising the consortium behind this report are: Action for Children, Alliance for Youth Justice, Anti-Slavery International, ATLEU (Anti Trafficking and Labour Exploitation Unit), Catch 22, ECPAT UK, Focus on Labour Exploitation, Hestia, Hope for Justice, Human Trafficking Foundation, Justice and Care, Snowdrop Project, The Anti-Slavery Collective, The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, The Children’s Society, The NWG Network, The Salvation Army, Unseen.

The report signatories are: AFRUCA, Safeguarding Children, BASNET (UK BME Anti Slavery Network), Caritas Bakhita House, Ella’s, Helen Bamber Foundation, Hope at Home, Latin American Women’s Rights Service, Palm Cove Society, Shpresa Programme, Sophie Hayes Foundation, The Medaille Trust, The Passage.