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Survivor-informed support for trafficked children in Scotland

Full report

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Research by:

UNIVERSITY of STIRLING

"Being in a safe place is a human right for everyone, you know. Everyone should be able to be in a safe place, that's the bare minimum."

Interview 3, young person

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Foreword

The UK is at a critical juncture for the future of people claiming asylum and support for refugees; the focus of this research on Scottish practice highlights the importance of alternative practice and policy responses that prioritise human rights and children's lives.

During and after the fieldwork for this report there have been significant developments in relation to work with separated children in the context of immigration policy and legislation, including children who have been trafficked. The Nationality and Borders Act was enacted in 2022 with certain modern slavery measures operationalised in January 2023, and early in 2023 the Illegal Migration Bill was put before the Westminster Parliament.

While this report provides commentary and recommendations pertaining to the present situation and the data, we recognise that, if enacted, the Illegal Migration Bill has the potential to directly impact on practice that has previously been the domain of the Scottish Parliament and devolved legislation. The Illegal Migration Bill is deeply concerning as it has the potential to directly impact on child victims of trafficking by rendering many asylum claims inadmissible and, once children reach 18 years of age providing a legal route to remove them from the UK The Bill as presented is likely to reduce any feelings of longer term security and safety that young people told us about during the fieldwork for this study.

Glossary and definitions

Human Trafficking - the legal definition for human trafficking in Scotland is set out in the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015. A person commits an offence of human trafficking if a relevant action is taken with a view to another person being exploited. A relevant action includes: recruitment of another person; transportation or transfer of another person; harbouring or receiving of another person; exchange or transfer of control over another person; or the arrangement or facilitation of any of the above actions. It is irrelevant whether the other person consents to any part of the relevant action.

Smuggling – is defined by the UN Protocol Against Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air as the unlawful movement of people across national borders for profit. It is differentiated from trafficking in that there is no coercion or threat and contact with the smugglers ceases on arrival.

National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – is the UK framework for identifying and referring potential victims of human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour and ensuring they receive appropriate support. As of April 2019, all referrals were made to one Single Competent Authority, located in the Home Office and in November 2021 the Home Office created the Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority. For children there is a pilot for devolved decision making to local authority areas ongoing at the moment across a number of local authorities in the UK, including in Glasgow.

First Responders - are those agencies who can refer into the National Referral Mechanism, which include certain public authorities and NGOs across the UK.

Competent authority – is one of the competent authorities making reasonable or conclusive grounds decisions regarding human trafficking cases; in the UK this is the Single Competent Authority (SCA) and the Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority (IECA). For children there is an ongoing pilot for devolving decision making to local authority areas across a number of areas of the UK.

Reasonable grounds decision – a reasonable grounds decision can be made following a referral to the NRM if the competent authority assesses that there are reasonable grounds to believe that a person is a victim of human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour.

Conclusive grounds decision - a conclusive grounds decision can be made following a reasonable grounds decision if the competent authority is satisfied that the individual is a victim of human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) - defined by paragraph 352ZD of the Immigration Rules as a child who is under 18 years of age when an asylum application is submitted; is applying for asylum in their own right; is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who in law or by custom has responsibility to do so. Being unaccompanied is not necessarily a permanent status. It may change, for example if the child has family members in the UK.

Unaccompanied children - (also called unaccompanied minors) are defined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

Separated children - are defined as children who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary care-giver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.

Age assessments – sometimes it is necessary to make a decision about a persons's age who is claiming asylum when their claimed age is doubted by the Home Office, or local authorities. This can happen when they claim to be a child but are suspected to be an adult or they claim to be an adult but are suspected to be a child and where there is little or no reliable supporting evidence of the claimed age. Age assessments are intended to ensure the individual is treated age-appropriately and that they receive the necessary services and support in respect of protection and safeguarding. Where there is doubt, a careful assessment of the individual's age is required, with the person provisionally treated as a child until a decision on their age is made pending the outcome of the assessment. All accessible sources of relevant information and evidence must be considered, since no single assessment technique, or combination of techniques, is likely to determine the individual's age with precision (Home Office 2019b)

Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) – is the Scottish Government policy aimed at supporting children and families by ensuring children and young people receive the right help, at the right time, from the right people. The GIRFEC approach aims to support children and young people so that they can grow up feeling loved, safe and respected and can realise their full potential. GIRFEC is a strategic way for families to work in partnership with professionals who can support them.

Scottish policy for referring to children to the NRM– this is contained in the Inter-Agency Guidance for Child Trafficking. The document recognises that child trafficking is a crime that is a child protection concern and that responses to an identified or suspected case need to be in line with single and inter-agency child protection procedures. Any agency or individual who suspects a child is a victim of trafficking is expected to ensure the immediate safety of the child, if possible, and contact social work services and the police as per national child protection procedures. The relevant child protection personnel in social work and the police, supported by other relevant agencies, should then make a decision regarding possible case discussion and/or immediate referral to the NRM. The guidance states that social work services assume lead responsibility for completion of any paperwork relating to referrals to the NRM and competent authority, in conjunction with the police.

Scottish Guardianship Service (SGS) / Guardianship Scotland – is the specialist service was set up in 2009 to support unaccompanied and trafficked children and young people in Scotland. The SGS was replaced by Guardianship Scotland on 1 April 2023, which is a statutory service delivered by Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour Children's Charity on behalf of Scottish Government. We refer to Scottish Guardianship Service (SGS), rather than Guardianship Scotland, throughout this report as this was the name of the service during the period of data collection. Guardians help children and young people settle into life in Scotland and cope with being apart from their families in a new country. Support includes understanding language and cultural barriers, navigating a complex welfare and asylum system, supporting young people to make informed decisions about their future, providing tailored information and advice to ensure they feel empowered throughout the asylum and trafficking process and upholding children's rights by listening to them and acting as advocates on their behalf. Any local authority or agency in Scotland can make a referral to Guardianship Scotland.

National Transfer Scheme – this is the protocol for unaccompanied asylum seeking children established to enable the safe transfer of unaccompanied children in the UK from one local authority (the entry authority from which the unaccompanied child transfers) to another local authority (the receiving authority), including between local authorities in different UK nations. Although originally based on a voluntary agreement, from February 2022, all local authorities

with children's services in the UK have been directed by the Home Office to participate in the NTS, commonly referred to as a 'mandated NTS'.

1. Introduction

Ensuring better outcomes for children and young people who have experienced human trafficking is a major and urgent challenge facing the UK. While the exploitation experiences and immediate support needs of children who have experienced trafficking are well documented in research, the evidence base on what happens in the longer term for children and young people – and how they feel about it – is more limited.

Most evaluations of support provision focus on stories of trafficking and needs immediately after identification. Once children and young people move beyond this stage, the spotlight on them fades. This study sought to extend the timeframe to explore short, medium and long-term experiences of recovery. The study directly involved children and young people who had made their homes in the UK, eliciting narratives of recovery with a focus on their choices as well as needs, alongside data recorded by, or gathered from, professionals. The aim was to improve understanding of what constitutes sustainable support over a longer timeframe, thus offering valuable insights for all those working with this group of children and young people, in the UK and internationally.

Context

Concerns about human trafficking, and particularly the trafficking of children and young people, have been a recurrent and enduring issue across the UK and internationally (Home Office 2022; Missing People / ECPAT 2022; US Department of State 2022; UNODC 2022). Although terminology varies and attention has fluctuated over time, people trafficking, modern slavery and exploitation has been the focus of attention for national and local governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international organisations. Despite the challenges of assessing the extent and nature of 'human trafficking', it has been the subject of significant policy attention since 2000, with legislation enacted in all countries of the UK, followed by policy and practice responses.

The number of potential human trafficking victims in the UK is usually recorded by referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This system was established in 2009 to identify and support victims to meet the UK's obligations under the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT). In 2022 a total of 16,938 individuals were referred, the highest numbers since the NRM commenced, of which 7,019 referrals were children under the age of 18 years at the time of exploitation (Home Office 2023). UK nationals accounted for 3,337 of the children referred across the UK in 2022. In Scotland, over the 10 years from 2012 to 2022, 845 children have been referred to the NRM, the vast majority being non-UK nationals (Rigby et al 2020; Home Office 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023).

Human trafficking is located at the intersection of various policy agendas and legislative priorities, such as immigration, welfare and child safeguarding. This has meant that the interlayering of policy and practice is complex and often contradictory – with significant implications for the experiences of those directly affected, particularly children (Rigby and Malloch 2020). This is important for the longer-term context, in relation to outcomes.

In Scotland, various studies have explored the issue of child trafficking. Statutory services first began to formally record instances of child trafficking around 2007, as frontline services in Glasgow encountered unaccompanied children seeking asylum in circumstances that were deemed unusual, suspicious or confusing (Cameron, 2010). Agencies were alarmed by

several issues, notably: children being registered at multiple addresses, children living with extended family and with parents still overseas, young people not registered for school and teenage girls presenting to services late into pregnancy. Reports from third sector organisations working with migrants and people who had experienced trafficking, identified that some young people shared accounts of fleeing circumstances of exploitation overseas (Cameron, 2010). Research evidence suggested that some of the young people approaching services in Glasgow were being exploited in the UK or had fled exploitation (Rigby et al 2009; 2010), a finding extrapolated to all of Scotland by the Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People's report (SCCYP, 2011). More recent reports such as Rigby et al (2020) and updates from the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, further highlight the specific needs of this group of children and young people.

The policies and legislation that shape the lives of those identified as victims of human trafficking – in terms of accommodation, education, support, residence rights – are divided between the UK Government (for 'reserved matters' namely immigration and asylum) and the Scottish Governments (for 'devolved matters' including support and safeguarding). The decision-making authority on whether children are recognised as victims of trafficking is presently located within the Home Office, with the single competent authority, but child protection, education, health and related support services are devolved to the Scottish Government and delivered under devolved legislation.[1]

This multi-level policy system has major implications. Not least, children and young people who have been exposed to abuse and exploitation can experience 'system trauma' when navigating complex systems of asylum, care and support (Rigby et al, 2020). Tensions arise in practice as the concerns of child protection and asylum compete (Rigby and Malloch 2020). The association between migration and trafficking has thus contributed to shaping the development of trafficking policy across the UK. Despite the significant change in referrals to the NRM, which indicate that over the last 5-6 years UK nationals compose the single biggest national group of trafficking referrals for England and Wales, within Scotland child trafficking has been regarded as a safeguarding issue which almost exclusively affects migrant children (Rigby et al, 2020). Data from the NRM illustrates that unaccompanied children from outside the EU have traditionally accounted for most young people referred from Scotland, with young people from countries such as Vietnam, Sudan and Nigeria being consistently represented (Rigby et al, 2020: 7).

There have also been major changes in recent years in services for children who have experienced trafficking, including some positive developments. The Scottish Guardianship Service (SGS), established in 2010 to support unaccompanied children including children who have experienced trafficking, to navigate the complex immigration, legal and welfare systems described earlier, has been praised as an example of good practice (Crawley and Kohli, 2013). Guardianship Scotland replaced SGS on 1 April 2023, and as with SGS is delivered by Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour Children's Charity on behalf of the Scottish Government[2]. It provides support for all unaccompanied children up to the age of 18, arriving

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[1] The recently announced Illegal Immigration Bill (2023) may have implications for this arrangement. There is also a UK wide pilot for devolving decision making to local authority areas presently ongoing – the results of which are not known at time of publication.

in Scotland who claim asylum, with a particular focus on trafficking. Guardians help young people to understand the roles and responsibility of different professionals and act as a link between different services and professionals involved in young people's lives. Early evaluations of SGS (Crawley and Kohli, 2012 and 2013) highlighted the 'added value' of guardianship across three important domains of engagement: asylum, well-being, and social networks (Crawley and Kohli 2013), and reported impressive levels of satisfaction with the service from practitioners and young people alike. A more recent evaluation of the Guardians' work within asylum and NRM processes highlighted four key roles and tasks: navigating and orientating the young people, gathering and providing information for stakeholders, developing statements with young people for lawyers and providing emotional support for young people (Stott and Kohli, 2021).

The Scottish Government's Human Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy states that the government's approach is 'victim focussed', emphasising the importance of 'recovery' for those who have experienced trafficking and recognising the need for appropriate mental health support and 'trauma sensitive' approaches (Scottish Government, 2017). Glasgow City Council are presently one of ten local authorities across the UK involved in a pilot NRM project looking at devolving decision making to local areas (Home Office 2022).

The present study explores the meaning attached to 'recovery' for young people defined as having experienced human trafficking and explores this concept in relation to the longer-term impact of statutory, third sector and informal forms of support in Scotland. It draws on 11 years of data collected by the SGS and primary data collected from interviews with stakeholders, practitioners, and young people. The aim of the study was to fill a gap in knowledge in relation to what constitutes recovery and effective support over a longer time frame for separated children and young people who have experienced trafficking. In doing so, the study illuminates processes that have not been previously explored with this group of children and young people in Scotland.

The project was funded through the Modern Slavery PEC, which seeks to improve quality of evidence to inform policy-making. It was one of five studies commissioned following an open call for proposals to examine support and recovery of survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking in the UK.

[2] We refer to Scottish Guardianship Service (SGS), rather than Guardianship Scotland, throughout this report as this was the name of the service during the period of data collection.

2. Methods

To achieve the study's aims, we explored how young people, practitioners and other stakeholders defined 'recovery' and their perspectives on the support that young people need and receive at different stages. We also analysed 11 years of data from SGS, which helped to illuminate the trajectory of needs and support received for all children referred to SGS who had been recognised as victims of trafficking throughout that period.

2.1 Scottish Guardianship Service data

Data from the SGS offered detailed information on young people with experience of being trafficked in Scotland that was not available in the higher-level statistics such as those gathered through the NRM process.

The case file data frame was developed by the research team and data inputted by a member of the SGS who manually extracted the data from electronic client case files. These case files were regularly updated by Guardians and support workers after contact and appointments with the young people. SGS administrative staff were also involved in inputting information regarding referral forms. Case files from across an 11-year period until October 2022 were selected. Those who had received negative conclusive grounds decisions, or were awaiting a decision, or not identified as victims of trafficking were not captured in the case file data.

Overall, information was gathered from the files of 166 young people who had all received positive conclusive grounds regarding their NRM decision at some point within the 11-year period to October 2022. Over the time period for inclusion in the data analysis, another 155 young people were still waiting for a decision regarding their trafficking referrals and 12 had received a negative conclusive decision and, therefore, are not included in the following analysis. The data suggests that approximately 17% (n=166) of all the separated children and young people referred to the SGS since its inception in 2010 (n=976) have been officially recognised by the Home Office as victims of trafficking, as of October 2022.

Information box 1: broader context on children and young people in the SGS

The SGS saw record breaking numbers of young people referred to the service in 2022, receiving 315 referrals, primarily a result of the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The Home Office has now mandated local authorities across the UK to take a specified quota of unaccompanied children into their care. The pattern of referrals has differed in Scotland with Vietnamese being the largest number prior to the NTS. The SGS is now receiving 40+ referrals about separated children per month, mainly from Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran, Vietnam and Eritrea. Fifty-eight percent of these recent referrals are a result of the National Transfer Scheme. The SGS has received a total of nearly 1,000 referred since its inception in 2010.

There are methodological limitations to this use of administrative data in that the recording of data was not guided by the research team/research questions, but by what is required of the agency recording protocols. The research team did not access the full case files due to restrictions on confidential and personal service user information. However, the data fields were designed by the research team in relation to the previous literature in this area and

previous research experience and then collated by a third party. For further information on the process, please see Appendix 1.

Although we can still make valuable observations using the case file data, caution should be taken when interpreting the results on two accounts. Generally, it should be reinforced that all percentages relate to a small overall total population of only 166 young people (although this still represents all children referred to SGS who had had a positive conclusive grounds decision at the point of data collection). Secondly, while it is possible that missing data on a variable represents the absence of a particular value, this missing data could also be a result of data collection issues. This important caveat will be acknowledged throughout the following analysis and caution over interpretation of results highlighted when necessary.

2.2 Characteristics of young people in the case file data

Sixty-three percent of young people (n=105) in the case file data were identified as male and 37% (n=61) as female. The mean age at the time of study was 21, the youngest person being 16 and the oldest 29. The average referral age to the service was 16 years old; the minimum age was 11, and the maximum age was 17. Seventeen percent (n=28) had been age disputed at some point during their contact with SGS. The average length of contact with the SGS for young people was five years, with the longest contact being 12.

Of the 12 countries of origin recorded in the case files, the majority of young people were from Vietnam (73% or n=121 - see information box 2), followed by Sudan (6% or n=10), China (5% or n=8), Somalia (4% or n=7), Nigeria (4% or n=6). The remaining 8% (n=13) of young people were reported as coming from Albania, Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Iraq, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, respectively and one young person had no country of origin recorded.

Information box 2:

The high proportion of Vietnamese children identified as victims of trafficking has been a feature of Scottish anti-trafficking work for approximately 7 years; this country of origin profile of all child trafficking victims referred to the NRM differs substantially from England, where most reported victims are from the UK. There is presently no clear understanding of why this pattern has emerged. While professionals had on-going concerns about the number of Vietnamese young people trafficked to Scotland, there remains much confusion and uncertainty, with limited understanding of the high representation of Vietnamese nationals of NRM data for Scotland (ECPAT 2019; Rigby et al 2020).

The countries-of-origin profile of children and young people in this study differed from previous Scottish studies, focusing only on those who had received a positive conclusive grounds decision. Rigby et al (2020) highlighted referrals from Scotland of children and young people from 32 different countries to the NRM between 2012-2018. Earlier studies identified children from Afghanistan (Cameron 2010) and Eastern European Roma children (SCCYP 2011) as a major concern amongst professionals regarding trafficking. This suggests concerns about children from particular countries over time dissipate or increase as patterns change.

The case data shows there was at least one young victim of trafficking living in 20 of the 32 local authorities in Scotland. As per figure 1, nearly three quarters of young people were

recorded as living in Glasgow (51% or n=84) and Edinburgh (20% or n=34). Due to small numbers of young people in other local authorities, and to minimise risk of possibly identifying individuals in the SGS, the remaining 18 local authorities were subdivided into 4 higher levels of geography as per NUTS2 (nomenclature of territorial units for statistics[3]) categorisation. The case data shows that of the remaining 29% (n=47) of young people – 7% (n=11) were recorded as living in Eastern Scotland, followed by 18% (n=30) in South-Western Scotland, 2% (n=3) in North-Eastern Scotland, and 2% (n=3) in Highlands and Islands. One percent (n=1) had no data on local authorities.

While the children and young people referred to the SGS may not reflect all victims across Scotland, experience of working with child victims of trafficking may be limited outwith the two largest cities. This was also reflected in interviews with professionals.

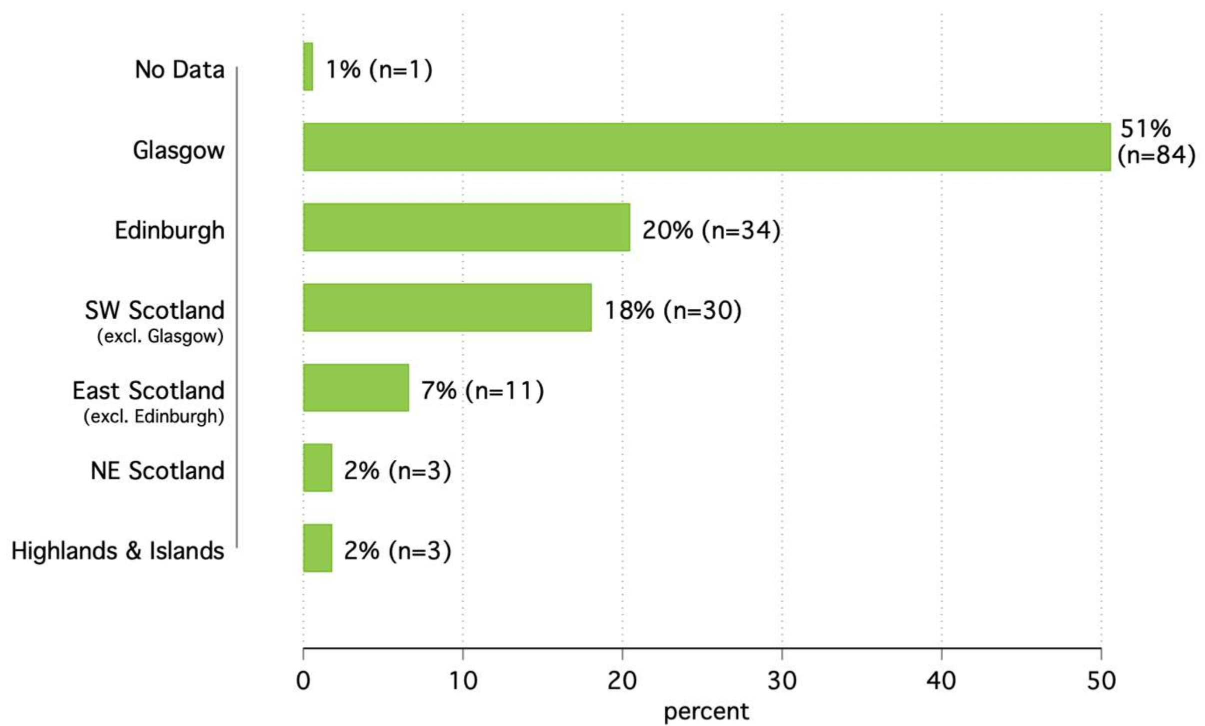

Figure 1: Location of where young people lived across Scotland; data taken from SGS case file data (N = 166).

There were five different exploitation categories evident in the case data files that were predefined by the SGS who use the same categorisation for their own records. As shown in figure 2, data on the primary form of exploitation show that cannabis cultivation and labour exploitation were experienced by the highest proportions of young people, with 33% (n=55) in each. The second largest category was sexual exploitation (16% or n=26), followed by domestic servitude (5% or n=9) and intention to exploit (3% or n=5)[4]. The remaining 10% (n=16) of young people had missing data in relation to type of exploitation. It should be noted

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[3] See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Nomenclature_of_territorial_units_for_statistics_(NUTS)

[4] The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 defines human trafficking as an action carried out for the purposes of exploitation, or with the knowledge of likely exploitation, of another person. The action and intention to exploit amount to an offence of human trafficking even if the exploitation does not in fact occur (see Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015: guide)

here that the fluid nature of abusive situations, and the vulnerability of children and young people on the move, exposed them to multiple exploitative scenarios, and that recording only one type of 'main' exploitation potentially minimises the totality of their experiences (Rigby 2009; Rigby et al 2020). As data on additional forms of exploitation has only been collected by the SGS since 2020, this was only available for 8% (n=13) of young people in the case file data.

Most of the young people in the case file data were initially identified as potential victims of trafficking and referred to the NRM between 2016 and 2019. The commencement of the Covid pandemic reduced the subsequent numbers identified, although as suggested above the present pattern of referrals to the SGS and identification may be changing.

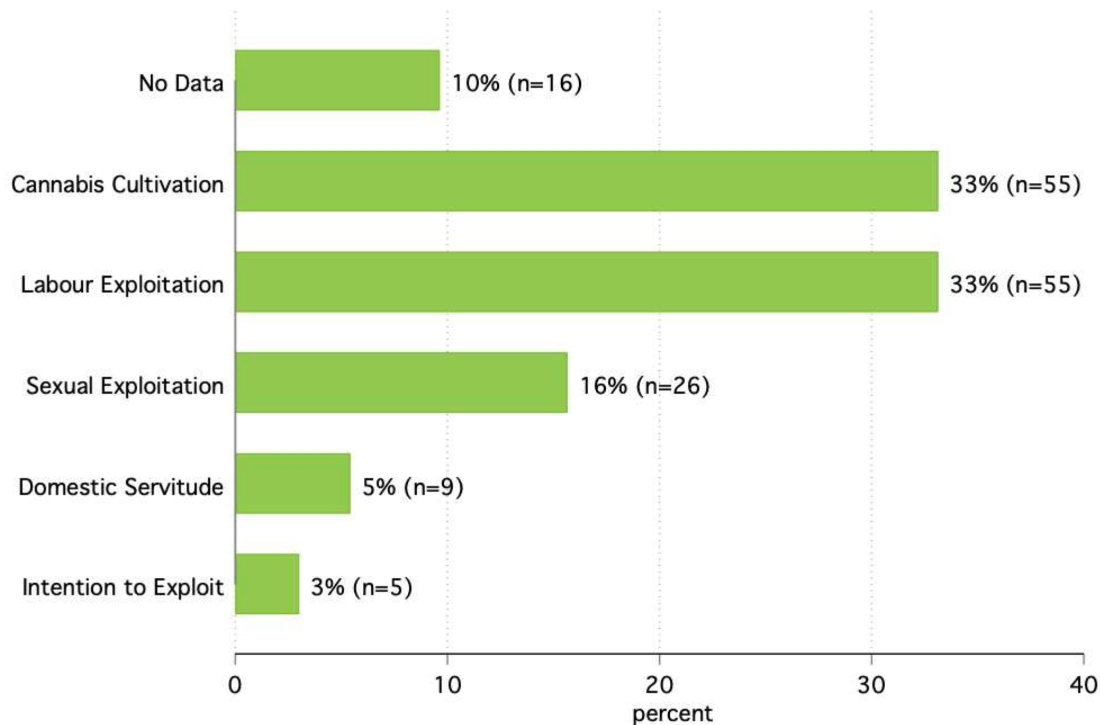

Figure 2: Primary type of exploitation; data taken from SGS case file data N=166.

2.3 Interviews

We carried out interviews with 19 young people who had experienced child trafficking. Young people were aged 17 to 24 years, of whom 15 were young men and 4 were young women. The length of time young people had lived in Scotland/the UK ranged from one year to 14 years, with the majority between 3 and 5 years. Given the focus of our study on exploring young people's experiences over an extended timeframe, we began with a recruitment strategy to invite young people from 3 groups based on time since arrival in Scotland: short term (3 years or less), medium term (4 to 6 years) and long term (7 years or more), However, as discussed later, these categories were not used for analysis as it became evident that other factors were more salient in shaping young people's trajectories.

The study design did not involve data linkage, so case study data and interviewee data were not cross-referenced. However, as young people were invited by SGS to participate in interviews we can assume that data from their records was included in the case file analysis.

Young people were recruited via the SGS, with a particular focus on participants who had been in Scotland/the UK for varying lengths of time. Participants were asked to reflect on their needs and how these changed over time, evaluate the support they received and explore what the terms ‘recovery’ and ‘support’ meant to them. Interviews focused on experiences of services and (receiving and providing) support, rather than of exploitation, and on how experiences and perspectives changed over time.

We used a comprehensive information and consent process to ensure young people had several opportunities to ask questions and time to make an informed decision about participating. We produced information sheets and short verbal recordings about the research in four languages: Arabic, English, Pashtu and Vietnamese. Potential participants were initially identified by Guardians, who approached the young person about the research and invited them to speak to the SGS Participation Officer to find out more about the study. The Participation Officer then contacted the young person to introduce the research and shared the information materials, via an interpreter if preferred. Next, if the young person gave consent, the researcher contacted them and reiterated the key points about voluntary participation before making arrangements for the interview.

Around 50% of the young people who had given consent to be contacted by the Participation Officer declined to participate, either directly or by not responding to a follow-up. We did not ask young people to elaborate but, based on information shared by non-participants and participants, we believe this reflects that young people have already had to ‘share their story’, many times in their interactions with professionals. It was particularly important that young people with such experiences were confident in saying ‘no’ or changing their mind after initially indicating consent. Several young people asked for confirmation at the start of the interview that the researcher would not ask about their experiences of trafficking or their journey to the UK. Consent was recorded verbally prior to the interview beginning.

We also conducted qualitative interviews with a convenience sample of professionals who support young people in a range of roles, including Guardians, lawyers, and social workers. Participants were recruited through the research team’s extensive network of professionals supporting children/young people who had experienced trafficking. Specifically, we approached managers/directors of relevant services, including SGS, social work, police and education, and requested that study material (information sheet/invitation email) be circulated to their colleagues. Specifically, to date, we have interviewed 4 solicitors providing specialist legal support to this group of children/young people in Scotland; 5 support workers employed in the SGS and 2 social workers.

Semi-structured interviews with professionals were carried out online. Participants were asked about their roles as well as the support provided by their employing agency/service; perceptions of challenges/benefits of multi-agency working; children and young people’s needs at different stages (short, medium and long term) and finally, their views of what ‘recovery’ means for this group of children and young.

All interviews were semi-structured to allow space for participants to express their views and narrate their experiences. Interviews lasted on average 60 minutes and were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3. Findings

The section below presents preliminary findings from both the qualitative and quantitative data collected for the study.

3.1 Safety and critical junctures

While our original research design had framed children's short, medium and long-term experiences in numbers of years, it rapidly became apparent that these categories obscured how young people's lives were shaped by critical junctures, in the form of points in time when young people experienced events or processes that had either a positive or negative impact. The timing of these junctures varied for different individuals. We asked all young people, as well as practitioners, about their perspectives on young people's needs and the support available at different points in time, explored as a series of priorities that evolve over time and in response to changing events.

Throughout this report we highlight a range of the points highlighted by young people which, looking across the full range of interviews, we identified as critical junctures. The most important of these junctures was created by the systems put in place to support young people: specifically, the experience of navigating the asylum system. Most young people in contact with the SGS will be involved with the asylum or humanitarian protection systems. Young people described the often overwhelming feelings associated with waiting for their 'papers' (documents from the Home Office confirming the right to remain in the UK), and the impact on mental and physical health, education or work and friendships.

As one young person explained:

> *A lot of people I know, they are thinking about these papers. Maybe someone is big, 25 years or 20 years, he has not anything, he is safe and happy, it's no problem. But the younger [people], every time they are scared. … First day they gave me papers, you know … My feelings were so happy and I'm eating things no problem. ... Just a long time I didn't have the papers and I couldn't eat, I didn't have an appetite, you know. So bad. But after they gave me papers and I was happy, I was safe, [I know] they're not sending me back to [country of origin].*
>
> (Interview 4, young person)

In the SGS records, 77% (n=127) of young people were recorded as having been granted leave to remain. A further 16% (n=27) were recorded as waiting for the outcome of their asylum application. This information was missing or unclear for the remaining 7% (n=12) of young people.

For many young people who were interviewed, their most difficult interactions with professionals had centred around being interviewed about their experiences of trafficking and/or the experiences that led them to move to the UK.

> *About the Home Office, I just told them everything what they asked me, because I was told that they need to know, in terms of help with my case, and help me settle down here. … I went through hell to give them all the information. We do lawyer appointments every week, or twice a week, and stay there hours and hours and hours and explain with details, everything. And you can imagine how painful that was for me.*
>
> (Interview 6, young person)

Spotlight on: Talking about the past

Adam is currently studying and has big plans for his future, including work, creative activities and the role he would like to play in helping other people. Here, he describes his experiences of thinking and talking about the past, and offers some thoughts for practitioners working with young people in a similar situation. He recalls when he first arrived how confusing it was to meet a lot of different professionals:

> *In the first time, it's very hard. Even they come, like, the social worker, they say to you something, you don't understand them, they come…there's a lot of different people. I was confused this time. Waah, you're scared, like, why is come a lot of people, they ask you something – where you come from, what's your name? A lot of questions. It was very hard.*

Many young people interviewed for this research told us they find being asked questions about their past painful, especially about the reasons they came to the UK and their experiences of exploitation. Adam recalls the interviews with the solicitor for his statement for the Home Office were particularly difficult:

> *Just if they're asking me, I describe. And my lawyer, I explained to her everything about my statement. It was a very hard time because I had a bad time in [the conflict in my country of origin], I lost a lot of friends. This time I was really…I feel bad. But I try to explain that I have to do. I told her I didn't want to do this, for me it's very hard, but, yeah, she say to me I have to do the statement. … Sometimes if you don't want to remember, they push you to remember.*

Adam also talks about the importance of 'keeping busy' and having a routine, such as school or college, because otherwise young people have 'too much time' to think about the past. He explains why this is important:

> *If they go to school, everything is fine. They learn some language and they make friends. … If they just for the wait for the school for five months or six months, it's very hard. ... You think about the school, about the statement. If they keep them busy, if they give them school or help them like family, this is good. It's very important.*

He adds in terms of professionals working with young people:

> *And if they can, they don't ask them, like, a lot of questions for the past or something, because it's very hard for the young people. Like, they feel why are they asking me all these* [questions]. *… Just keep them busy, give them some advice.*

Notions of emotional as well as physical safety featured prominently in professionals' accounts, including the reflection that 'system trauma' can be one of the biggest barriers for young people in their ability to recover from experiences of trafficking:

> *If you think about it, education and being safe, and all that, takes a back seat. Because if you don't know whether you're staying or not, you live in limbo, you can't plan forward, you can't make any plans, you start losing the motivation of why they…I might be deported, why do I even want to learn English, why should I continue with college. And it becomes a downward spiral. So, the asylum process is the major, major thing. All these others are just by the ways, you know what I mean, they are equally important, but without immigration status, then you can't plan your life.*
>
> (Interview 29, social worker)

Young people's descriptions of safety coalesced around three core components: first, the physical safety of an appropriate place to stay and separation from the source of exploitation; second, the stability of familiar routines and regular contact with people they trusted; and third, what Chase (2010) has described as ontological security – a sense of predictability about the future, which in young people's descriptions was closely associated with official recognition of their right to remain in the UK. As one young person explained:

> *I am protected now, that's making me feel safe. I'm allowed to stay in UK and I'm safe, you know. I have my accommodation for example, and then I have my study... I'm free.*
>
> (Interview 8, young person)

Safety, however defined, is clearly an immediate and critical need for children and young people who had been trafficked. For professionals working with young people, particularly in the short-term period following identification, ensuring that children were physically safe was a priority.

The SGS records contained information indicating that most young people were considered by the service to be safe: 58% (n=97) of young people whose cases were 'closed' at the time of the analysis and 37% (n=61) whose cases were still 'open' were reported as safe (for the remaining 5% (n=8), this information was not recorded). The data also indicated that for 8% (n=13) of young people, at some point their Guardian had recorded concerns that the young person was at risk of continued exploitation, and a further 3% (n=5) of records indicated the Guardian had discussed these potential risks with them.

In terms of children and young people going missing, the SGS records indicate 5% (n=9) were recorded as missing overnight, or for a short period at some point over the 11 years period. A further 5% (n=9) were recorded as 'permanently missing', although for five young people the records included additional notes indicating the SGS had some information about where the young person was currently living or believed to have moved to (for example, if a Guardian or another professional had had some telephone or other contact with the young person).

There has been substantial interest and concern about the number of separated and care-experienced children going missing across the UK recently. ECPAT UK – Missing People (2016) indicated 28% of children in care suspected or identified as trafficked (167 of 590 children) across the UK in 2014-15 had gone missing at least once, a figure that had increased to 31% (378 of 1,231 children) in 2020 (Missing People – ECPAT UK 2022). While there is no room for complacency when any child goes missing, the existence of the SGS in Scotland for all separated and trafficked children, and a more child protection, welfare-oriented approach, may provide an indication why the numbers of missing children are lower. It may also be related to the overall numbers of trafficked children identified in Scotland being fewer. This is an area that requires further research to understand more fully.

A number of young people narrated current or past experiences of feeling ‘in limbo’ until the asylum process was complete. Plans for education and work were often contingent on their immigration status: for example, one 19-year-old had spent two years studying ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and was hoping to progress to qualifications to allow her to work in healthcare but was limited to further ESOL options due to her asylum status. These findings build on that of Rigby et al (2020), where there were indications that those who had refugee status were more likely to engage with broader future-oriented services, such as education and training.

3.2 Support and service provision

Clearly the sampling method for the case file data meant that all the children and young people in the study had received support from the SGS, including advocacy, peer group, mental health and befriending services and drop in sessions. The responses from the interview participants indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the support provided. It is important to note however that the research was unlikely to identify and interview young people outwith the SGS, or who may have had a negative experience. The interaction of different forms of formal and informal support that young people reported as most beneficial is explored in the final section.

The case file data shows that, on average, young people had 12 contacts with Guardians, with the minimum being once and the maximum being 38 times. The more years a young person had been in the SGS, the less contact they had with Guardians over time, which perhaps indicates reduced need, or more contact with other services. However, it should be noted that for a large proportion (42% or n=70) of young people, data on this variable was missing. Whether this large amount of missing data represents a lack of contact or data collection error is unclear.

A third (34% or n=34) of the young people had contact with the SGS participation activities and/or the befriending service, and 2% (n=4) were involved with the Allies (mental health support) service, with a couple of young people involved with both. These services are a relatively recent addition to SGS and were only available for part of the sample period, so these figures may be smaller than expected.

Young people highlighted the importance of services such as SGS offering or helping young people access activities that provided a structure to daily life. Several young people, when asked about the most important forms of support, identified activities that brought them into contact with other people:

> *Short term, I would say, it’s just trying to, like, find somewhere comfy, somewhere safe. And trying to, like, get them engaged. Because one thing I’ve noticed, that most times when people come in…yeah, it’s hard, because coming in with lots of trauma, and lots of stuff. It’s, people struggle to actually find it, they find it hard to actually go out, you understand? But the more, when they stay indoors, the more the problem, the more they stress, and everything just pile up on the individual.*
>
> (Interview 2, young person)

In terms of the type of work undertaken by the Guardians, the case file data clearly indicated the majority of young people (70% or n=117) had trafficking / types of exploitation discussed with them, with nearly two thirds (n=104) having the NRM process / decision, and consequences explained. For three quarters (n=123) of the young people the roles of different

professionals were discussed, with nearly 50% (n=77) of young people being debriefed after police interview by Guardians. Given that the main task of SGS is to support children and young people through the various asylum and welfare processes, the percentages here may be a result of recording not being clear at times as we would expect Guardians to respond to the needs of individuals detailed above.

While the Guardians are not case managers for other services, and the case file recording of the SGS does not necessarily require contact with other services to be recorded, there was some information relating to young people's access and contact with other services. Interviews with professionals also explored how services collaborate to provide support for this group of children and young people. Professionals highlighted the roles of the the following services in processes of identification and support, at different points and to address a range of needs: Police Scotland (mostly as far as identification is concerned); Scottish Guardianship service including befriending service and Allies (short term trauma service); social work and other local authority services; immigration solicitors (including immigration/asylum/ family reunification and criminal injuries compensation services); Home Office and interpreters. Education (colleges and schools, which the latter including a safeguarding role) and accommodation providers (foster carers, residential workers, host families and other accommodation arrangements) also featured prominently in professionals' interviews. In addition, physical and mental health teams, both in the statutory and third sector, including specialist mental health services and specifically CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services NHS Scotland**),** Anchor (NHSGGC Glasgow Psychological Trauma Service) and Freedom from Torture, as well as the Allies service mentioned earlier. Specifically in relation to support provided to age disputed children and young people who have experienced trafficking, the following organisations were mentioned: the British Red Cross (and specifically Youth Case work service), Simon Community project which is a homelessness service (if age disputed children are place in adult homeless accommodation) and Migrant Help. Some services were highlighted as being particularly involved in the initial stages, however it was noted that service input cannot be discussed as a linear progression of provision, as different and evolving needs dictate which services are best placed to provide support at different stages of the young people's recovery journeys.

Accommodation

The case file data shows that the majority of young people (34% or n=57) were recorded as being accommodated in a supported flat, 25% (n=41) were in a residential unit, 16% (n=26) were with a foster family, 8% (n=14) were in a flat/house, 2% (n=3) were in a hotel and for 5% (n=8), data was missing. The remaining 10% (n=17) were recorded as living in 'other accommodation' which included student accommodation, homeless accommodation, and temporary accommodation, and three young people (2% n =2) were in detention centres / prison. The method of data-recording used by SGS meant it was not possible to identify changes in accommodation consistently but additional notes for some young people indicated they had moved, for example, from short-term emergency accommodation into residential care or had initially lived with a foster family before moving into a supported flat.

Nearly all young people who participated in interviews appeared to have relatively stable experiences of accommodation, with few moves, which may not be true of the wider population who have experienced child trafficking (particularly in light of recent concerns about the use of hotel accommodation). Young people who were or had been unhappy with their accommodation had communicated this to their social workers directly or via their Guardians. Some young people gave examples of social workers supporting their choice of accommodation for a range of reasons: to move closer to college, to a children's home in a less noisy area, or to more independent living arrangements after initially living in supported accommodation.

Young people who had lived for extended periods with foster carers or host families often talked with affection about their carers and others in the household, including other young people living with the same family, with one commenting that it was hard to put into words the support he had received because it was 'so much'.

Another young person had initially lived in supported accommodation before moving to student accommodation. He said he appreciated both; when he arrived, the staff in supported accommodation had helped him to settle in to the city and life in Scotland, and his current housing suited his current needs and priorities. His experience was echoed by others young people who praised keyworkers and other accommodation staff for offering day-to-day help with orientation and introductions to other services:

> *They gave me, like, support. They had young people, you know. …if you are new and you don't know the area, they can take you to the shopping, your appointments, and they can help you for everything, you know. They talk to you and everything.*
> Interview 8, young person)

Spotlight on: Accommodation

Binh has lived in Scotland for three years, having arrived aged 17. He is studying at college although his options for courses are limited while he waits for the outcome of his asylum claim.

Binh currently lives in accommodation close to his college, but for most of the first two years he lived with a host family arranged through the local authority:

> *I regarded them as my family, if I had any news and anything I would discuss or talk to them. … Even when I moved out if I need any help they would be there and helped me.*

Thinking about the kind of things his host family had done that he found helpful, he adds:

> *If I list all those things maybe you don't have time to list all those things. They just give me an opportunity to be familiar with the life here, to settle down. They send me to see [health professional] and to do other things a lot.*

Binh recalls that when he first arrived *'everything was vague and I was lost and I didn't know who I could trust'*. Over time, he came to trust his host family and his social worker. He felt they listened to his views, as he listened to theirs, and he has been able to make his own decisions about things like college and accommodation within the options available to him.

Since moving into a flat, Binh keeps in touch with his host family and goes back for visits. Sometimes he cooks food for them from his country of origin. He likes to joke with Dave, the male carer, who has taught him Scottish slang.

I have gained a lot, you know…I have been taught a lot and I learnt a lot from them, like, from the culture, from the way to eat, from the food and from the lifestyle.

Education

The SGS records provide information on education services for nearly 60% of children and young people, who either applied to or attended college or university post age 16, usually with English as a Second Language course.

All participants in the qualitative interviews had attended, or were currently attending, college or secondary school, and a number were studying at, or in the process of, applying to university. The most frequent difficulty young people reported was either having to wait for a college place (although for most this was resolved relatively quickly) or having too few hours of contact on ESOL courses. Several young people had asked to move to colleges that provided more ESOL hours per week – not only to improve their language more quickly but to occupy their time and avoid having 'too many hours' to think about past experiences.

Mental health support

The SGS case file data shows that 27% (n=45) of young people had been referred to, or were on the waiting list, for a mental health service(s), while 10% (n=16) had visited or been referred to a GP, a counselling service, or psychologist for mental health concerns. Eighteen percent (n=30) had ongoing mental health concerns recorded – including trouble sleeping, social anxiety, depression and issues related to trauma. Additionally, 8% (n=13) had discussed different forms of mental health support with their Guardian. No data on mental health support were available for the remaining 37% (n=62) of young people, possibly suggesting they had not engaged with any mental health support, but perhaps a result of case file recording. As our data came from the SGS records only, it may not include children and young people referred for mental health support by social work or other services.

Young people who took part in interviews were relatively open in talking about their mental health, and particularly the impact of stress on eating, sleeping and concentration. The main stressors were concerns about their safety (particularly in the early stages post identification), key stages of the asylum process (when they were interviewed, often at length, about their experiences), the longer-term experience of waiting for the outcome, coping with memories of previous events, and missing and/or worrying about family members.

The majority of young people interviewed had been offered some form of mental health support. Among those young people who had seen a counsellor, psychologist or attended group therapeutic support, most were positive about the impact of this support. A smaller number reported more ambivalence about their experiences of mental health support and had either decided not to take up such support or had stopped attending after a few sessions.

One young person started smiling as he discussed the psychologist who had helped him a couple of years earlier and commented *'she's made me feel safe'*. He described that he felt comfortable confiding his worries, which included waiting for the outcome of his asylum application, concern that he would be returned home, and the impact of previous experiences.

Another young person urged others to confide in professionals, including mental health professionals, about feelings and experiences that they were finding difficult to deal with:

> *Tell them, even the practical barriers you face on a day to day. So one of the things I used to face was, when I first got to Glasgow, bus drivers were terribly racist at that time. So, buying a ticket caused me so much anxiety, that sometimes I would have a panic attack. ... talking to my therapist lets me get in this box where I didn't have to speak, you know, I would just like, flash it, and just leave, and they had no right to actually question. So like, even just little things, you know.*
>
> (Interview 3, young person)

Spotlight on: Taking time

Amira received leave to remain a few years ago. She has a busy job, active social life and several hobbies she enjoys. These days she has less contact with support services. But she remembers clearly how difficult it was in the early days to open up to people, particularly after some early interactions with professionals who had little experience of working with separated children or knowledge about the needs of Black children. She recalls her first experiences with the Guardians as a 'glimmer of hope':

> *Like everything else, it did take time. …. But I felt a lot of warmth coming from the Guardianship project, as soon as I met them.*
>
> *I didn't speak much when I was younger, and I wouldn't even speak much to foster parents. … I remember being in meetings with them [Guardians], and just sitting in silence for 30 minutes, and they just sat down in silence for 30 minutes, you know.*

She explains that at the time, the impact of trauma and the stress of trying to navigate the asylum process and adjust to life in Scotland made it difficult not only to articulate but even to formulate her own thoughts about her experiences:

> *So when someone sits you down and says, how are you feeling, you don't know how you're feeling, because you don't know. … I felt like there was this patience to let me unravel whatever was going on, you know.*

What also helped was seeing professionals take even seemingly small concerns seriously and their actions to address these:

> *You know, even the most minor of things, it's like, how can I fix this, you know. Them going out of their way to make sure you're okay.*

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3.3 The makings of good practice

Trust and relational working

All interviewees were asked to identify elements that constitute good practice in supporting children and young people who have experienced trafficking. Young people and professionals were united in the view that good practice was contingent upon the formation of trusting relationships. Trust and relationships were overwhelmingly highlighted as a vital ingredient – even condition – to providing effective support, as illustrated below:

> *I think first of all that has to come through building trust and relationships. And some of it is it's not just young people that have been trafficked; it's what you would do for any young person: you would want them to feel cared for, that they matter, that they are a priority.*
>
> (Interview 21, Guardian)

Young people spoke frequently about the importance of feeling that someone cared enough to listen to them. One young person reflected on his experience with the keyworker in his accommodation and his Guardian:

> *They normally talk to me, they asked how I was, how my life was, whether my mood was okay, my mental health was okay, if I needed any help at all. They taught me how to deal with things, how to do things better.*
>
> (Interview 5, young person)

The establishment of trusting relationships was further discussed as dependent on adopting child-friendly, compassionate and responsive ways of working, Consistency and reliability were all discussed as vital elements of good practice, as documented in previous studies. Choosing which information, and when, to share with professionals was an important component of building trusting relationships; widely recognised as core to effective practice with children and young people who have been trafficked (Hynes 2022). As illustrated earlier, young people clearly articulated the costs of having to discuss traumatic experiences, often repeatedly and at length, with professionals.

Relational working was also highlighted as a crucial element of effective multi-agency working by most professionals interviewed:

> *And so if I work to build those relationships, to connect with those other professionals then hopefully, and I do think I see this, it is better for the young people. Some burden is taken off them. There is a better understanding of who they are, what their needs are, how us as professionals can work together to support that young person and their needs and pass stuff across.*
>
> (Interview 21, Guardian)

However, and despite the recognition of the value of trusting relationships, external constraints meant that such connections could not always be made or were hindered by infrequent contact. It should be noted here that this was only mentioned by two of our interviewees – both social workers – perhaps reflecting the reality of statutory service provision within the social work field in Scotland, given high workload and considerable pressures on resources at the time of data collection, following the impact of Covid and the economic crisis. It was this reality that negatively impacted working practice and was highlighted by our interviewee below:

> *It is very difficult, especially for the young people that I started doing things with them and now, I'm no longer even…they call me and say, oh, it was my birthday, you never even wished me a happy birthday. It's quite difficult. And I try and explain to young people and I tell them, you see the way you came, we've got other people coming. We know sometimes we get five people a week, so just explain to them that they need help and I'm here, so call me, text me. And I try as much as I can to help them, but it's now become…I can't say that I have…I do have a good relationship with them, but it's not what I'd like it to be and what they would like it to be.*
>
> (Interview 29, social worker)

Time constraints not only affected social workers' relationships with children and young people but were also mentioned as a barrier to effective multi-agency working. Although this was discussed as an issue faced by various groups of professionals involved in supporting victims/survivors of trafficking, it was more pronounced in the case of social workers.

> *Social work being extremely busy, social work having big caseloads. I'd say that can be an obstacle. Getting time to talk about these things with social work can be difficult. Pinning meetings down.*

(Interview 22, Guardian)

Multi-agency barriers to good practice

Some of the elements of good practice highlighted by study participants were evident across a range of services and included: regular supervisor training to ensure the appropriateness of responses, early identification of trafficking indicators and timely needs assessment; training to ensure strengths-based practice approaches were adopted; multi-agency co-ordinated working with clear expectations from all participating agencies as well as integration of responses within the child protection system. However, structural factors could negatively impact on the formation of trusting relationships and options for institutional support.

Practitioners' responses were by no means surprising; they have been documented widely in studies exploring service provision to children and young people who had been trafficked, but it was concerning that some issues that have long been recognised still affected current practice:

> *So, yes, so, you know, definitely multi-agency co-ordinated partnership working, absolutely. But that's easy to say and not always easy to implement. And it definitely comes from child specialists; so, that's training. But there is something, as I say, about clear operating protocols and procedures around about that that are required. Clear standards as to what we expect each agency to work to. Again, I think we've got a long way to go in that respect in Scotland. What are the standards that we all have to work to if we're working with child victims of human trafficking?*
>
> (Interview 26, solicitor)

The level of training- but also experience- of professionals involved in supporting children and young people was also discussed as impacting multi-agency working processes.

> *I think, if the agencies are kind of trained and informed then we all probably work together a bit better. But they don't all necessarily get specific training about working with young people who, you know, experienced what our young people have experienced.*
>
> (Interview 20, Guardian)

A final element discussed as impacting practice, and especially multi-agency working processes, was the competing priorities of different services involved in the support of children and young people who had experienced trafficking. Perhaps not surprisingly, competing priories between the immigration and criminal justice systems on the one hand, and child protection processes on the other, were highlighted as a particular challenge for effective multi-agency working by the vast majority of interviewees. However, as clearly illustrated below, a focus on punishable acts during the period of exploitation rather than the exploitation itself, also hinders effective support for this group.

> *One huge obstacle I would say is the more recent re-trend of criminalising young people again. So yeah, the criminal justice system, that's been a huge obstacle. We've seen a huge increase in young people referrals from Polmont [young offenders institution] […] And we know that in international and domestic policy, they should be treated as children first. And in a lot of ways, yes, that does happen, but policy isn't always put into practice. Yeah, I would say that's a big obstacle.*
>
> (Interview 22, Guardian)

Similarly, what was described as perceived difference in values between statutory agencies and third sector organisations, was also reported as a challenge at times.

> *What they think are conflicting values…whereas in actual fact our goal is the same, you know, to protect this young person. […] I don't think those third agency sectors are that good at multi-agency working. I think the Guardianship are, you know, they are, but we obviously have our issues with each other as well just around their advocacy at the end of the day and, you know, that can be quite difficult sometimes.*
>
> (Interview 21, social worker)

Choice and agency

We asked young people whether they felt that professionals had offered them some choice in key decisions about their lives, such as where they lived and education options. Their responses were often tied to relationships with professionals: perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had described generally positive experiences with their Guardian or social worker felt they had been listened to and had their views taken into account. It is worth noting here that while the SGS case file data contained little detail about contact with social workers, it was clear from the interview data that all young people did have an allocated social worker.

The examples young people gave underlined the importance of listening to individual perspectives. On education, for instance, most young people said they had asked to attend courses with more students in similar circumstances, but one young person had specifically requested to attend a college with fewer students who shared his first language to help him improve his English quickly.

Practitioners also recognised choice and empowerment as vital to good practice, and particularly relevant for this specific group given the disempowering experience of having been trafficked.

> *It's like they didn't have those rights then so I think it's even more important that they have those rights now [..] And I suppose trying to give people small choices, because I think sometimes people that haven't had choice in life it's very difficult to make decisions, it's very difficult to make choices because they've not had practice [..] but I think it starts with what I would hope by acting very small scale that you're building towards that in a way that feels safe.*
>
> (Interview 21, Guardian)

A number of young people who had been in Scotland for some time reflected that in the early stages the concept of 'choice' either felt like less of a priority (compared with, for example, feeling safe) or that they would not have understood the implications of the different choices on offer. At the outset they were reliant on professionals' capacity to listen and make choices on their behalf, and only gradually felt more able to make decisions and advocate for themselves.

One young person reflected about her experiences when she first came into the care of the local authority, and had been placed in accommodation with staff and support that she said helped her to feel safe until she felt ready to move to more independent housing:

> *And even if they asked me at that time, I wouldn't know what to tell them. So, at the beginning, I don't think any young people got a choice, they give you what they can at the beginning. And then afterwards, social worker would give you options, they would give you option either to live in a flat, or to share a flat, or to go student accommodation, or to get your own flat, or stuff.*
>
> (Interview 6, young person)

Resources and location appeared to be the main restraints to professionals supporting young people's choices. If young people wanted to move to live in a different local authority area, or to attend a college outwith their local authority, this was not always possible, although in some cases professionals had worked with young people to support such moves. Sometimes changes did not happen as quickly as young people would have liked, for example while waiting for housing or a place at college to become available. In general, if someone they had a trusting relationship with had explained the context to them, young people accepted the constraints on professionals even if they still wanted a change to take place.

3.4 Recovery

> *Recovery. I'm translating it good in my head, it would mean to me, getting better. And maybe people who come from trauma, they recover from that, they get better slowly, slowly. Trying to support them on getting better and recover. It's not always being sick, where you need to recover, it's mental health, it's emotional support, where you need to recover and move on with your life.*
>
> (Interview 6, young person)

> *About recovery, if at the beginning when I first arrived probably I would not understand that very clearly. I could only understand it to be the fact that I have been through the journey, I was exploited. The first thing probably is my health would be recovered, I recover in terms of health.*
>
> (Interview 11, young person)

As part of our interviews with young people and professionals, we explored in depth their views on what recovery may mean for children and young people who have experienced trafficking. As described in these interviews there are different definitions of recovery - recovery as a long (even life-long) process; recovery as being able and feeling confident to make and voice choices; regaining a sense of control; the ability to think about the future and make plans. Professionals' and older young people's accounts in particular highlighted the significance of acknowledging exploitative experiences as a necessary step towards recovery.

Service outcomes may not reflect the priorities of the children and young people and may not even translate to 'recovery' as understood by young people in understanding and timescales. In this respect recovery may not sit neatly with those outcomes determined by policy and practice imperatives. Additionally, there were many obstacles to positive outcomes and recovery, further highlighting the complexity of exploitation and its impact on children's subsequent lives.

Drawing together analysis across our data sources, here we reflect on the concepts of identity, community and autonomy as inter-linked influences on recovery. Although safety and recovery are sometimes conflated, safety is a pre-condition for recovery, and while physical safety is an immediate and critical priority for young people and professionals alike, it is – as the young person quoted at the start of this report stressed – the 'bare minimum'.

As noted earlier, a broader understanding of safety – one encompassing not only an absence of physical harm and freedom from exploitation but a sense of predictability and security about the present and future – came through clearly in interviews with young people and was recognised by professionals. In the early stages, enrolment in education or other regular activities was a key priority not only for learning but also for the benefits of meeting other people and establishing a regular and familiar routine:

Well, if you experience trafficking then you need time out, because you need to recover from things that you was…from things that make you sad, things that really make you depressed. … So, the recover means that to allow yourself a routine, you know, so to fill a space that you always have, like your normal life.

(Interview 7, young person)

This perspective reflects the notion of ontological security (sense of predictability about the future) highlighted earlier, which is vital for young people who have experienced exploitation. However, this became more difficult for young people who were repeatedly exposed to 'system trauma' (Rigby, 2020), itself a cause of distress and exhaustion:

[T]he thing is, like, trauma doesn't start and stop, trauma is always there. And it's like the way you brush your teeth every morning, that's the same you deal with it. And the system that they have now makes it quite tricky to fully recover.

(Interview 3, young person)

As well as young people, professionals also noted that recovery may not necessarily mean that trauma 'disappears', but rather becomes manageable and children and young people come to understand that they are not defined by the experience of having been trafficked:

I think it means being able to…that their identity isn't completely tied up in this entire experience and they can live with it alongside without having all the sleepless nights or being able to manage this feeling. Because you're never going to forget it, it's never going to not be a thing, but it's going to hurt less.

(Interview 23, solicitor)

Informal support through engagement in peer networks also helped children and young people break free from the institutional discourses that they used in dealings with services and that were applied to them. Engagement with peers thus enabled young people to feel more than 'victims' or 'survivors'; simply to be children or young people. Friendships helped young people feel less isolated in their journeys through formal, often traumatising, processes:

Well, they just need somebody to talk to them, you know, to find a good friend. If you find a good friend it might cover a lot of things because you don't think a lot about the past all the time, so, you know, you don't feel alone.

(Interview 13, young person)

At times, young people found that comparisons with peers could also be a source of stress, for example at points where one person was granted right to remain or accepted on to a university course. One young person described experiencing racism from other young people in her initial accommodation, which made her feel isolated, even though felt well supported by the staff. As teenagers and young adults, sometimes friendships involved tensions and arguments as well as care and support. Nevertheless, as young people established relationships with peers, whether through activities organised by services or through meeting other young people at college, in their accommodation or elsewhere, the value of communities in processes of recovery was clear:

I've seen young people that just arrived, like a few weeks in, and ... you see them very, sort of scared sometimes, or like, very tired, or not able to focus. And then a few months in you meet them at, like, a group night with other young people, and they are the life and soul of the evening. You know, it's amazing to see. And those things help, just to have friends and eat the foods that they like, and all those things.[…] because obviously the

legal appointments, it's all part of it, but to see the young people having fun, you know, playing football together or those things, that's amazing.

(Interview 28, Guardian)

Young people who looked back over a longer timeframe since they had first accessed support services described a gradual process of building up their knowledge and confidence, and developing an increasing autonomy as time passed:

> *I was very shy at the time, and I was very vulnerable. I wouldn't complain about anything, I would just sit there and stay, and just go with the flow and do what I have to do, and I have to go to lawyer, I go to lawyer, I have to go here, I go there, just follow their instructions. And that's it. I wouldn't complain about anything, and I wouldn't do anything for at least in the first year or two years.*
>
> *But after I started volunteering, going here and there, and making my English better, then I start cutting off all the interpreters. I was going to the psychologist by myself and explaining it the best way I can. So, after that, I think because of all what happened, I had to either do it myself to survive, or get what I need, and get the skills, or just stay there and cry. So, I think I got a bit more strength and confidence.*
>
> (Interview 6, young person)

The timeframes young people discussed often spanned several years, emphasising the importance of ensuring care experienced children's rights to care and support post-18, including accommodation, were recognised fully in practice. This is currently still available in Scotland up age 26 under support for care experienced young people, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking and trafficked children (Ramsay, 2020; Scottish Government, 2021).

The ability to plan, to hope and to dream about the future was a pivotal element of recovery, according to our interviewees. Within participants' accounts, feeling empowered and having the autonomy and confidence to make life choices - free from external processes like the asylum system - was a necessary condition.

> *Part of recovery, for me, is having movement in life, feeling a sort of progressing, feeling like I'm playing the role which I'm able to play in society, a role that feels like me in society.*
>
> (Interview 3, young person)
>
> *But then also being able to see a future where you have choice and you get to choose what you want to do and anything is possible, and being supported, still, to be able to achieve those things by social work, by guardianship, by other organisations. Yes, I think…and like I said before as well, like being able to advocate for yourself.*
>
> (Interview 26, solicitor)

4. Conclusions

To date, few studies have specifically explored the longer-term needs of separated children and young people who have experienced trafficking, the longer-term impact of receiving services designed for those who have experienced trafficking, or the potential barriers to recovery and effective outcomes. This lack of evidence is restricting policy and practice efforts to plan and provide effective services over time. This study begins to address this policy and practice challenge and knowledge gap. It moves beyond the timeframe of previous research to explore longer term experiences of recovery, directly involving children and young people who have made their homes in the UK.

However, retrospective analysis of case file data is not without its limitations for analysis and planning. The administrative data may not contain some of the variables considered important (in the opinion of the researchers) and therefore some of the statistical data is partial. Additionally, there is no one agency in Scotland that has a clear overview of support services and what is actually provided (Rigby et al 2020). Consequently, the data from the SGS is only part of the overall picture in this respect, and within this study was examined as one data source alongside interviews with young people and professionals to gain a fuller picture. From a UK perspective the numbers of trafficked children identified in Scotland is small. Across the four nations the highest number of child trafficking victims has for the past few years been UK nationals, therefore some of the conclusions from the current study may not be easily applicable across this wider group.

Despite noted limitations the data does suggest that the majority of children and young people with conclusive grounds regarding trafficking in Scotland are considered safe by the Guardians and free from continued exploitation. However, nine children (5%) were recorded as having gone missing permanently, and a further 5% (n=9) had gone missing at least overnight at some point, and there are clearly concerns from practitioners that children going missing is a recurring issue. Within the UK, this issue has attracted particular attention recently in relation to children who are seeking asylum going missing from hotel accommodation[5]. While any trafficked children going missing is concerning, the existence of SGS and the more child protection focussed approach developed in Scotland may explain the differences to the UK figures of up to 31% of trafficked children in care going missing at least once (ECPAT UK and Missing People, 2022).

Initial services aimed at addressing immediate needs are crucial to secure safety and identify forms of support required. In this respect prioritising the importance of a child protection and safeguarding referral and intervention, over an NRM referral (Rigby et al 2020) is paramount. Within this context, and in the early stages of intervention, young people are likely to be much more reliant on professionals for support and advice, but building trusting relationships takes time and is highly challenging within the present NRM decision making process.

Despite difficulties highlighted by interview participants in relation to multi-agency working, training, experiences of discriminatory attitudes and the overall trauma to children and young people regarding multiple welfare and immigration systems, there are clear indications of progress, recovery and positive outcomes for many young people. Again, while this finding is

[5] https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-01-23/debates/2BEF91B6-389B-46E4-86EF-C93331267E9C/ChildrenSeekingAsylumSafeguarding

within the Scottish context, regular and ongoing contact with Guardians and support services, not contingent on NRM decisions, may provide a recognised framework for good practice. While multiple systems may remain a feature of policy and practice, consistent, positive relationships as described by children and young people may help to mitigate the more problematic aspects of practice.

Within this sphere of recovery and outcomes the asylum status of children and young people, along with safety, seems to be the primary consideration for children and young people. From the perspective of children and young people it appears that in the absence of settled immigration status, and feeling safe, other aspects of recovery, including positive outcomes from a system / policy perspective (such as health, education and work) may be of secondary importance. While these broader aspects of recovery cannot be ignored, the system response across many policy domain areas may be struggling to meet needs without security of place, and remaining in the UK, while being kept safe. There is a challenge for all support services when immigration decision making is delayed; within this there are implications for devolved (UK four nations and welfare delivery) policy making when most of the services supporting children and young people have little or no influence on Home Office decisions regarding asylum claims. Official recognition of the residence status of young people and the right to remain in the UK is central to any process of recovery or feeling of physical safety and ontological security for young people and acknowledged by the professionals who supported them. At present this security can be tenuous and under the proposals in the Illegal Migration Bill (2023) may become elusive.

The competing priorities for services is important to consider, in particular, how are they supported to work together to support young people? Agencies themselves have different working practices and professional objectives so it would be useful to see the further development of clear collaborative objectives that over-ride the organisational priorities of any one agency. Relatedly, the apparent hierarchy that affects statutory and third sector agencies (in terms of funding, access to information, influence) should be addressed.

In relation to 'recovery', the issue of individual healing and organisational context is important. The interaction between the two highlights the importance of personal and individual safety and wellbeing, within a context where this can be facilitated or obstructed by organisational practices and processes. This is one area where identifying the views of young people – about what factors helped and hindered their personal recovery – is crucial and future research needs to address this. This too highlights the collective and social responsibilities that form part of community supports, as opposed to the more individualistic and responsibilising notions of resilience.

Policy and Practice Implications

One of the key aims of this study was to add to social policy and social work knowledge of the short, medium and long term needs and experiences of trafficked children and young people and the services designed to support them. The findings from the data have a number of implications for the development of knowledge in this area:

- **The UK and Scottish Governments must ensure that a child protection framework of support and processes take priority over NRM referrals.** OSCE (2022)[1] indicate that any NRM should build on existing national child protection systems, where a child's best interest is at the centre of decision making in line with state obligations under the UNCRC.

- **The Home Office must ensure that decision making processes are timely.** Immigration status is crucial in allowing young people to make plans and organise their lives. Ensuring decision making is timely is imperative to recovery.

- **The Scottish Government and other funding bodies need to ensure that services are properly resourced to provide adequate and appropriate levels of support.** Limited provisions work against building trusting relationships and can often impact on the effectiveness of engagement and subsequently longer-term outcomes for young people. Continuity and consistency are vital in establishing trusting relationships as a pre-condition for recovery. The Scottish model of guardianship support for all separated children, regardless of NRM decisions, combined with provision of support post-18 for care experienced young people, provides this. Identification and support in Scotland is not conditional on a positive NRM decision and reflects the importance of the child protection and support framework and process as indicated in the first recommendation.

- **Clear collaborative objectives that over-ride the organisational priorities of any one agency need to be reinforced.**

- **Young people require support – including education, financial, accommodation and mental health support - that goes beyond specific services related to trafficking in order to meet their longer-term needs and support longer-term recovery.** These are presently available in Scotland under child-care and throughcare and aftercare provisions and professionals need to ensure equal access to services across the country, supported by additional training where necessary.

- **All statutory and non-statutory bodies working with separated and trafficked children need to ensure that the focus remains on children's needs rather than particular national groups.** Professionals have ongoing concerns about the patterns of over-representation of specific nationalities in processes of identification. Ongoing training regarding patterns of arrivals, the importance of assessment within a child protection framework utilising possible trafficking indicators, and the need for a multi-agency response (including cross border) are all important factors regarding the focus on needs.

Areas for further research

- Further research is needed to explore how young people are identified as victims of trafficking and/or exploitation and how this may influence or determine responses at the initial point of contact with services, based on needs rather than nationality or mode of entry. Most importantly, young people's involvement in research should ensure that instead of being viewed as passive recipients, research offers them the opportunity to actively shape the knowledge produced about them as well as the services put in place to support them, in line with the principle of centring survivors' perspectives (Dang, 2022). This can be achieved through research designs that aim to democratise research processes, by promoting a sharing of power in decision making; by being inclusive of all perspectives, experiences and skills; by placing value on knowledge emerging from lived experience, and by being based on reciprocal relationships.

- There is a need to ensure records of service provision are clear and recording processes are accurate for all children and young people who have experienced exploitation through trafficking. There needs to be accurate statistical data collected to inform the planning and development of policy and practice. SGS could be well placed to continue the development of this work.

- Related to this, and the retrospective nature of this study, research adopting a longitudinal methodology over a significant period of time, and involving all key agencies, would provide a more detailed picture of the services needed by and provided for children and young people who have been trafficked.

- The on-going criminalisation of young people requires further exploration as it can have significant impact on processes of recovery for children and young people who have experienced trafficking. This is likely to be even more important now under the potential provisions of the Illegal Migration Bill to criminalise the mode of arrival.

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Appendix 1

Further Information on SGS Data

Initially, the SGS were given an empty template of variables of interest that were predefined collaboratively between the research team and the SGS and informed by previous reports/evaluations (e.g., Kohli and Crawley, 2013). Information on each of these variables was thus extracted from the casefiles by a member of the SGS who used their discretion to input any data they found relevant (from a mixture of closed and open-text fields) to build up the data frame. Although most of the information for variables was readily available in the case files (for example gender or pre-defined categorisations of exploitation), some information across the case files were extracted for variables when relevant.

The research team then operationalised the data by reducing case file information into appropriate categories for ease of interpretation. It should be noted that due to data being taken from different sections of case files over an 11-year period, it is not always possible to pinpoint at which time in this period the information relates to. However, information on when cases were opened and closed and when young people were referred to SGS are included so rough estimates can be made.

While this was a rigorous process it is apparent from the statistical data that for some data fields there is 'no data' available as the information sought in the case files does not always map neatly to the objectives of the research. For example, only 51% (n=85) of case files had valid data on the location where the young person was first found when we would have expected this information to be available for most, if not all, young people. We suspect this discrepancy (among others) exists due to differences in recording and case file management by multiple actors over a 11-year period which resulted in varying quality and style of information input about young people over time. This is further illustrated by more detail on variables being available for some young people than others. This was the case, for instance, with some having detailed qualitative descriptions of their physical health requirements that had been lifted directly from open-text fields in the case files, while others had just been marked (more generally) as 'having health concerns'.

The Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection at the University of Stirling is committed to the delivery of excellent academic research with children, young people and families. We work to build an integrated and systemic understanding of children and young people's lives, exploring in particular how best to support their wellbeing, and to protect them from factors that might be harmful. Our interests include mental health, resilience, and child protection, as well as children and young people's rights, relationships, play, learning and education, their communities, and the broader social environment in which they are located. We are particularly concerned with the impact of inequalities, with questions of social justice and of how different childhoods are represented through research and policy. We use creative and innovative methods to explore issues that matter to children, families and those who care for and about them. We work together with children and young people, families and communities, as well as with organisations to build knowledge that can be applied and used in practice settings, like health, social care, third sector organisations, criminal justice and family courts, and education.

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre was created by the investment of public funding to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of law and policies designed to overcome it. The Centre is a consortium of six academic organisations led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law and is funded by the Art and Humanities Research Council on behalf of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

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