

7Minute Briefing

The **National Referral Mechanism (NRM)** is the UK government's framework for identifying and supporting potential victims of modern slavery, which includes both human trafficking and exploitation. It serves to ensure that victims are properly recognised and can access critical services for their protection and recovery.

Managed by the **Single Competent Authority (SCA)** within the Home Office, the NRM helps both children and adults who are at risk.

Key Components of Modern Slavery:

- Modern slavery includes crimes such as:
- Human trafficking (for sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude)
- Criminal exploitation, including involvement in illegal activities like drug trafficking.
- Organ harvesting, forced marriage, and other forms of exploitation.

Legal Foundation:

- The **Modern Slavery Act (2015)** provides a strong legal framework, giving law enforcement the tools to fight modern slavery and ensure perpetrators receive appropriate punishment.
- The Act also enhances support for victims, such as the introduction of **Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs)** and protections for those identified through the NRM.

National Referral Mechanism (NRM)

First Responders' Role:

First Responders are organisations responsible for identifying potential victims and making NRM referrals. These include local authorities, police, social workers, immigration officers, and certain NGOs.

They have a duty to:

- Identify victims of trafficking and modern slavery.
- Gather detailed information to understand the victim's situation.
- Submit referrals through an online NRM form(combined).

Non-first responder organisations should make a safeguarding referral to Social Care for potential victims for Social Care to complete the NRM referral.

Referral Process: The referral process begins when a First Responder suspects that an individual—either a child or adult—has been trafficked or exploited.

- For children (under 18), an NRM referral must be made regardless of the child's consent.
- For adults, the referral requires their explicit consent unless they are referred through the Duty to Notify (DtN) system, which is used when a victim declines consent but still needs to be notified to the Home Office(combined).
- The online form used for referral dynamically adjusts based on the specific circumstances of the victim.

Decision-Making Stages: After a referral is submitted, the Single Competent Authority (SCA) undertakes a two-stage process to determine the victim's status:

Reasonable Grounds Decision:

Within 5 working days, the SCA makes a preliminary decision on whether there are "reasonable grounds" to believe the individual is a victim of modern slavery or trafficking. The threshold is low; it only requires suspicion, not proof, of trafficking.

Conclusive Grounds Decision:

Within 45 days, after gathering more evidence, the SCA makes a final decision, known as the Conclusive Grounds Decision, which determines whether the individual is more likely than not to be a victim. If the decision is positive, the victim receives additional support for 45 days, and possibly longer.

Transitional Safeguarding Challenges for Victims

Vulnerabilities for Young People:

Young people transitioning from childhood to adulthood face particular challenges, especially if they have been victims of modern slavery. Many services and protections designed for children may no longer be available once they turn 18. This gap in support creates a “cliff edge,” where young adults may face increased risks of exploitation, mental health struggles, and isolation.

The Importance of Early Engagement:

Professionals working with young people should establish trusting relationships and begin discussions about the NRM process well before they turn 18. These conversations should focus on:

- The young person’s right to consent or withdraw from the NRM.
- The continuation of support services under the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC) after they reach adulthood.

It’s vital that agencies coordinate their efforts to ensure the young person understands the long-term implications of their choices.

NRM Support Post-18:

Post-18 Support: Even though local authority support may diminish at 18, the NRM ensures continued assistance through the MSVCC. This includes access to accommodation, health care, psychological support, and legal aid. The NRM framework aims to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood for victims of modern slavery.

Key Support Mechanisms and Agencies Involved

Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs):

For children, Independent Child Trafficking Guardians provide an essential source of advocacy and support. They ensure that a child’s best interests are upheld and help navigate complex legal processes(combined).

ICTGs also assist professionals by offering advice and guidance on how to support trafficked children effectively.

The Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC):

This contract provides adults who have been identified as victims with a comprehensive set of services, including:

- Safe accommodation.
- Medical treatment and counselling.
- Legal advice and representation.

The MSVCC ensures that support does not abruptly end when a victim transitions to adulthood, mitigating the risk of re-exploitation.

Multi-Agency Collaboration:

Effective safeguarding requires strong inter-agency collaboration. First responders, local authorities, police, and NGOs must work together to ensure a seamless transition of care and continued protection for victims of modern slavery.

Improving Practice

- What measures are in place within your team to identify potential signs of modern slavery and trafficking in children?
- How well does your organisation understand the NRM process and the support it provides for victims?
- What gaps exist in your agency’s knowledge or processes, and how can these be addressed?
- Are there clear strategies in place to help young people transitioning to adulthood remain engaged with support services?
- How does your organisation ensure ongoing support and monitoring for adult victims who have transitioned from childhood services, and what improvements can be made to prevent re-exploitation during this vulnerable period?

In conclusion, the NRM plays a critical role in identifying, protecting, and supporting victims of modern slavery in the UK. However, the transition from childhood to adulthood presents additional challenges that must be addressed through coordinated efforts, comprehensive support, and early intervention.

Ensuring that victims receive appropriate support, both before and after they turn 18, is crucial in safeguarding their long-term well-being and preventing further exploitation.