



HM Government

Report on the trial of independent child trafficking advocates and next steps

December 2015

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Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 48(7) of the Modern Slavery Act 2015

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Introduction

1. Child victims of trafficking are among the most vulnerable people in society. We have a responsibility to protect these children. Local authorities, voluntary and community organisations do some outstanding work but there are indications that criminals are still finding vulnerabilities in the system. Too many children who are potential victims go missing when under the care of children's services or are not identified by statutory services as victims, thus not getting the care and support they are entitled to and need. In some cases they are inappropriately treated as criminals themselves.
2. The Government is determined to tackle this problem and to ensure that child victims of trafficking are rescued, protected and given the opportunity to rebuild their lives. This is why, in January 2014, the previous Coalition Government announced that it would trial a new system of independent child trafficking advocates.
3. Under this system, each child victim would be allocated a dedicated advocate who would provide specialist support and ensure that the child's voice was heard as their case progressed through the care, immigration and/or criminal justice systems. The advocates would be independent of statutory services and would have the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure that the child's needs were fully met and their best interests represented.
4. Concerns were raised in Parliament during the passage of the Immigration Act 2014, and during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Modern Slavery Bill, that the advocate role would benefit from legal powers set out in statute. The Government listened and we included a provision in the Modern Slavery Bill to allow advocates to be placed on a statutory footing.
5. The provision in section 48 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 reflects that the advocates model was being trialled. Section 48 (7) requires the Government to submit a report to Parliament within nine months of Royal Assent of the Modern Slavery Act, setting out what the Government proposes to do next.

Key findings of the independent evaluation

6. The trial ran in 23 local authorities from September 2014-September 2015. The advocates were provided by Barnardo's, the children's charity. The University of Bedfordshire was commissioned to provide an independent evaluation. 158 children took part in the trial: 86 received an independent child trafficking advocate and 72 received the existing service provided by the local authority in the area they were located.

7. An interim evaluation report of the trial was published in March 2015. The final evaluation report is being published today alongside this report and is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-independent-child-trafficking-advocates-trial-final-report>. A copy of this document has been placed in the library of the Houses of Parliament alongside this report.
8. The evaluation examined how the advocacy scheme was implemented, how independent child trafficking advocates operated in practice and the impact of independent child trafficking advocates compared to existing provision.
9. The evaluation found that the role of the advocate was seen as a positive one by most professionals involved in the trial, and most significantly by the children themselves. The additional time that the advocates spent with the children was seen as valuable, with many professionals considering that the advocates were acting in the child's best interests and that the advocates aided decision-making, especially where the service provider already had established relationships with a local authority. The children felt listened to and valued.
10. However, the evaluation found that there was no evidence that advocates led to a reduction in the number of children going missing. During the trial, 15 of the children who were assigned an advocate were permanently missing at the end of the trial, compared to 12 children who were not assigned one. Seven of the 15 children who were assigned an advocate went missing before they were referred to their advocate.¹ Missing children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation so this finding is a major concern. We had hoped that the new system would significantly reduce the proportion of children who go missing.
11. During the trial period there was also limited evidence of benefits in terms of involvement with the immigration and criminal justice systems. Some cases were still going through the relevant processes, including the National Referral Mechanism process, and some children reported not feeling able to yet engage sufficiently with the criminal justice system as witnesses. Again these were important issues where we had hoped independent child trafficking advocates would have had a beneficial impact. The independent evaluator considered that more time would be required to determine the potential impact of independent child trafficking advocates on these issues.

¹ We do not have information from the evaluator on how many children in the comparator group went missing before meeting with a social worker or independent advocate. Overall 46% of children (72) in the trial had at least one missing episode recorded in their case file. The majority (23 of 27) of the children who went 'permanently' missing were recorded of being of Vietnamese origin.

The Government's response and next steps

12. Overall the evidence about the impact of the independent child trafficking advocates during the trial appears to be equivocal. Aspects of the independent child trafficking advocates model show promise but did not deliver on some key outcomes that trafficked children are entitled to expect. The model will ultimately be judged by whether it ensures that each and every child always receives the support that they need and prevents the child from going missing. There was limited evidence that the trial model met all of these exacting standards.
13. For this reason, the Government does not propose to commence the provisions within the Modern Slavery Act 2015 at this point. We need to get this right. We want to work with interested stakeholders to do this, ensuring that the model complements and reinforces existing and planned initiatives being undertaken on child protection. The University of Bedfordshire's independent evaluation suggests areas for further work to determine the best model. That is why we intend to develop and test revisions and alternatives to the current model.
14. Our immediate next step will be to meet with interested Parliamentarians, frontline professionals, non-Governmental organisations, the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner and trafficked children in January and February 2016. We will identify options for addressing the areas where the model that we trialled appears to be insufficient or more time is required in order to determine the outcomes. We will update Parliament by March 2016 on the models to be tested.
15. The Government thanks Barnardo's, the University of Bedfordshire and the other partners involved in the trial for the important work they have done to test the independent child trafficking advocates model. Their work has highlighted the challenges of providing a particularly vulnerable group of children with the support they deserve, and has pinpointed areas where we need further to refine our approach.

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