A Review of Greater Manchester's Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) Partnerships Approach

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This review was commissioned by Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and completed by The University of Manchester (UoM) between 2024-2025.

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GMCA GREATER MANCHESTER COMBINED AUTHORITY

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Tackling serious and organised crime **together**

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Executive Summary

This report, commissioned by Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and completed by The University of Manchester with input from a Lived Experience Consultant (LEC), presents a comprehensive review of partnership responses to modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) across Greater Manchester. With a specific focus on the interconnected challenges of MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum, this review draws on survey data, existing Greater Manchester Police (GMP) data, interviews, and social network analysis to identify the strengths, gaps, and future opportunities for collaborative working within this complex landscape.

The findings of this review underpin the complexity and diversity of MSHT partnership work across Greater Manchester. A strong culture of collaboration is evident, especially at the city-region level, as well as between statutory bodies and the Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector. Practitioners consistently acknowledged the value of multi-stakeholder partnerships, especially those facilitated by the Greater Manchester Anti-Trafficking Forum, in enhancing communication, enabling joint problem-solving, and encouraging cross-sector innovation. However, this collaborative ethos could be more consistent across the ten local authorities. Some boroughs demonstrate well-integrated practices and active engagement, but the inconsistency across boroughs limits Greater Manchester's capacity to present a unified and resilient response to MSHT.

The report considers that many partners observed a lack of a clear, shared vision or long-term strategic direction, with uncertainty over who holds responsibility for setting objectives across the city-region and/or MSHT sector. Governance structures and communication mechanisms were described as inconsistent, with information-sharing often fragmented. Part of this included a perception that partners are often in 'firefighting mode' with cases and day-to-day work, at the expense of a more structured vision or strategy. Related to this, siloed working is common, especially when influenced by separate funding streams, and overlapping forums that risk duplicating effort and practitioner 'fatigue'. Many partnerships rely heavily on individual relationships rather than embedded systems, which results in collaborative efforts being vulnerable to staff turnover and loss of institutional knowledge, which can undermine continuity and sustained progress.

National legislative changes have had significant impacts on frontline work. In particular, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 (IMA) and Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA) were identified as having created a more hostile and restrictive environment for victims and survivors. These laws have introduced heightened evidentiary thresholds for positive National Referral Mechanism (NRM) decisions and have disproportionately affected non-UK nationals. As a result, many victims are now excluded from formal recognition and statutory support. Partners reported growing frustration with the system's increasing emphasis on immigration enforcement over protection, which has limited the quality of engagement with victims and undermined

local partnerships. Importantly, parts of the Home Office (UKVI) are generating significant amounts of work for partners across Greater Manchester but are not necessarily present in local discussions. In this respect, Greater Manchester is an area that is largely unified in working to moderate the adverse impacts of national legislation changes and 'hostile environment' immigration policy.

Support for survivors is shaped by systemic gaps between local authority areas, varying referral practices, and differing interpretations of statutory responsibilities. Some services, especially housing and health, are stretched thin and often not fully aligned with MSHT recovery needs. The reliance on temporary or poor-quality accommodation and irregular access to support were cited as major barriers to longer-term recovery. In many cases, adults who do not receive positive NRM decisions are left with limited, if any, ongoing support, with the majority of these being non-UK nationals. In contrast, children typically benefit from more secure pathways due to local authorities' safeguarding duties.

An additional key finding is the varying and underdeveloped inclusion of People with Lived Experience (PLE) across MSHT related activity and projects. While their involvement is widely recognised as essential, many organisations do not have the resources or structures to meaningfully embed survivor voices into service design or governance. Existing examples of good practice show the value of survivor insights in shaping good quality interventions, but these are not the norm. Instead, survivor involvement is often tokenistic or limited to specific projects rather than integrated into wider partnership frameworks.

The private sector is an under-utilised resource, despite its critical role in prevention and response, especially in contexts of labour exploitation. Businesses were often seen as peripheral to current MSHT partnership structures, and engagement efforts were typically one-directional, focused more on raising awareness and occasional PR opportunities for businesses rather than deeper-rooted collaboration and more critical reflection that other partners are engaged in. However, given that many forms of exploitation occur within otherwise legitimate industries such as construction, hospitality, agri-food, and care, the potential for business involvement in intelligence sharing, ethical employment pathways, and victim recovery is significant. Strengthening this engagement presents a major opportunity to enhance MSHT partnerships across the city-region.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations that are intended to strengthen the approach to MSHT partnerships, improve cross-sector communication, and embed more sustainable, survivor-centred partnership structures and involvement across the Greater Manchester system.

The review commends the city-region's openness to critical self-reflection and improvement – and as some participants (from beyond Greater Manchester) believed, it tends to perform well on this front in comparison to other UK regions. Partners

consistently demonstrated a commitment to enhancing service delivery, embedding lived experience in practice, and developing integrated responses across MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum systems.

Recommendations

A top-level summary of the recommendations to develop the city-region's partnership approach to MSHT is provided below, with further detail provided in section 12 of the report.

1. Develop a vision and clear objectives for MSHT partnership work across Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester[1] should adopt a clear, city-region-wide 'mission' or 'vision', i.e., a longer-term strategy, for MSHT partnership work. This includes consistent framing of partnership goals, expectations for collaboration, and measurable outcomes. Such a vision should be grounded in ensuring positive victim and survivor experiences. Creating a shared vision with clear objectives would enable forums that crosscut the areas of MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness to be better aligned across local and Greater Manchester levels, with more structured communication, clearer agendas, and senior-level engagement.

2. Establish formalised governance structures to lead MSHT work in Greater Manchester

A formalised governance function is required to oversee the development of strategic MSHT coordination. This should ensure alignment across sectors, support borough-level consistency, and provide senior accountability for partnership delivery.

3. Identify and engage named individuals in local authorities to support MSHT coordination

Each local authority should identify named individuals who are responsible for MSHT-related issues. These individuals should be well-placed within relevant teams (e.g. safeguarding, homelessness, or public protection), trained to coordinate partnership responses, and have authority to drive collaboration with statutory and non-statutory partners.

4. Ensure a consistent positive experience for victims and survivors of MSHT across Greater Manchester

Support for MSHT survivors should be accessible and consistent, regardless of NRM status, immigration background, or borough of residence. Greater Manchester partners should advocate for more inclusive support models, embed MSHT into existing service pathways (e.g. housing, healthcare), and establish clear referral routes for survivors who are not eligible for specialist support.

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[1] When referring to action points throughout this report, the term 'Greater Manchester' refers to the collective partnership that is focused on MSHT, homelessness, and asylum and migration-related challenges, rather than to any one organisation/authority (unless otherwise specified).

5. Include people with lived experience in developing services and responses to tackle MSHT

PLE should be embedded in service development, governance, and evaluation. Their involvement should be meaningful, safeguarded, and properly resourced. Advisory roles, co-production panels, and commissioned consultancy work are all vital to building services that reflect survivor realities.

6. Develop a stronger MSHT partnership with the private sector

Greater Manchester should relaunch its Modern Slavery Business Network and develop a clear engagement strategy with employers. This should encourage ethical business practices, enable intelligence sharing, and create employment pathways for survivors. Incentives such as alignment with goals of corporate due diligence and ESG (environmental, social, governance) frameworks can help to strengthen private sector buy-in.

1. Introduction

Greater Manchester, like many UK (city-)regions, faces growing challenges related to modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT), especially where these intersect with homelessness and the migration/asylum system. Individuals affected by these issues often experience overlapping vulnerabilities, including insecure immigration status, destitution, and social exclusion, which heighten their risk of exploitation (David et al., 2019; LeBaron, 2020; NCA, 2021). The response to such complex and interlinked concerns requires intelligent, coordinated partnership working across statutory agencies, voluntary organisations, the private sector, and the wider community.

The purpose of this report is to provide a detailed review of how partnerships in Greater Manchester operate in response to MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum. Commissioned by Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and conducted by researchers at The University of Manchester, the review draws on surveys, interviews, and social network analysis (SNA) to map and analyse the structures, strengths, and shortcomings of existing collaborative efforts. There are various discussions on appropriate terminology to describe those affected by MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum, such as victims, survivors, service users, clients, and people with lived experience (PLE) (e.g., Fohring, 2018; NSPCC, 2024). Depending on the context and purpose of discussion, there are good reasons to use each of these terms. In this report, we use 'victims and survivors' wherever possible, although this varies where it is necessary to adjust the terminology for specific discussion points.

The report situates its findings within a challenging national policy landscape, where legislation has increasingly limited support for vulnerable migrants and introduced greater barriers to accessing justice and safeguarding. Despite these systemic constraints, Greater Manchester's network of organisations, including GMCA, Greater Manchester Police (GMP), and a wide range of Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector partners, have demonstrated a commitment to innovation and cross-sector collaboration. The central aim of this review was to capture that commitment, critically examine areas for development, and propose recommendations that can enhance collective responses to MSHT and associated vulnerabilities. As part of the review, a Lived Experience Consultant (LEC) was commissioned to ensure that the process remained grounded in issues relevant to survivors' experiences.

The report is structured by first providing some brief contextual background on the topic of MSHT in relation to Greater Manchester. Second, it outlines the methods used to inform the findings and recommendations. Third, there is a discussion of existing MSHT data in Greater Manchester, the SNA in relation to key MSHT partnerships, as well as key findings based on interview data. Finally, there is a series of recommendations and conclusions based on these discussion points.

2. The Context of MSHT in Greater Manchester and the UK

This section contains an overview of the regional and national context surrounding MSHT, with a focus on structures, partnerships, and responses across Greater Manchester. It outlines the roles of local authorities, statutory agencies, and the VCFSE sector, as well as the strategic approaches adopted by GMCA and Programme Challenger, which is Greater Manchester's partnership response to serious and organised crime, including MSHT. Broader national trends and legislative developments are also considered to situate local responses within the wider UK framework.

(a) Greater Manchester organisations and structures

Greater Manchester is a metropolitan county in the North-West of England and is made up of ten local authorities or boroughs: Manchester, Salford, Trafford, Stockport, Tameside, Oldham, Rochdale, Bury, Bolton, and Wigan. Each borough has its own local council who are responsible for delivering local services, including housing, social care, and community support. These councils work both independently and collaboratively, especially on issues that crosscut local boundaries, such as homelessness, safeguarding, and support for asylum seekers. Despite economic regeneration in parts of Greater Manchester, significant inequality remains, and many boroughs face challenges around poverty, housing insecurity, and social exclusion.

GMP operates across all ten boroughs and is a key partner in responding to modern slavery, trafficking, and exploitation. GMP works with local authorities, immigration services, and charities to identify and support victims, as well as to disrupt criminal networks. Alongside formal agencies, the VCFSE sector plays a critical role in reaching vulnerable communities, by offering frontline support for those experiencing homelessness, seeking asylum, or at risk of exploitation.

These organisations, especially within the VCFSE sector, may fill service gaps that statutory services cannot or do not cover, by providing safe spaces, casework, legal advice, and advocacy, including for those with insecure immigration status or little/no recourse to public funds. In some cases, VCFSE organisations may have the possibility to conduct more considered and less 'reactionary' work where time and space is needed to build trust among specialists. Businesses in Greater Manchester are also recognised as potential partners in tackling MSHT, especially through ethical supply chains, due diligence practices, and employer engagement in survivor support and safe employment pathways (Causeway, 2025; GMP, 2024).

GMCA is a strategic body that brings together the ten boroughs under a shared governance framework and is led by a directly elected Mayor. GMCA sets priorities on issues such as housing, transport, policing, gender-based violence, violence reduction, and economic development, and is a significant actor in city-region-wide responses to complex challenges such as MSHT through the Deputy Mayor for Safer and Stronger Communities.

In recent years, GMCA has taken an integrated approach to addressing homelessness through projects like the 'A Bed Every Night' scheme (GMCA, 2025a) and has convened multi-stakeholder efforts to support migrants and respond to MSHT. While powers over immigration reside with the UK government, GMCA advocates for devolved approaches that can be more locally responsive to the needs of vulnerable populations in the city-region.

(b) Programme Challenger: Greater Manchester's response to serious and organised crime

Programme Challenger is Greater Manchester's strategic partnership approach to addressing serious and organised crime. Established in 2012, it includes the Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Unit (MSOICU), which began operations in 2015. Challenger operates within the governance structures of both GMP and GMCA, and reports through operational and tactical meetings into the Challenger Executive Board.

Since its formation, the MSOICU has focused on a victim-centred, capacity-building model. It supports GMP and partner agencies in identifying and responding to MSHT across Greater Manchester. A rolling programme of training and continued professional development has led to the establishment of a network of approximately 120 Victim Liaison Officers (VLOs) and 50 Tactical Advisors across the force (Programme Challenger, 2025).

In 2021, an investigative team was created, which has led to a shift from coordination functions to investigative functions within MSOICU. The Unit, consisting of Police Constables, Detective Constables, and Investigative Support Officers (ISOs), who assist district officers with complex MSHT investigations and also take on more complex investigations in their entirety. A dedicated Training Coordinator role was also introduced to support partnership-wide skills development, but this role, as of July 2025, is in the process of being disestablished.

(c) National context and trends of MSHT

Modern slavery is a global issue that affects millions across the world, including tens of thousands of people in the UK. The UK Government launched its first Modern Slavery Strategy in 2014 and introduced the Modern Slavery Act in 2015. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK's framework for identifying and supporting potential victims of MSHT and has been in operation since 2009, with victim care services linked to this since 2011. It enables designated organisations to refer individuals for assessment and access to specialist care (O'Brien et al., 2022).

The NRM is a distinctive feature of the UK's MSHT response and is set apart from broader victim support frameworks. Unlike in other parts of Europe, where the NRM functions primarily as a statistical/counting tool, in the UK it serves as both a gateway to specialist victim care and a formal mechanism for identifying victims. This dual role means that the NRM can be perceived (at least in part) as a tool to determine victim

status, which can be problematic (FLEX, 2024), especially as such a model does not exist for victims of other crimes. Its unique function within the UK system raises critical questions about access to support and the implications of official recognition.

Further legislative developments, including the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (NABA) and the Illegal Migration Act 2023 (IMA), have since brought significant changes to the legal landscape. These changes have altered evidential thresholds within the NRM and have limited victim access to care and support, especially for those who have experienced MSHT outside the UK, and/or are submitted by First Responders without full accounts and information being submitted. Referrals to the NRM nationally have increased significantly over the last decade. In 2024, 19,125 potential victims were submitted to the NRM, with an additional 5,598 referrals made via the Duty to Notify (DTN) process (Home Office, 2023a).

At the time of writing, the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which is currently progressing through the UK Parliament, is intended to improve border security and repeal parts of the IMA. Though it is intended to bring in new protections to redress exploitation in underregulated labour markets and is conversant of the risks of amplifying institutional racism in immigration policy, the proposed legislation currently leaves those elements of NABA and IMA in place. These elements can deter non-UK victims from reporting MSHT to authorities and risks disqualifying victims of MSHT from protections (The Law Society, 2025). More broadly, victims – including UK nationals – may be discouraged from reporting their experiences due to factors such as distrust of the police and, in the case of care leavers, distrust of social services, as well as concerns linked to having a criminal record.

(d) Overlaps between MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum

While at first glance, challenges related to MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum may appear to be distinct (and of course can be), there are potential connections that are not always joined up in terms of practice, policy, and research. This risks an overly fragmented and disconnected approach towards providing support and developing interventions. More specifically:

Shared vulnerabilities:

- Individuals who experience homelessness, especially those with no or little recourse to public funds, are disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, and criminal exploitation (e.g., county lines, cannabis farming, care leavers, ex-prisoners, and young people excluded from education).

- Asylum seekers and refugees may become homeless and destitute, which contributes to the necessary conditions that are needed for offenders to exploit. This can become worse when asylum claims are refused or when temporary legal status is awarded and then revoked.

- Survivors of MSHT, upon exiting the NRM, may experience destitution and homelessness due to a lack of longer-term support.

Intersectional challenges:

- Many individuals do not fit neatly into one single category. For example, someone might be a trafficked person, an undocumented migrant, and be experiencing homelessness, as well as / or being substance-dependent, but siloed or disconnected service responses may treat these issues in isolation.

- Language barriers, a lack of immigration status, and fear of authorities may limit individuals from accessing support, thereby reinforcing cycles of exploitation and homelessness, which can include a deterioration of mental and physical health, the selling of sex, or the buying, consumption, and selling of drugs.

(e) Partnership and innovation

In 2020, GMCA and Challenger commissioned Trilateral Research, in partnership with The University of Manchester, to improve understanding of MSHT across the city-region. This work led to the development of Project Honeycomb, which was a data-sharing and analysis initiative intended to enhance multi-stakeholder collaboration.

The MSCU maintains strong partnerships with the voluntary and community sector. Organisations such as Stop the Traffik and Justice and Care have been instrumental in delivering community engagement and victim support services. In 2016, Stop the Traffik launched the Greater Manchester Anti-Slavery NGO Forum. In 2023, coordination of the Forum was transferred to Causeway Charitable Services following a competitive process.

(f) Understanding 'partnerships' in the context of MSHT

At a basic level, partnership work generally refers to collaborative efforts between two or more organisations, who have some form of agreement to work together and pursue a joint aim (Cook, 2015: 4). Partnerships can therefore include government agencies, police, local authorities, NGOs, the private sector, and international bodies, including in the context of MSHT. The idea is that no single organisation can address the multifaceted nature of MSHT by themselves.

The term 'partnership' can include:

- Formal structures, such as statutory services, memorandums of understanding, and other specific agreements within and between organisations; as well as Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASHs); the Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime (MSOIC) Programme; or Regional Anti-Slavery Partnerships (RASPs).

- Informal networks, including information sharing, awareness raising, and joint training initiatives.

- Cross-sector and multi-level arrangements that involve some combination of local, regional, national, and international coordination.

For example, the Greater Manchester Anti-Trafficking and Slavery NGO Forum distinguishes between 'NGO members', which includes NGOs and charitable services in the region who support victims/survivors of MSHT or who work within the MSHT sector; and 'NGO Partners', who are not part of an NGO but may attend the Forum and provide information that is relevant to it.

As per the above, and importantly for this review, the terms 'partners' and 'partnerships' contain various meanings for different practitioners, groups, and organisations. During this review, some participants used terms such as 'networking', 'joint working', 'integration', 'collaboration', 'cooperation', and 'statutory services', rather than 'partnerships' – even if the type of work broadly included some form of partnership work.

To reflect this diversity, the authors adopt an inclusive approach and use 'partnerships' as a catch-all approach to refer to various terms used in line with the above issues. The authors do not consider the varying use of such terminology to have had a substantial (certainly not negative) effect on the findings, discussion points, or recommendations contained in this report. However, we recognise that, in the longer term, moving towards more consistent terminology to distinguish between the variety of partnership work may be useful in some settings.

3. Methods

The findings of this review were informed by professionals across the public, private, and VCFSE sectors who were actively working across at least one of the spaces connected to MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum. Participants were usually based within Greater Manchester but occasionally worked at the national level as well/instead. The data collection methods included a survey, individual and small group interviews, as well as a breakdown of existing MSHT data. These methods are discussed in greater detail below.

As with any review, evaluation, or other research, there are limitations with the data collected. In this case, not every stakeholder or partner in Greater Manchester with connections to the MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum spaces are included. Therefore, the review findings are intended to be illustrative and suggestive, rather than statistically representative of all MSHT partnership work that is ongoing across the city-region. Even so, the authors are confident that the findings and subsequent recommendations are firmly grounded based on recurring and crosscutting themes that participants highlighted during the review.

(a) Lived Experience Consultant (LEC)

The inclusion of a LEC, Jane Lasonder, was a critical component of this review, and significantly strengthened every stage of it. From the initial framing of its objectives to the development of its methods, the analysis of preliminary findings, and the drafting of this final report, Jane's prominent role in the review ensured that the work remained anchored in real-life perspectives and was genuinely responsive to the needs of those it is intended to benefit.

Involving LECs in projects is not merely good practice but is crucial for achieving impactful and ethical outcomes. Their invaluable first-hand insights provide a depth of understanding that traditional research and professional expertise alone cannot replicate. For this review, this meant gaining a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the complex challenges faced by victims and survivors of MSHT, as well as individuals affected by homelessness and migration/asylum challenges.

Jane was engaged through Align Ltd, an ethical consultancy specialising in the meaningful inclusion of Lived Experience in organisations' strategic and practical solutions for modern slavery, human trafficking, and labour exploitation. Align Ltd supported us in identifying the most suitable LEC for this work, providing ongoing welfare and safeguarding support for Jane, as well as ethical inclusion guidance to the team from the outset of the project. The authors and commissioners of this report found LEC involvement highly useful in shaping the overall direction and content of the work completed. We strongly support, where feasible, embedding a key role for LECs in other related projects.

(b) Existing MSHT data within Greater Manchester

The review contains discussion of existing MSHT data from the GMP Modern Slavery Tracker (via the system I-Base) that covers all identified enquiries (including referrals, police recorded incidents, UKVI, and intelligence) recorded from 2020 until March 2025, as well as all identified modern slavery victims (via the NRM/DtN process). These data are referred to during the remainder of the review where helpful to do so.

(c) Survey

A survey was distributed to professionals via networks supported at the Greater Manchester level, that also had reach into more localised networks, such as the Greater Manchester Anti-Trafficking Forum and the Greater Manchester Migration and Asylum network. This was primarily intended to map out existing collaborations and partnerships across various organisations operating within (and sometimes beyond) Greater Manchester – in other words, to get a sense of who was 'connected' to who across the spaces of MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum.

Key questions to respondents included perceptions of who their key collaborators/partners were, as well as any views on strengths and limitations of existing partnership work across Greater Manchester. Participants also had the opportunity to insert text responses to their perceptions of MSHT partnership work across the region, both in terms of strengths and areas for improvement. Many of the wider issues that these responses allude to are addressed in more detail during the rest of this report.

In total, there were 35 usable responses to the survey from various organisations operating mostly across Greater Manchester, whereby most respondents were based in the public and VCFSE sectors. These responses provided a 'birds eye view' of perceived strengths and limitations of MSHT partnership work, helped to inform discussion points during some interviews, and provided the dataset utilised by the SNA set out below.

(d) Individual and small-group interviews

The main purpose of the interviews was to examine awareness, perceived strengths, limitations of, and recommendations for existing and potential MSHT partnership work across Greater Manchester. To take part in an interview, it was not a precondition for participants to complete (or have already completed) the survey, or vice versa.

A total of 33 interviews were conducted: most (n=30) of these were one-to-one interviews, along with a small number (n=3) of group interviews, meaning that there were 38 individuals who contributed to interviews. Representatives from local government (including GMCA and local authorities), law enforcement (including GMP and other law enforcement agencies), the VCFSE sector, as well as healthcare, were included. A visual breakdown of participant groups is provided in Figure 1 below. Most interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, whereby all transcripts were

anonymised before being subject to thematic analysis, which is a common analytical approach used to draw out important and/or recurring issues from discussions.

Interview participants were asked about their overall understanding and impressions of MSHT/homelessness/migration and asylum partnership work, both in terms of their own organisations as well as the wider context in Greater Manchester – and where appropriate, the national/international levels. This process included opportunities for participants to highlight existing strengths, areas of development and challenges, as well as potential suggestions or alternatives to existing approaches to partnership work.

Participant Group	Number of Interviews Conducted
Local Government	8
Law Enforcement	6
NGOs and Charities	17
Healthcare	2

Figure 1: Summary of interviews conducted.

(e) Social Network Analysis (SNA) of collaborations and partnerships

SNA was carried out to help visualise aspects of MSHT partnership work across Greater Manchester. This is a practical approach that can be used to examine the structure of relationships among social entities, such as individuals, groups, organisations, or even entire societies (Scott, 2017). It focuses on mapping the connections between these entities, which are typically represented as nodes in a graph. By analysing patterns in these networks, SNA can uncover insights such as influence and key players within a network.

One of SNA's key potential strengths is its ability to visualise less obvious patterns, relationships, and dynamics within groups and communities. It is especially useful when identifying central actors, detecting clusters or subgroups, and helping to understand how the position of an entity within a network influences others, thereby affecting behaviour or outcomes. For the purposes of this report, the nodes used are organisations and other groups that have organisational elements (see especially Figures 18, 19, 22).

4. Overview of MSHT Data in Greater Manchester

This section contains an overview of MSHT data in Greater Manchester, including trends in referrals, victim demographics, exploitation types, and geographical locations. It is based on data held by GMP, but this includes a range of sources, including reports into GMP from e.g., the Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline and partners, as well as intelligence logs, crimes, and Home Office information from NRM and DtN referrals.

While the number of NRMs and DtNs has gradually increased, this may reflect improvements in identification rather than the full scale of exploitation, which is likely to be significantly underreported. At the same time, the proportion of exploitation identified within Greater Manchester has decreased, with a growing share of cases in 2024-25 linked to out-of-force exploitation. Within the city-region, the number of potential victims has declined slightly and has been more sporadic over the past four years. Key themes across the data include the gendered nature of referrals, the prominence of criminal and labour exploitation, and the role of frontline professionals and immigration authorities in identifying victims.

As has been widely discussed elsewhere in the MSHT field (e.g., Green and Heys, 2024; UK Parliament, 2023), and in relation to many forms of crime, the data available for MSHT are likely to show only a fraction of actual cases, which means that there is a significant 'dark figure' of unknown and unreported cases. For clarity, the data for 2025 are partial and cover the period up to and including March 2025 only. In addition, data from January to March 2020 were excluded because the analysis was based on fiscal year.

Most figures in this section include 'out of force' (OOF) data unless otherwise specified. OOF data refer to MSHT cases where offences were committed outside Greater Manchester (and most often outside the UK). Including OOF data mean that there is a more complete picture of all MSHT victims in Greater Manchester, rather than just focusing on offences that were committed in Greater Manchester.

This decision has implications for the data presented and the wider discussion. On the one hand, stakeholders within Greater Manchester have little to no control over the prevention of MSHT beyond the city-region. On the other hand, through various support services, these stakeholders do have greater control over service delivery, and/or the re-trafficking/re-exploitation of individuals who are currently in Greater Manchester. The authors feel that the aim and spirit of this review is more geared towards supporting all MSHT victims in the region and the structural factors that may result in further exploitation, irrespective of where they were originally exploited – hence the decision to include OOF data.

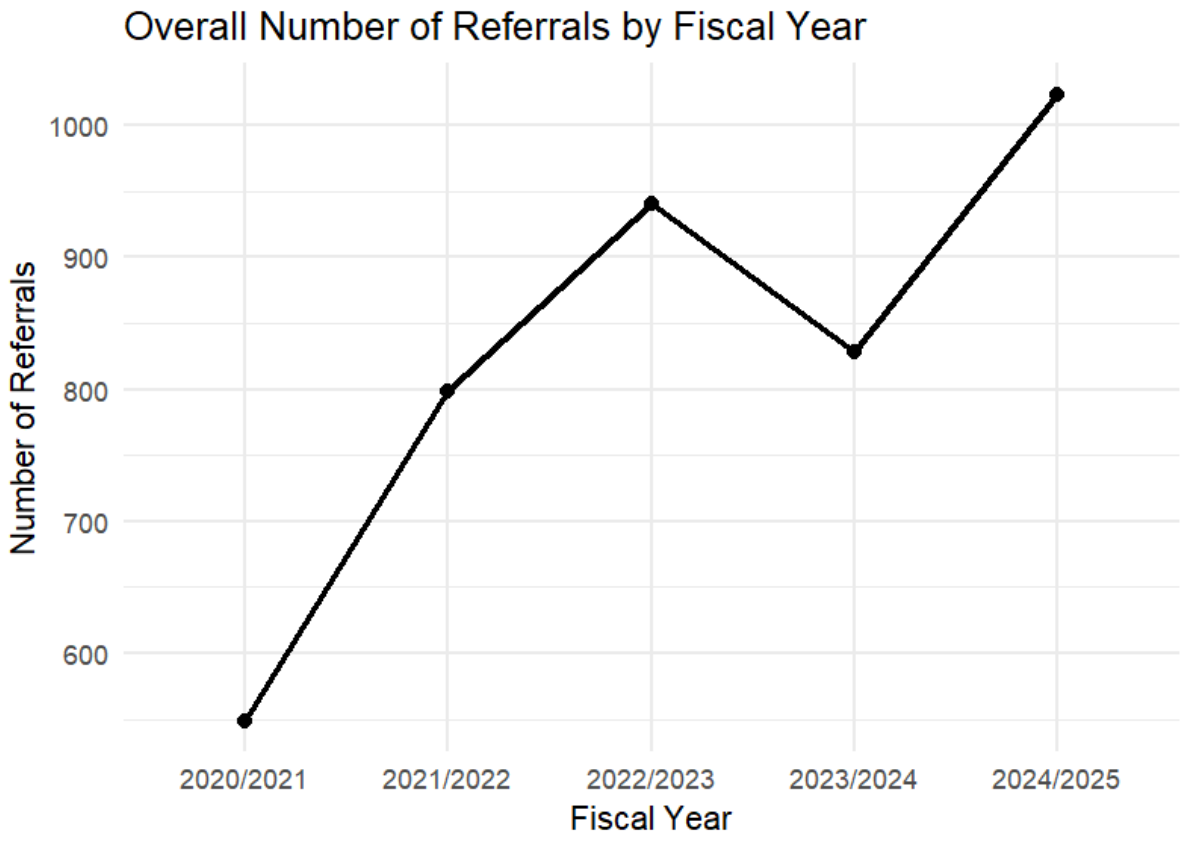

Figure 2: Overall number of NRM and DtN referrals in Greater Manchester by fiscal year

As per Figure 2, in the fiscal year from April 2024 to March 2025 the overall number of NRM and DtN referrals combined related to potential victims in Greater Manchester was 1,023, which has steadily increased in recent years from 549 in 2020-21. While not a direct comparison, this increase is broadly reflected in UK NRM figures (Home Office, 2025a), which show a year-on-year increase between 2014 and 2024. Potential reasons for these increases include:

- Increased efforts to train first responders and improve the identification of potential victims. Related to this, better detection methods and greater awareness among professionals may help to explain increases (Blanchard, 2024).
- Delays in making 'reasonable grounds' (RG) decisions. For example, in the UK context the average time to reach an RG decision in 2022 was 6 days, whereas in 2023 this had increased to 23 days (Hope for Justice, 2024a). Within Greater Manchester, there have been past examples of RG decisions taking over 30 days to process, and in some cases over 90 days. Such delays can discourage potential victims from engaging in the NRM process, which may lead to repeated referrals and increased DtN reports.

Figure 3: Overall number of referrals by gender

To break down the overall NRM data for Greater Manchester between March 2020 and March 2025, there were a total of 4,138 referrals: 3,042 were male, and 1,091 were female (Figure 3). Four victims did not identify as male or female, and one person identified as transgender. This suggests a clear gender division in terms of referrals made and arguably reflects the complexity and nuance of MSHT cases that relate to various types of exploitation (see Figure 11), as well as the sectors within which exploitation can occur. These figures also run contrary to some assertions that most victims are young women (e.g., IOM, 2025; Walk Free, 2020).

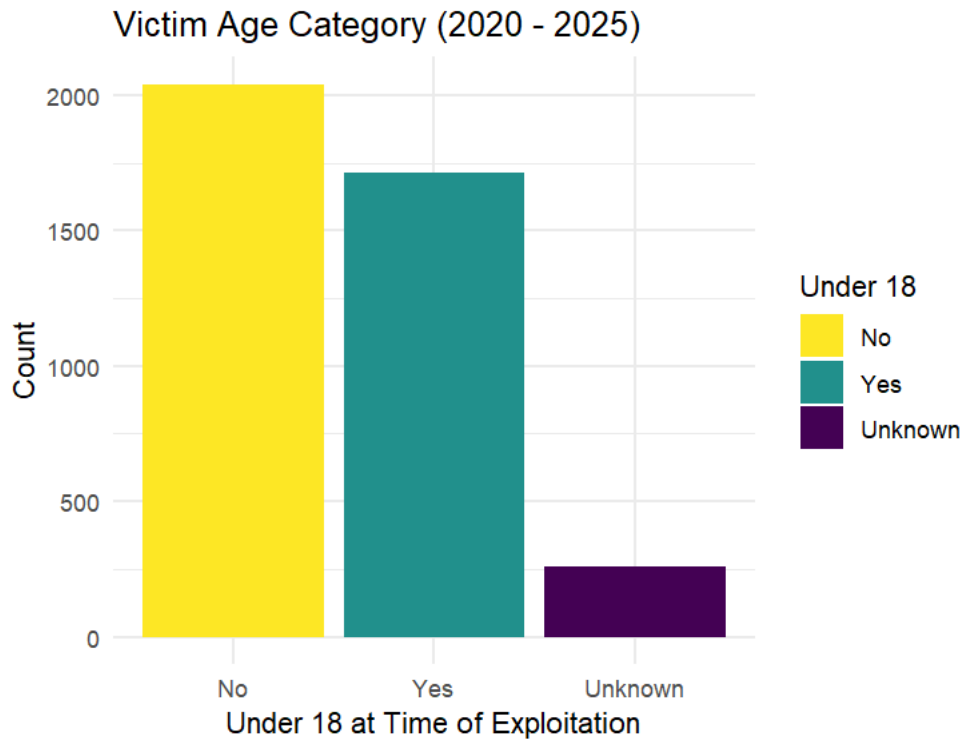

Figure 4: Under 18 at the time of exploitation (Greater Manchester NRM/DtN referrals)

Based on a breakdown of the original data that are portrayed in Figure 4, almost 43% of all referrals include those who were under 18 when the exploitation took place, which suggests a relative balance between those identified under 18 or not at the time the exploitation took place. The distinction is an important one as victim care, advocacy, and access to services emanate from different sources depending on whether an individual is an adult or a child, and both contexts need to be considered.

When considering the MSHT picture, there are key differences between support provided to adults and children. Adults typically receive support through the Salvation Army and local partners such as the Medaille Trust, Causeway and St. John of God, which can include safe accommodation (if eligible), advocacy, and signposting/referral support to services such as legal and immigration advice, and well as mental health support.

For children, local authorities have a statutory duty to provide services for children at risk, so all under 18s referred into the NRM will receive support from local children's services. This may include specialist support via organisations such as Barnardo's if appropriate referrals are made into the service. In essence, adults access services that are available through the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract enabled by the NRM, whereas children are safeguarded under the Children Act 1989/2004. For children, immigration status is not a barrier to accessing full support.

The above distinctions can have implications for support services available. For adults, support is voluntary since they consent to enter the NRM, and eligibility for support

depends on NRM decisions (i.e., reasonable grounds (RG) and conclusive grounds (CG)). Whereas for children, support is automatic once MSHT is suspected or identified, and local authorities have a statutory duty to provide safeguarding where a child is at risk of harm. In brief, children receive more guaranteed support, whereas adults may 'fall through the gaps' if they do not engage with the NRM or if they get a negative decision.

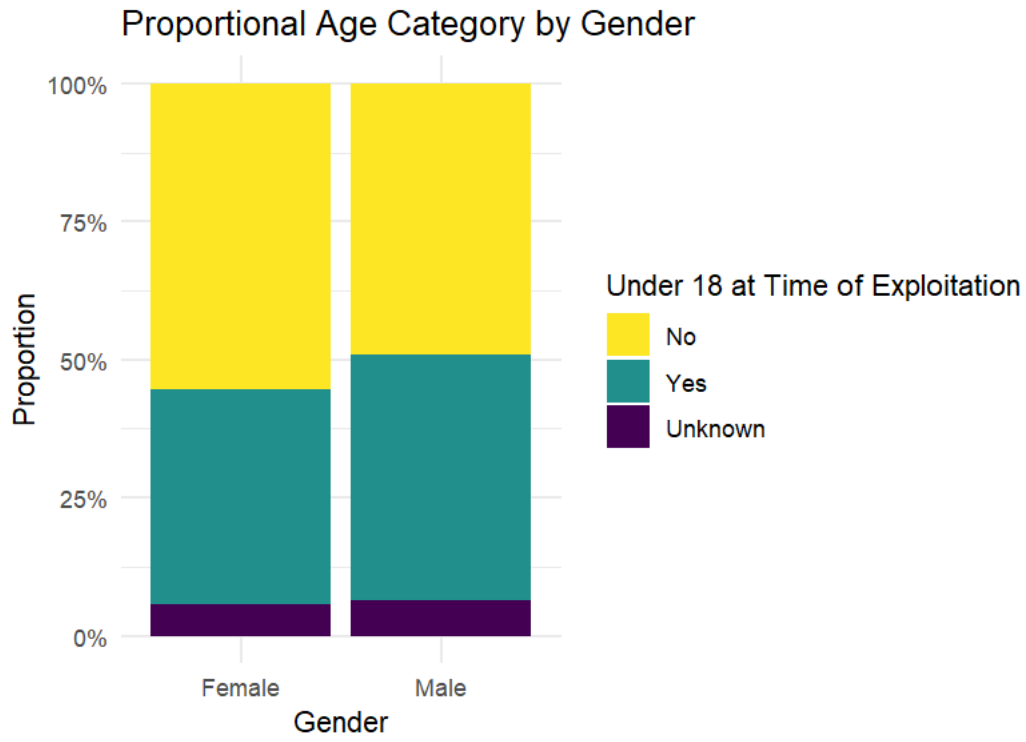

Figure 5: Proportional age category by gender (Greater Manchester NRM/DtN referrals)

To combine Figures 3 and 4, a proportional overview of referrals based on age and gender is provided (Figure 5).

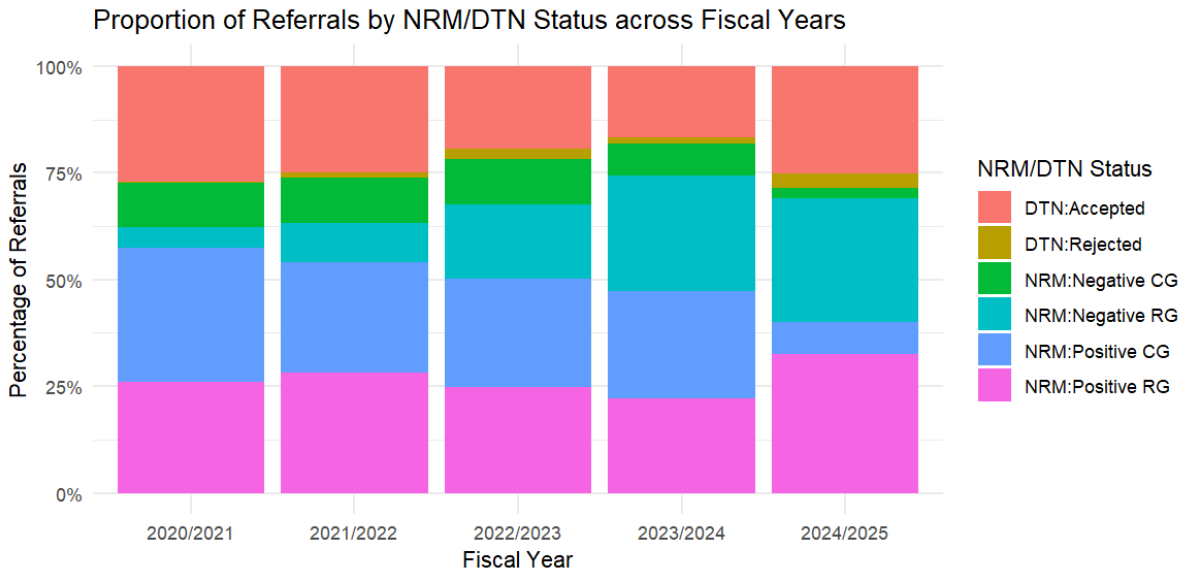

Figure 6: Referrals by NRM/DtN status across fiscal years

While at first glance the visual in Figure 6 may appear to show relatively stable trends, there are some important distinctions. Perhaps most notably, over the last 12 months (2024-25) there has been a significant reduction in the number of NRM positive CG decisions. In 2023-24, this number was 196, whereas in 2024-25, this had fallen to 68. In addition, the number of negative RG decisions increased from 209 in 2023-24 to 259 in 2024-25.

A reduction in positive NRM decisions in Greater Manchester over the past year may be linked to changes in the Home Office's decision-making criteria, which now require more objective evidence to meet the RG threshold (Home Office, 2023). This shift has disproportionately affected non-UK nationals, who experienced a lower rate of positive decisions compared to UK nationals (see Figure 9). Additionally, immigration-related fears have discouraged some victims from fully engaging with the NRM process (Sawyer et al., 2025), which can limit the quality of referrals made. Such factors may help to explain the decline in positive outcomes despite continued high referral numbers.

These figures somewhat contrast with DtN referrals, which in 2024-25 had their highest number of referrals accepted (n=224), and despite a lower acceptance rate in 2023-24 (n=129), have generally increased year on year since 2020-21.

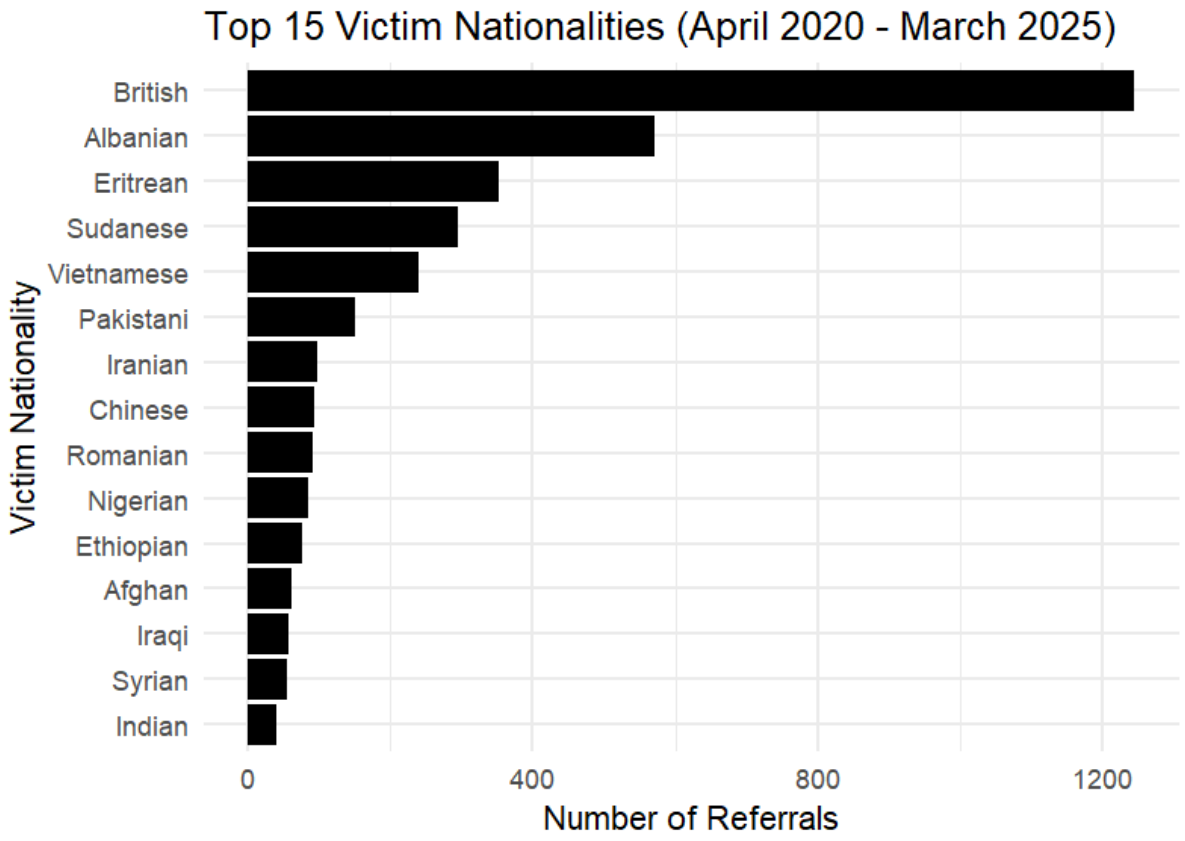

Figure 7: Top 15 victim nationalities (GM NRM/DtN referrals)

In line with UK NRM data (Home Office, 2025a), in Greater Manchester the most common nationality referred was British (Figure 7). This has been a trend for some years and continues to challenge potential myths around MSHT that 'it' only happens to non-UK nationals, and that immigration is a causal factor of MSHT, which has also been hotly contested for some time from various groups (e.g., Anti-Slavery International, 2022; Broad and Gadd, 2022; Hope for Justice, 2024b).

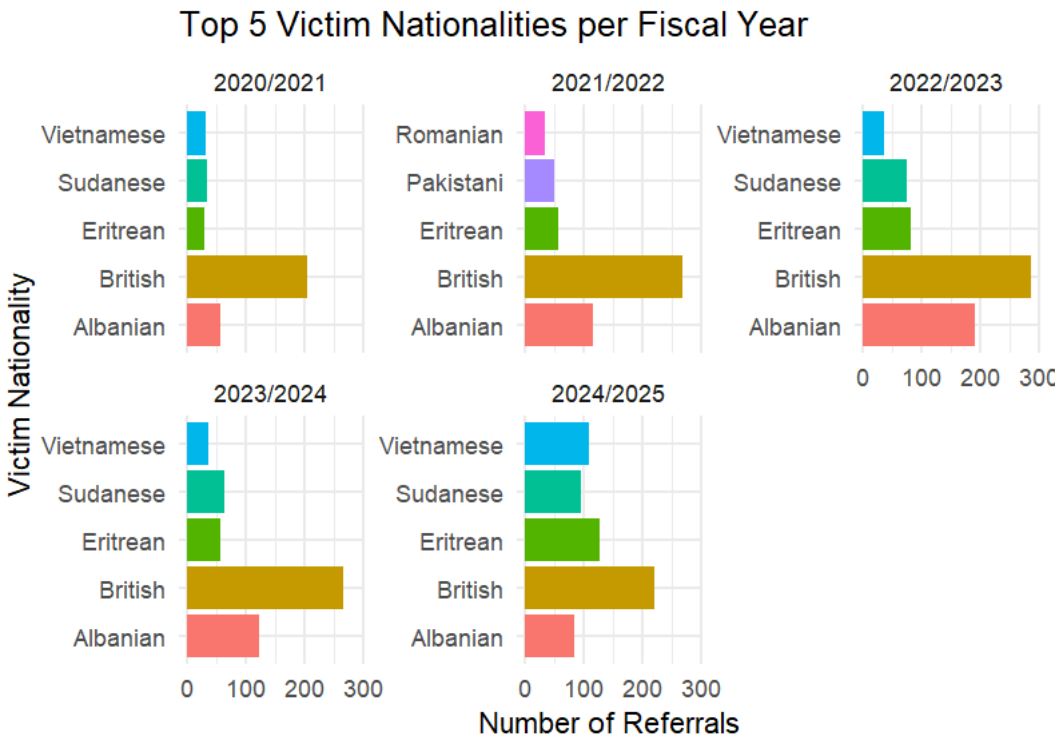

Figure 8: Top 5 victim nationalities per fiscal year

Figure 8 shows that those with British nationality are associated with higher numbers of referrals, although Albanians and Eritreans appear consistently in the top five. Vietnamese and Sudanese appear in the top 5 in four out of the last five years, indicating very limited movement in nationality trends.

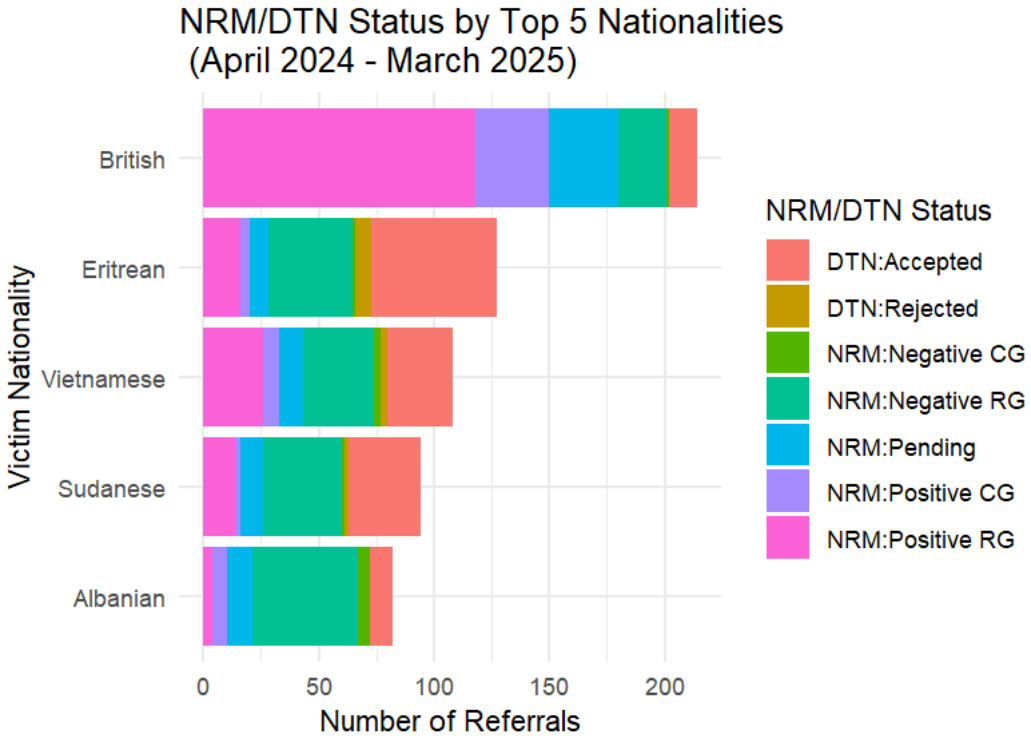

Figure 9: NRM/DtN status based on top 5 nationalities

UK nationals are more likely to receive positive RG decisions under the NRM compared to individuals from other commonly identified nationalities. In contrast, non-UK nationals are significantly more likely to receive negative RG decisions. Excluding DtN cases, negative RG decisions were in the majority for certain nationalities – for example, Albanians (62%), Eritreans (56%), and Sudanese (54%), while the equivalent rate for UK nationals was just 10%.

There are overlaps here between MSHT and migration. The differences in these data suggest that migrants may face additional hurdles in being formally recognised as potential victims of MSHT, which is likely to reflect systemic biases and the complexities of their immigration status. Importantly, there has been a significant increase in the number of UKVI referrals in 2024-25 compared to previous years, which are linked to these negative RG decisions in the data. For instance, in 2023-24 UKVI referrals were 252, whereas in 2024-25 this increased by 77% to 446.

In addition, the 'status' of being a migrant can heighten vulnerability to exploitation while simultaneously limiting access to support mechanisms under the NRM. This is especially since UK victims have access to a range of other public services that non-UK nationals do not always have, which may include welfare support and access to housing, thereby overlapping with issues of homelessness as well.

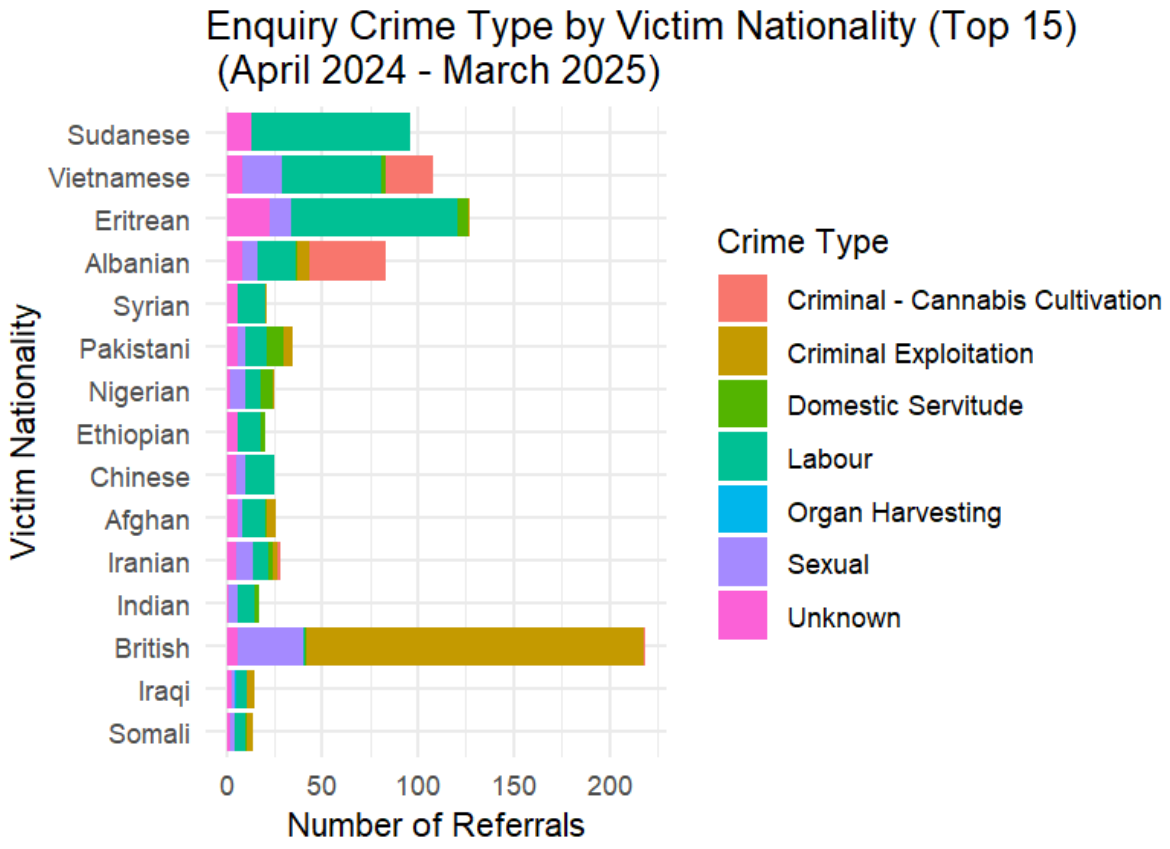

Figure 10: Type of exploitation based on nationality

Based on Figure 10, in some cases there are clear distinctions between type of exploitation and nationality. Those with British nationality are more often associated with forms of criminal exploitation, whereas Eritreans, Sudanese, and Vietnamese are more closely linked to labour exploitation – and in the case of Albanians and Vietnamese, also cannabis cultivation.

The value of breaking down nationality and type of exploitation lies in the potential to tailor support services to different groups of victims and survivors. For example, 'home grown' involvement in criminal exploitation (e.g., county lines) that relies on recruiting young British people/children outside schools or on social media apps, would likely need a different approach when compared to supporting Albanian and Vietnamese nationals who run or provide labour for cannabis farms; or Eritreans or Sudanese individuals who experience labour exploitation prior to or as part of their journey to the UK. In these latter cases, factors such as language barriers and immigration status may be more significant factors than the need to address gaps in services for young people.

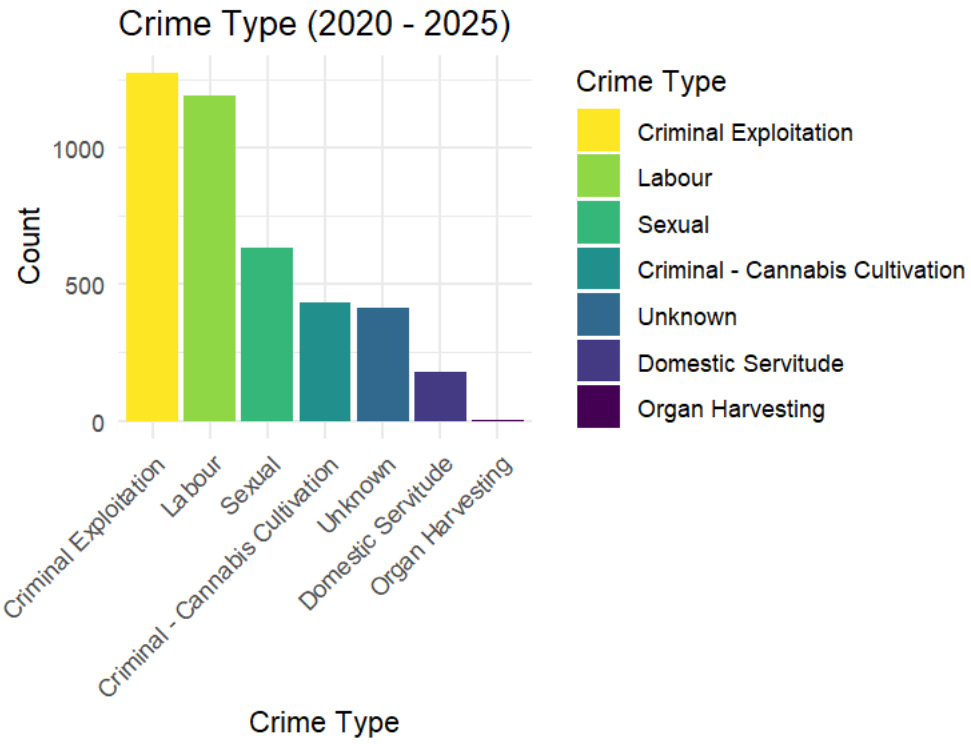

Figure 11: Type of exploitation (identified enquiries)

Based on identified queries, with OOF data included (i.e., exploitation committed within and beyond Greater Manchester/UK), labour exploitation is the most prevalent type experienced by victims and survivors who are living in Greater Manchester. With OOF data excluded (i.e., exploitation committed within Greater Manchester only), criminal exploitation is the most prevalent (Figure 11).

These figures challenge the more traditional view that MSHT, in broad terms, is largely synonymous with sexual exploitation (see also Cockbain and Bowers, 2019; Davies and Malik, 2024). Even so, sexual exploitation remains a significant element of the picture in Greater Manchester and has historically been the second most frequently identified form of exploitation in the area (excluding OOF data). For instance, in 2020-21 there were 49 recorded cases of sexual exploitation, which was second only to criminal exploitation (173 cases), while labour exploitation ranked third with 21 cases. Similar patterns are evident across the period 2021–2024.

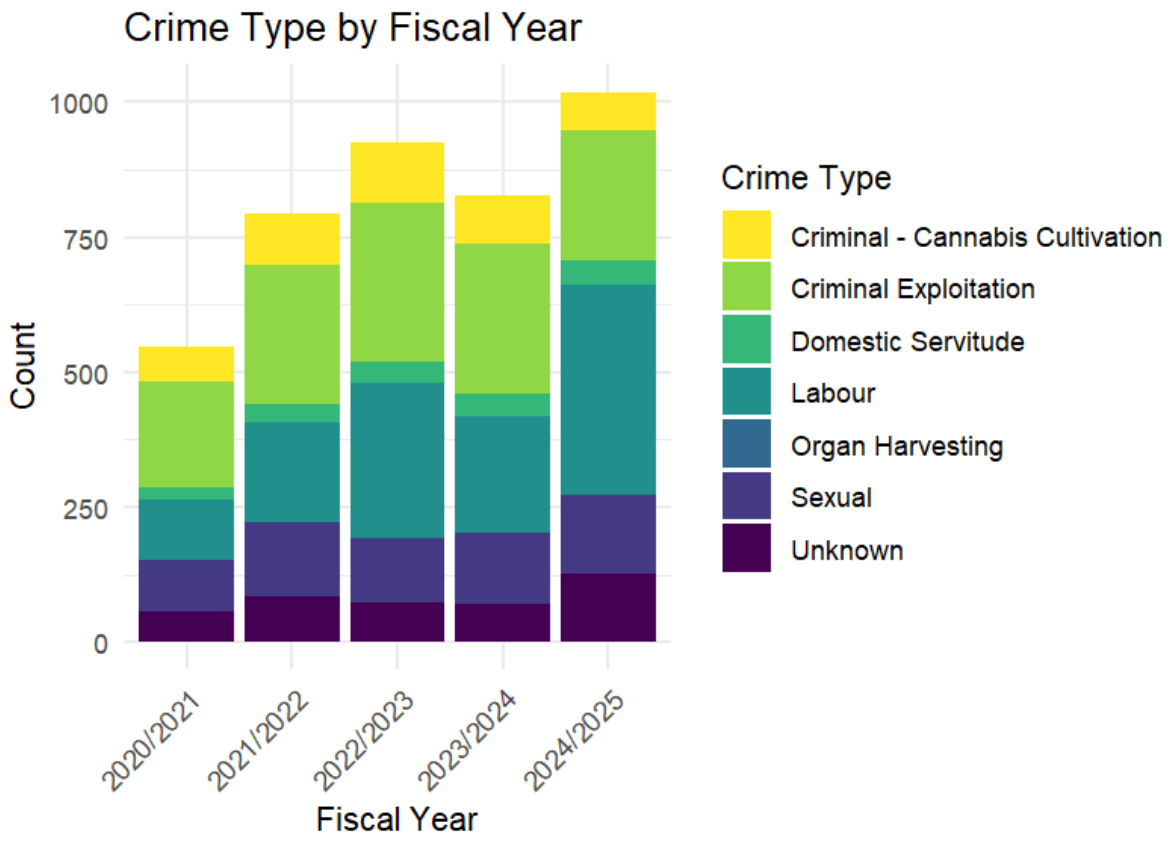

Figure 12: Trends for type of exploitation (identified enquiries)

The split between exploitation types seems to have remained broadly similar in the last five years relative to the increase in enquiries (Figure 12).

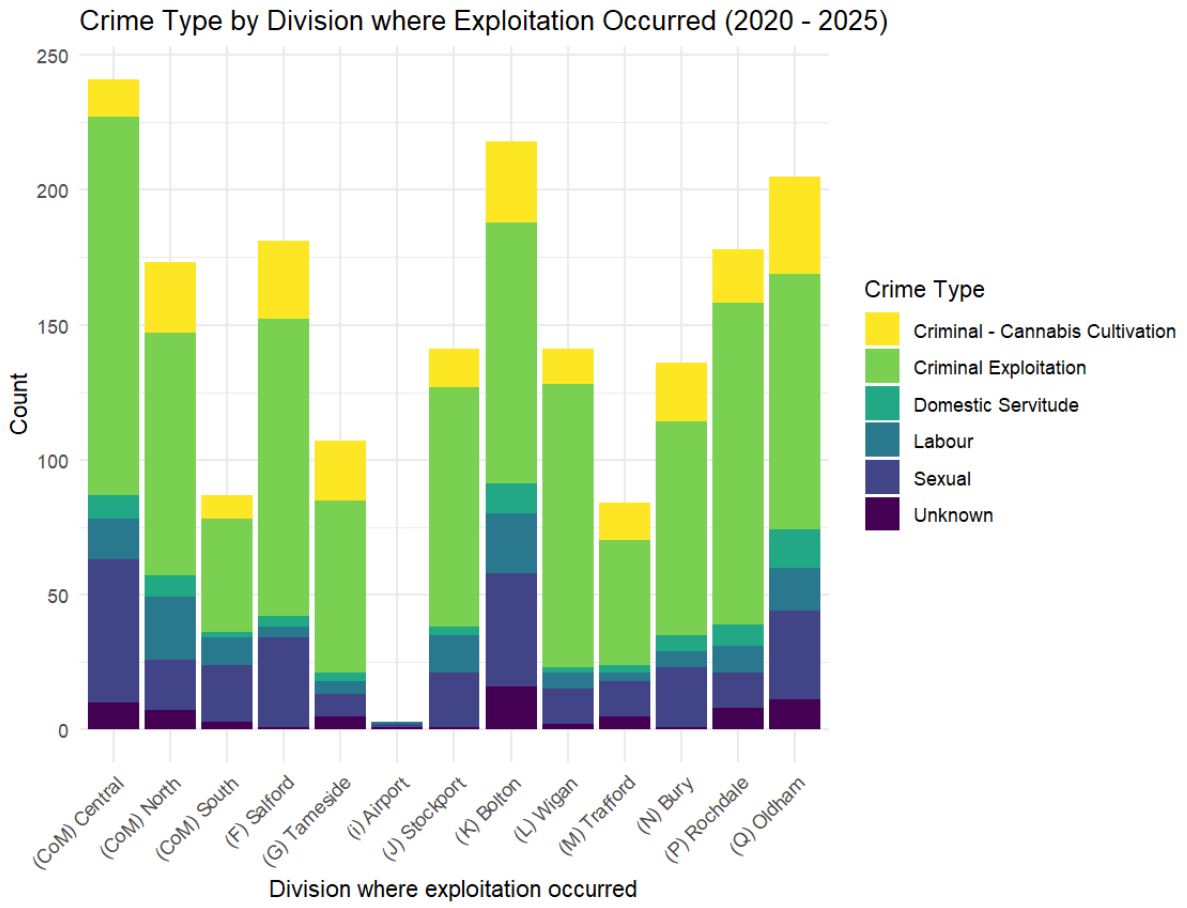

Figure 13: Type of exploitation based on division (identified enquiries)

When linking the types of exploitation to the different local areas of Greater Manchester, criminal exploitation is by far the most prominent across all areas, with other exploitation types broadly similar. When looking at all exploitation, the most prominent area was Central Manchester (CoM), closely followed by Bolton, and then Oldham (Figure 13). For the visual above, enquiries labelled as 'unknown' or 'out of force' have been excluded since these cases significantly outweighed the above local areas (Figure 14) - although labour exploitation seems to be more commonly represented across these two labels, which is why it seems less prominent in Figure 13.

According to Greater Manchester's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy 2022-2025 (Programme Challenger, 2022), there are 55 active organised crime groups that have impacts in the City of Manchester, and this represents 31% of such groups in Greater Manchester. Oldham had the second highest number of such groups impacting the area. While MSHT cannot solely be explained by the presence of organised crime groups, this together with other factors such as socio-economic deprivation and vulnerability may make some residents of these areas more susceptible to exploitation.

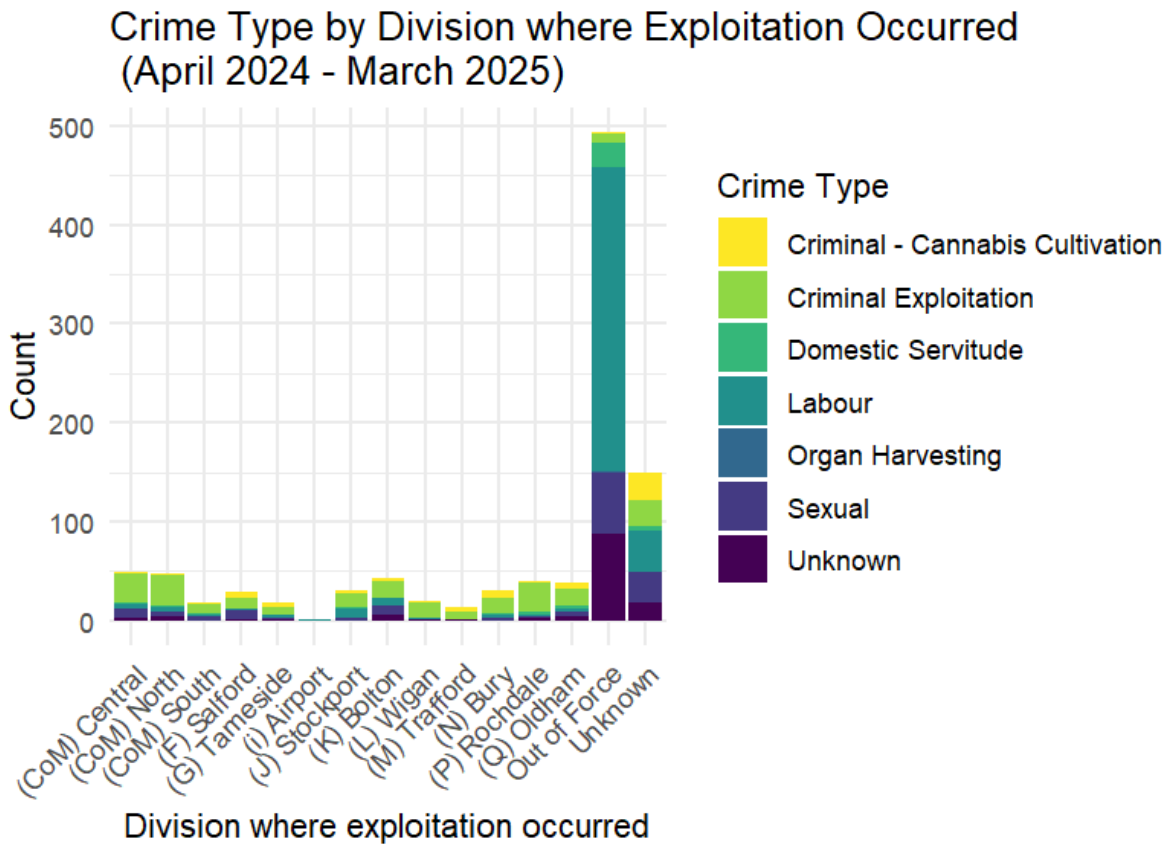

Figure 14: Crime type by division where exploitation occurred

As a point of contrast to Figure 13, Figure 14 shows the difference between 'in force' and 'out of force' data. Therefore, criminal exploitation appears to be a significant challenge as offences committed within Greater Manchester, whereas labour exploitation is more likely to be linked to victims and survivors where they were exploited 'out of force' – in other words, beyond Greater Manchester or the UK.

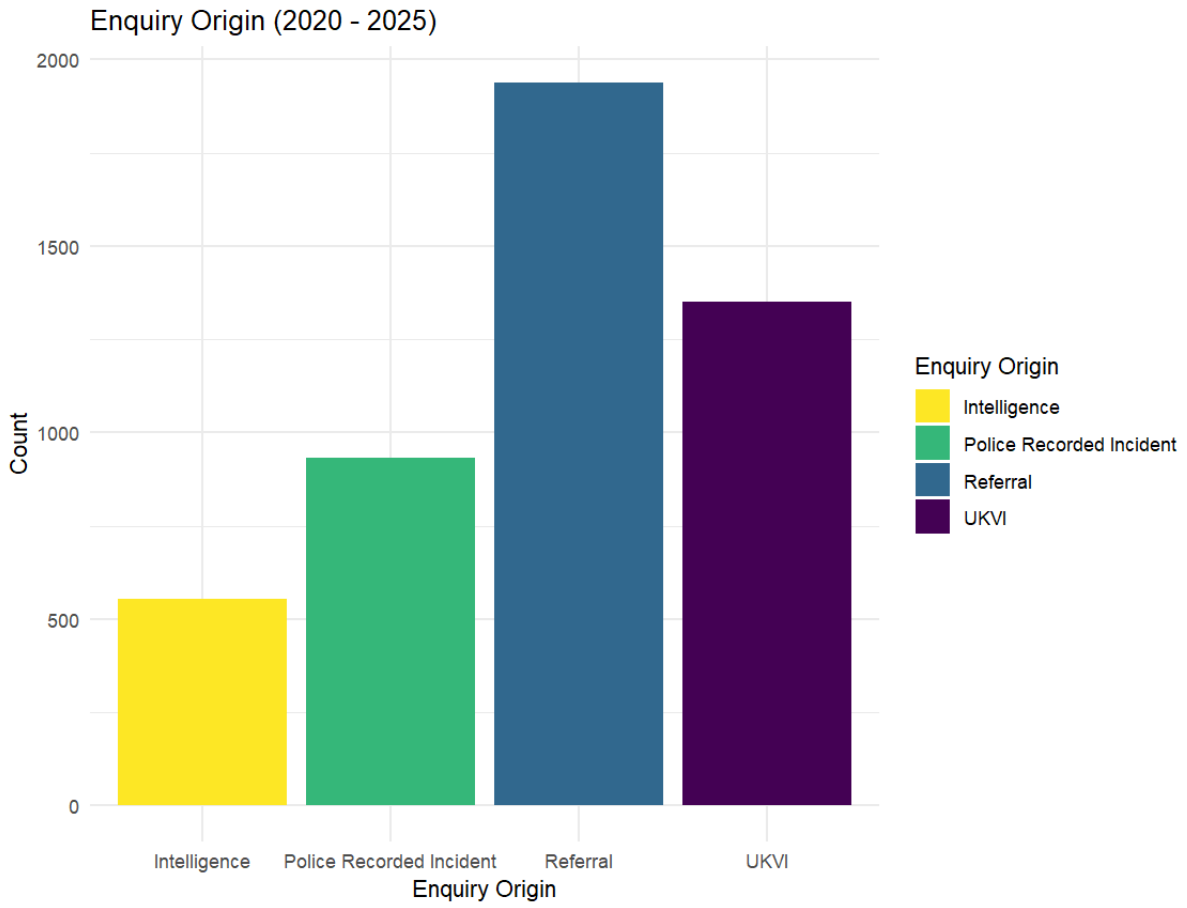

Figure 15: Enquiry origin (identified enquiries)

Of all identified enquiries[2], referrals and UKVI-related work are the most common points of origin in relation to MSHT (Figure 15). This may indicate that frontline professionals and self-reporting victims are playing a significant role in helping to bring these cases to light. UKVI, despite not being well represented in MSHT partnerships across Greater Manchester, has contributed 1,387 cases between 2020-25, which suggests a substantial role in identifying potential victims, especially those who do not have a secure immigration status.

As will be discussed further in section 9(g), there are related concerns with poor quality NRM referrals, as well as high evidentiary thresholds that can end up restricting or barring support to potential MSHT victims. In turn, these individuals may have little choice but to rely on alternative support structures that are not necessarily available through MSVCC (Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract) services, such as general migration/asylum support.

[2] An enquiry refers to any crime, incident, intelligence log, or referral in relation to potential modern slavery. An enquiry can be made up from just one intelligence log to a number of linked intelligence logs, crimes, etc. Each enquiry will relate to one specific modern slavery topic (this could be a place, crime type, offender, etc).

These details are broken down further in relation to type of exploitation below (Figure 16).

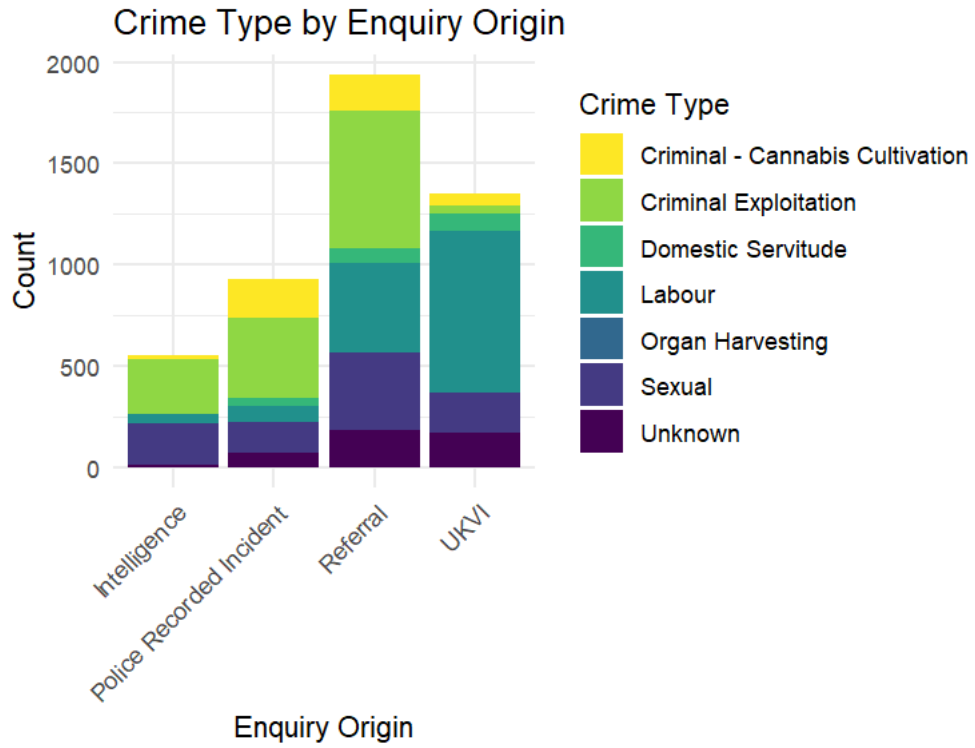

Figure 16: Type of exploitation based on enquiry origin (2020-2025)

Perhaps the most prominent points to highlight in relation to Figure 16 include:

- Criminal exploitation, labour exploitation, and sexual exploitation are more likely to be associated with referrals, which might suggest that professionals working across Greater Manchester encounter these issues on a regular basis, have a reasonably good understanding of how to identify relevant signs of exploitation, and know how to make a referral.
- Where there are identified gaps in training and awareness across the MSHT sector in Greater Manchester, the referral process seems to be the area that can have the greatest impact in relation to victim and survivor support.

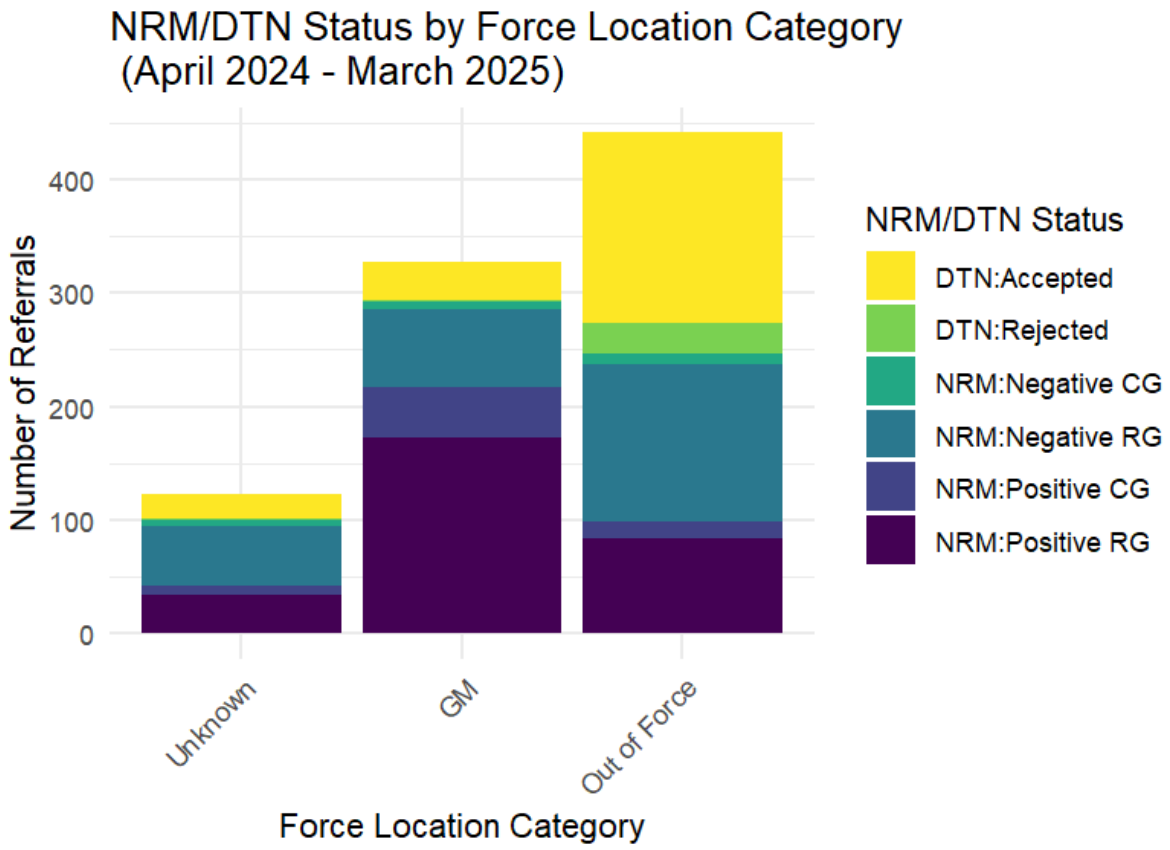

Figure 17: NRM/DtN status based on force location

To build on some of the above commentary, it is apparent that during 2024-25, OOF victims were more likely to receive an NRM negative RG decision compared to those identified in Greater Manchester (Figure 17). This in turn affects the type of support that victims and survivors are entitled to and may have immediate and longer-term implications for their prospects of support with housing and accommodation.

Overall, in Greater Manchester, there has been a significant rise in MSHT referrals that include individuals exploited OOF – those exploited outside the region or UK – who now reside within it. In 2024-25, OOF cases made up a large proportion of all referrals but accounted for largely negative RG decisions under the NRM. This means that while the overall pool of potential victims is increasing, especially from outside the city-region, a growing proportion are being denied formal victim status and associated support because of negative NRM decisions. As a result, more individuals are relying on a limited pool of services, predominantly through the asylum process, which places strain on already stretched frontline systems.

5. Mapping Out Organisations and MSHT Partnerships

Using Social Network Analysis (SNA), the purpose of this section is to map out and visualise some of the key MSHT partnerships that are operating across Greater Manchester. In the survey, participants were asked to identify who they perceived as their 'most important partners' with regards to their work on MSHT, homelessness, and/or migration/asylum. A selection of organisations was provided, and participants also had a free-text option to add in additional organisations that they have partnerships with. The survey data were also complemented by a similar question/discussion point on key partners during the interviews.

As with any such mapping exercise, the data presented here are partial and not necessarily fully reflective or inclusive of all collaborative efforts in relation to MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum across Greater Manchester. Partnerships also evolve over time; whereby new partners are incorporated into existing structures and service delivery; and existing partners may take on a greater or more limited role at different points. Even so, such mapping exercises provide a useful 'snapshot' to indicate wider patterns and key organisations/groups that are involved in the activities/workloads under consideration.

This section contains the overall visual of the sociogram (Figure 18), which is then broken down and discussed in relation to its possible meanings.

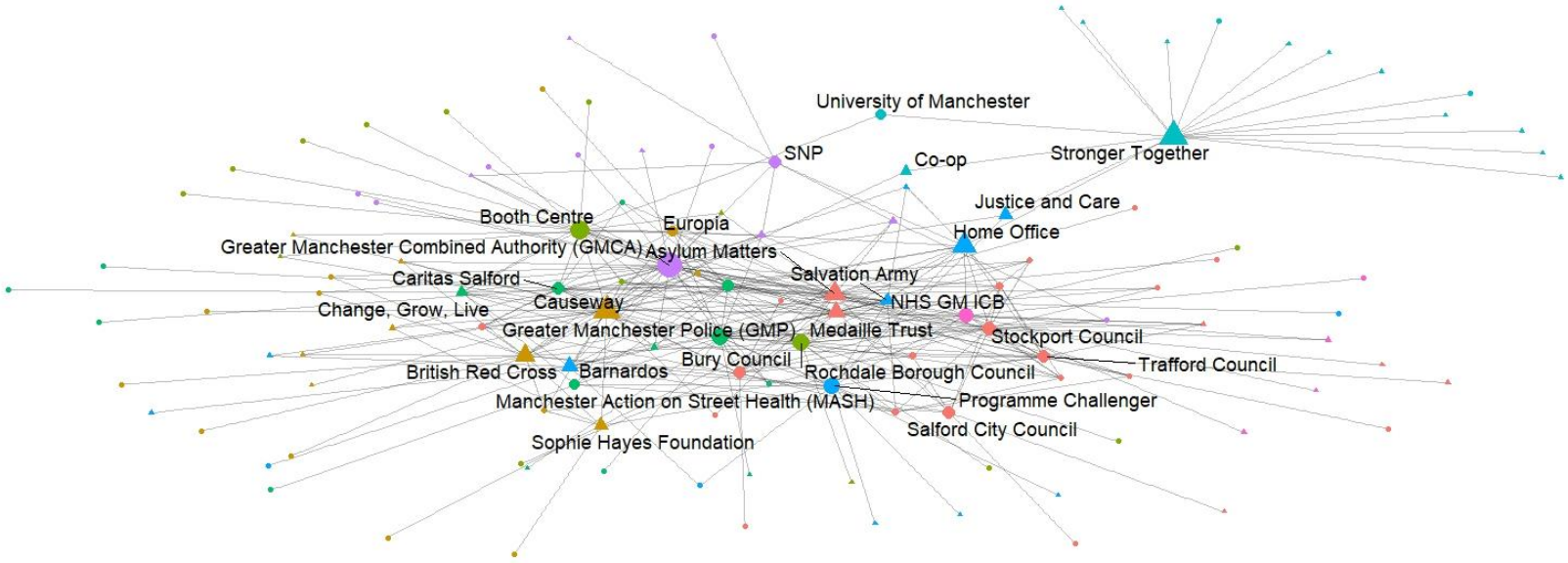

Figure 18: Visualisation (sociogram) of MSHT Partnerships in Greater Manchester.

Key:

Δ = primary focus on MSHT.

◦ = primary focus not on MSHT.

Colours = refer to potential network 'clusters' (see Figure 22).

Based on Figure 18, there are several points to draw out:

Nodes: in total, there are 124 organisations (nodes) named in the survey and across interviews.

Density: this means the proportion of possible connections in a network that are actually present. It provides an indication of how interconnected the organisations (nodes) are. In this case, 4.1% of all possible connections are present. Although this number appears to be low in absolute terms, it is actually a robust figure given the large number of organisations in the network. While there is scope for increasing connectivity between organisations, the number of connections as it stands is sufficient to connect all the organisations together.

Centralisation: refers to the extent to which a network's structure is organised around its most central organisations (nodes). It is intended to measure how (un)evenly centrality (e.g., influence, connectivity) is distributed across all organisations in a network. The network reaches 26.8% of its maximum possible centralisation, so there are some highly central organisations that stand out (see also Figure 19).

Some organisations are more influential than others, but there is no extreme central hub that dominates the network. This may be seen as an opportunity, as highly central organisations that have sufficient resources and capacity have the potential to efficiently reach goals and coordinate the activities of the network. However, there might also be a downside to centralisation in reliance on central organisations, which might be overloaded with work or communication, and their incapacitation (e.g., by funding cuts) can undermine the entire network.

Average path length: this is the average number of steps along the shortest paths between organisations (nodes) in a network. Simply put, it refers to how many 'hops' it takes, on average, to go from one organisation to another using the shortest possible paths.

In this network, each organisation can reach each other within almost 3 steps (in other words, via two other organisations), so the network distances are quite short, which suggests a relatively straightforward means of communication across organisations.

Components: in this case, the network is one connected piece with no disconnected segments. If a network has one component, it means that every node is reachable from every other node – there are no isolated subgroups.

Overall: this is quite a cohesive network with some organisations that stand out in terms of how embedded they are. All the network-level measures indicate that the network has the potential for a quick spread of information and resources due to being one coherent whole with short distances between organisations, some of which are highly central.

The 'top 10' nodes/organisations are identified based on the below centrality measures, which help to identify key organisations in the network:

Ranking	Degree	Betweenness	Closeness
1	Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)	Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)	Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)
2	Causeway	Stronger Together	Causeway
3	Asylum Matters	Causeway	Asylum Matters
4	Greater Manchester Police (GMP)*	Home Office (NRM focus)	Medaille Trust
5	Medaille Trust	Booth Centre	Manchester City Council
6	Booth Centre	Asylum Matters	Greater Manchester Police (GMP)*
7	Rochdale Borough Council	Greater Manchester Police (GMP)*	Booth Centre
8	Stockport Council	Rochdale Borough Council	Home Office (NRM focus)
9	Manchester City Council	Programme Challenger**	Stockport Council
10	British Red Cross	British Red Cross	Salvation Army

Figure 19: Rankings of key organisations engaged in MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum partnership work across Greater Manchester.

Explanations for centrality measures:
Degree: number of connections/collaborators each organisation has.
Betweenness: how much does a given organisation bridge/broker between others.
Closeness: how close in network distances it is for a given organisation to reach another.

* Where GMP was mentioned, interview participants were asked which part(s) of GMP tended to be most important for MSHT partnership work. In most cases, local neighbourhood teams were seen as key due to their high visibility and easy access that stakeholders (e.g., local authorities, charities) had to them.

** Programme Challenger is not an organisation, as it crosscuts several organisations and groups, so its inclusion here could be seen as problematic. However, the authors are confident that the SNA would not have produced significantly different results had Challenger been excluded or merged with other organisations that form its governance structure (including GMCA and GMP, which are already named among the 'top 10' here). The authors are therefore representing the input of survey and interview participants who chose to refer to Challenger instead of / as well as specific organisations as part of the MSHT partnership network.

The above centrality measures (degree, betweenness, closeness) indicate significant overlap with which organisations are seen as central to MSHT partnerships in Greater Manchester. In each case, GMCA are ranked highest – from interview data, this is due to GMCA being seen as the main coordinating organisation for MSHT partnerships, albeit closely supported by organisations such as Causeway. To provide context, participants did not feel as though any of these central organisations had a 'monopoly' or otherwise 'unfairly' dominated partnership work across the city-region, but they were seen in a positive light as a consistent point of contact for queries and collaboration opportunities more widely.

Collectively, the most central organisations represent the areas of MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness (i.e., rather than just the area of MSHT), which suggests that there is at least some awareness of the need for 'join up' between these overlapping policy areas – especially since MSHT victims and survivors may experience challenges related to migration/asylum and homelessness. Even so, as discussed in section 9(e), while participants were satisfied with coordination and communication at the GMCA level, they had more concerns with these issues within and between some local authorities. Given the prominence of some local authorities in Figure 19, this may be a significant gap in relation to wider MSHT partnerships work.

National Organisation	Count	MSHT	Count	Homelessness	Count	Migration/Asylum	Count
Yes	73	Yes	72	Yes	75	Yes	61
No	51	No	52	No	49	No	63

Figure 20: Individual attributes – distribution of individual characteristics of named organisations (total 124 for each column).

To reinforce the above discussion, Figure 20 contains a breakdown of whether named organisations operate only across Greater Manchester, as well as which policy/social challenges they focus on. In 70% of cases (73 out of 124), organisations operating across the MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness spaces did not work solely within Greater Manchester, but in other parts of the UK as well. This could be significant when considering the advantages of larger organisations that may have more resources to deliver support across more than one or multiple regions in the UK. In contrast, organisations operating more at the national level may not necessarily have the same level of local insight or specialist knowledge of Greater Manchester's needs and priorities, which was broadly reflected during interview discussions.

Regarding the spaces of MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum, there appears to be at least some overlap between organisations who focus on all three areas – although it was clear from survey and interview findings that some organisations specialise in just one or two of these areas. This suggests that overall, while there appears to be some level of overlap or 'join up' between the three areas, this is far from a standardised approach, with a small number of participants feeling unable to comment on certain challenges (e.g., on MSHT) due to their main area of expertise being elsewhere.

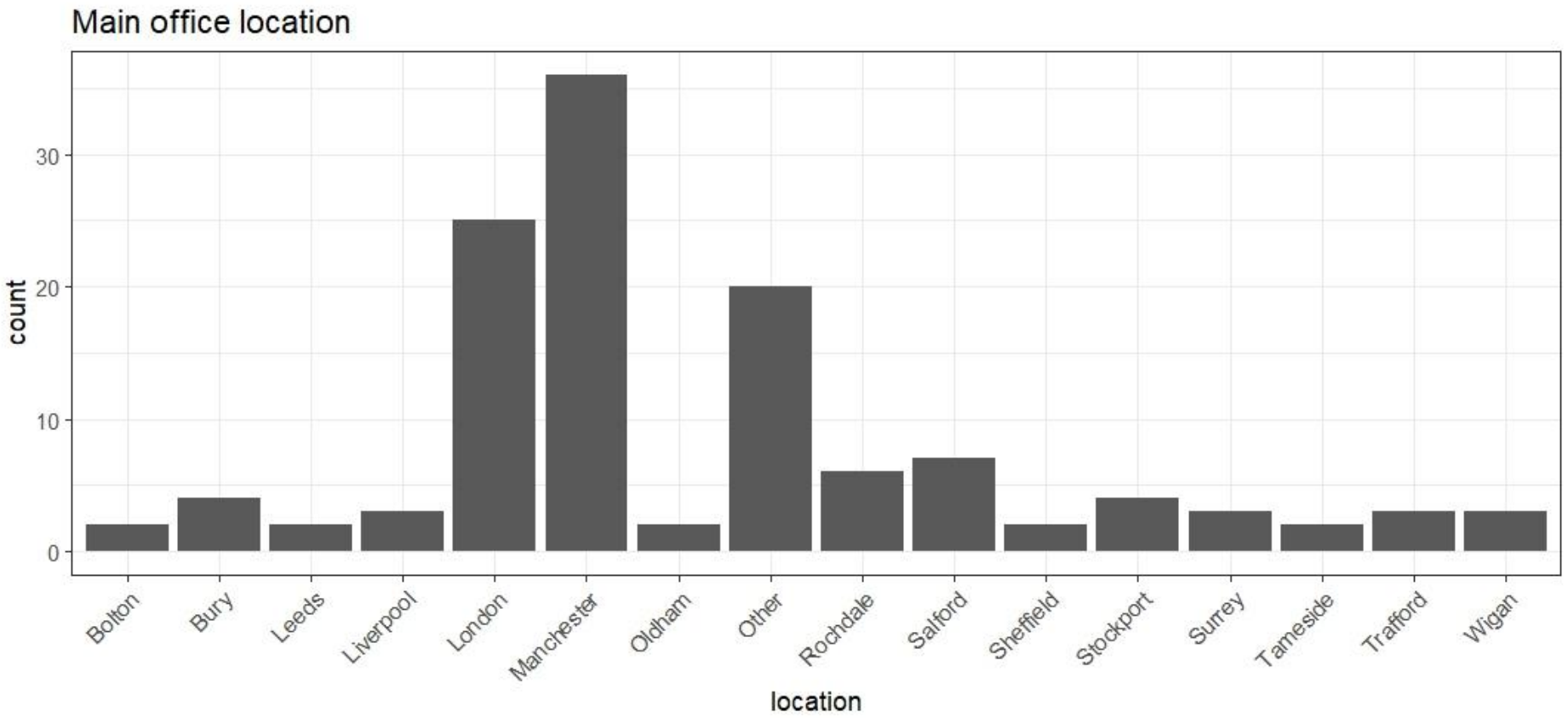

Figure 21: Main office locations of partnership organisations connected to MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness.

As per Figure 21, named partners have a strong presence in Greater Manchester, although there are a significant number who have their main offices based elsewhere, including London and elsewhere in the UK. Within Greater Manchester, the City of Manchester is most strongly represented, followed by Salford and Rochdale. 'Other' collectively refers to various locations across the UK that were named just once or twice.

Like the point made from Figure 19, the above suggests a combination of local expertise that is mostly based within/across Greater Manchester, although there are a large number of organisations that operate beyond the city-region and so may not always have as strong a local connection. This difference can potentially lead to discrepancies and misunderstandings among some service providers if they are less familiar with needs and priorities within Greater Manchester, which highlights the importance of having a central and well-connected network as per the discussion around Figure 18.

Subgroup / Cluster	Organisations / Groups
1: Greater Manchester migration/asylum response	GMCA; British Red Cross; Rochdale Boroughwide Housing*; GM Sanctuary Seekers Group; Refugee Action; Migrant Destitution Fund; NHS; Serco; Step Change Consortium; SAWN; Women Asylum Seekers Together; Yaran Northwest; SWAP; MHCLG; Northwest ROCU*; ATLEU; St Bride's Church; Bolton Brass; Rainbow Haven; Migrant Health Group; Local Government Association*.
2: MSHT/migration interaction	Booth Centre; Causeway; Europia; Sophie Hayes Foundation; GMIAU; St. John of God; Restricted Eligibility Support Service; Urban Village; Living Well; Shelter; Greater Manchester Law Centre; University of Salford; Manchester Metropolitan University; CCLA; Merseyside Modern Slavery Network; BASNET; Anti-Trafficking Forum; Greater Manchester Mental Health Leadership Team; West Yorkshire Anti-Slavery Partnership; National Museum Liverpool.
3: Rochdale homelessness and migration	Salvation Army; HMPPS*; Rochdale and District Mind; Rochdale Borough Council; Boaz Trust; Revive; The River; RADAR; St Vincents de Paul; Caring & Sharing; Army of Kindness.
4: Salford MSHT and migration	Caritas Salford; Salford City Council; Salford CVS; Diocese of Salford; Caritas Shrewsbury; Homes for Ukraine; Loaves and Fishes.
5: Greater Manchester migrant	Medaille Trust; Trafford Council; Bury Council; NHS GM ICB (Integrated Care Board); Asylum Matters; Lingua GM; GMMH; Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust; Stockport Council; Stockport Race Equality

homelessness response and care sector	Partnership; Home Office (NRM)*; Bolton Council; Oldham Council; Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council; Wigan Council; GLAA*; Resolve Property; Cresta Court Group; Bury Homeless Partnership; Manchester Housing Group; DHSC*; The North West Association of Directors of Adult Social Services; Citizen's Advice; BARDOC; Regional Strategic Migration Partnership; Sector 3 (supports VCFSE sector in Stockport); CQC.

Figure 22: Subgroups/clusters of the MSHT/migration/homelessness partnership network across Greater Manchester

* Potential 'outlier' organisations/groups that were noted in the later consideration of the clusters.

The above clusters (presented in no particular order) suggest a series of groupings across Greater Manchester that are strongly associated with each other and are focused on service delivery related to the cross-cutting areas of MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness.

Most clusters contain some level of interaction and cooperation between at least two of these areas (MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness). For example, clusters 2 and 5 respectively contain key groups and organisations that comprise responses to MSHT and migration/asylum issues, as well as homelessness and migration/asylum.
Some clusters indicate activity within specific geographic areas of Greater Manchester – for instance, clusters 1 and 5 are more focused on Greater Manchester as a whole, whereas clusters 3 and 4 suggest strong partnership work within Rochdale and Salford, respectively.

Local authorities are especially well represented in clusters 4 and 5, which suggests a high level of engagement with the VCFSE sector across these different spaces – although this is less apparent in clusters 1 and 2.
Within cluster 5, while the GLAA and Home Office are noted as potential outliers, their involvement most likely relates to ongoing work and collaboration in the care sector, where the exploitation of (migrant) labour is a prominent concern (e.g., Crimestoppers, 2025).

Overall, the SNA presented in this section suggests that:

- Partnerships addressing MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum issues across Greater Manchester form a broadly cohesive and well-connected network. Organisations are generally able to reach each other through short pathways, which supports efficient communication and collaboration.
- While certain organisations act as key connectors and hold greater influence within the network, no single group or organisation is especially dominant, which suggests a structure that is centralised enough to enable coordination while remaining balanced and resilient.
- The network comprises a mix of locally focused and nationally operating organisations, so combines strong local and regional expertise with wider resources. This combination is useful for the overall capacity of the network, and it also suggests some variation in the depth of local knowledge and engagement.
- The clusters across Greater Manchester suggest strong, interconnected groupings of organisations that are working on MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness, and often overlap in focus. While some clusters operate more at a regional level and others are more locally specific (e.g., Rochdale, Salford), they collectively highlight significant partnership work, especially between local authorities and the VCFSE sector, that are driven by shared concerns and the need for good quality service delivery.
- In summary, the SNA highlights a connected and functional partnership landscape with identifiable hubs of influence and a broad base of organisations that work across overlapping policy areas.

6. Strengths of MSHT Partnership Culture in Greater Manchester

Having outlined the wider context of MSHT, methods used, and relevant data in relation to this review, sections 6-11 focus on key findings from interviews conducted with professionals across the MSHT, homelessness, and migration and asylum spaces. The themes discussed throughout sections 6-11 reflect specific issues as well as the 'bigger picture' in relation to MSHT partnership work and are connected back to earlier data in sections 4-5 where appropriate.

Survey respondents and interview participants generally had favourable opinions of the MSHT partnership work across Greater Manchester, including where this overlapped with priorities connected to homelessness, migration, and asylum. While almost everyone highlighted limitations and areas of development, this should not distract from the headline that most participants recognised the added value that partnerships bring to supporting service users[3] in various settings.

More specifically, participants felt that partnerships were a crucial aspect of addressing MSHT, homelessness, and challenges connected to migration/asylum. This was largely due to the mutual support and collegial working environment that has been encouraged across Greater Manchester, not least by the Anti-Trafficking Forum that was originally established by Stop the Traffik in 2016 and is currently coordinated by Causeway. Participants were impressed by the willingness of others to share information and good practice, collaborate, and importantly, to identify and address gaps, which was clearly driven by a desire to improve practice for the benefit of service users. These key points are expanded in the following sections.

[3] As a note on terminology, we recognise that organisations may use different terms to refer to individuals using their services. For the purposes of this report, we refer to 'service users' to encompass anyone that accesses any service.

(a) Commitment to cross-sector collaboration

Across interviews, almost all participants expressed the need for and value of collaborating with other organisations regarding their own practice, sharing information, and supporting service users, as illustrated in these extracts:

> "It's not about getting people to all come into your system and understand your system of how you're running things. It's about understanding all the different organisations, individual nuances and priorities, and establishing how you can work together". (NGO-02)

> "We won't succeed unless there's strong partnerships and strong collaboration between the different sectors and services just because every case is quite different. There are national trends, but obviously every individual case does look very different and because modern slavery and the tactics of traffickers are evolving, and it runs over so many different areas as well, like into homelessness, into asylum and migration, into drug and alcohol use ... we all bring our own strengths to it as well, and there's not enough resource within one department to tackle it directly. I think the partnership response is just the only way forward and it's going to be the strongest way forward tackling modern slavery with long-term benefits, not just short-term". (NGO-03)

> "… partnership and collaboration is vitally important and it has become increasingly so over the years because the needs of the people we support are so varied they cannot be met by any one organisation. There are a range of interventions required that are provided by different organisations." (NGO-09)

> "A big chunk of our information on modern slavery is from referrals, and by referrals, I mean from outside of the police. When we look at some of our success stories and some of our convictions we've had for modern slavery, and we have really positive stories from the survivors afterwards. When you look at the origin of that, they were referred in from a partner". (Law-Enforcement-01)

While these extracts may seem like obvious starting points to many practitioners working within/across the MSHT, homelessness, and/or migration spaces, it is arguably important to emphasise them as part of an ongoing and up to date evidence base on the value of such partnerships to service users, other professionals, and policymakers. Across the extracts, there is a clear and consistent emphasis on the necessity of partnerships, which includes

recognising and adapting to the diverse structures, priorities, and capabilities of different organisations.

The complexity and evolving tactics of MSHT offenders, as well as the overlap with other social issues such as homelessness, substance misuse, and migration, highlight the need for a multifaceted approach. No single organisation contains the full capacity or resources to address the complex nature of each MSHT case. The above suggestion from law enforcement that key intelligence and case outcomes often originate from non-police partners reinforces the key role of NGOs and community organisations in the referral and support process. In this respect, trust-based relationships between organisations are critical to case identification and subsequent support for service users.

(b) Structural enablers of positive collaboration

Several platforms and processes were highlighted as practical enablers of effective partnership working in Greater Manchester. Notably, the Greater Manchester Anti-Trafficking Forum, was consistently referenced as a key form of structural support. Such forums were seen as key in providing regular opportunities for networking, communication, and shared learning:

> "That's one of the strengths of all the partners in Greater Manchester; we all support each other … nobody's threatened by what you're doing because they just see it as added value. And when you're in these times of where money is tight and budgets are low and all of that, then you just have to be thankful that you've got some other services, a partnership that's adding some value to your organisation … I think what we do well and effectively is that we don't just set a partnership open then just let it run. We make sure that we bring partners around the table and talk about how things are going, review things and if we need to, make changes and that sort of thing. And we're constantly looking at what we need". (NGO-08)

> "What I've found in the space of modern slavery is actually quite an engaged group of different stakeholders and a really good partnership approach. For example, you've got the right level of statutory involvement with police and the Combined Authority, and then you've got quite a large and positive engagement with members of the VCFSE sector that are there as well. In practice I've found it to be one of the most beneficial spaces for us to inhabit". (NGO-11)

These reflections point to a well-balanced and maintained system of partnerships that includes representation from statutory actors (e.g. local councils, GMCA) and the VCFSE sector. Importantly, the structures in place are seen as dynamic, with regular reviews and adaptations to meet members' needs as they develop. Indeed, various meanings of

'partnerships' are represented in this forum, ranging from those with statutory obligations, to those with some kind of formal agreement, to those who used the forum as an ad-hoc, informal networking opportunity to seek information or contacts that they needed.

(c) Cultural conditions to facilitate collaboration

Alongside structural supports, participants outlined a positive culture of collaboration, especially at the Greater Manchester level. This includes a general willingness to work together, high levels of trust, and a desire for partnerships to be meaningful and constructive for the benefit of service users:

> "I think on a Greater Manchester level, collaboration and partnership and support across services is much better than it is at a more local level. Even though there's obviously issues everywhere, I think you see better collaboration and relationship on a Greater Manchester level. I think there's more meaningful interaction, I think there's more openness to have debate and challenge – all in a nice way, than there is at a local level". (NGO-01)

> "I can see the will is there. A lot of these groups across the board, there's a will to do something and there's a desire for it to be actionable and meaningful, which are two things that are not always actually a given for partnerships. There's a trust in the charities and in the NGOs working". (NGO-03)

This cultural dimension appears to be central to how Greater Manchester's partnerships function. Trust, open dialogue, and collective intent are not always guaranteed in partnership work (Local Government Association, 2022), and participants saw these as distinguishing features of the Greater Manchester context. While the attitudes represented above do not seem to be universal between all service providers (see section 9(f) for further discussion), the positive aspects of collaboration nevertheless came through strongly during interviews.

(d) Openness to addressing gaps and challenges

Closely related to this culture of collaboration, participants highlighted Greater Manchester's willingness to be self-reflective, engage in critical review, and take action to address limitations in existing partnership work:

> "What I will say for Greater Manchester is they are interested, they are listening, they are keen, they want to get it right, they want to make that join up". (NGO-10)

> "I do think there's room for improvement, but I do think Greater Manchester [Combined Authority] are open. The very fact that they've asked you to do this [review] shows they're open to trying to find their gaps and make their gaps better. They're not afraid to make themselves vulnerable, to explore where their gaps are, and I think that in itself says a lot about the strength of the partnership working and it says a lot about the strength of their desire to make partnership working right". (NGO-09)

This openness to feedback and development is widely recognised by stakeholders as a sign of a healthy and adaptive partnership culture. Rather than defensiveness, there is a strong sense that Greater Manchester partners want to understand where improvements can be made and take active steps to do so. Such feedback points to a regional environment in which partnership working is not static or performative, but rather responsive, reflective, and committed to progress.

The strong culture of collaboration, mutual support, and openness to improvement across MSHT partnerships in Greater Manchester has meaningful implications for service users. Trust-based relationships between organisations can enhance the timeliness and appropriateness of referrals, while active engagement across sectors may enable more comprehensive and sustained support.

When partnerships are well-managed, transparent, and include a range of different organisational strengths, they are better equipped to respond to the complex and fast-changing needs of individuals affected by MSHT. In addition, the willingness of partners to reflect on gaps and improve practice helps to create a more responsive and person-centred system, which increases the likelihood that service users will receive consistent, coordinated, and dignified support.

The above discussion points and extracts suggest that Greater Manchester has laid important groundwork for strong and authentic partnerships. The willingness to "get it right" and "make that join up" points to a shared understanding of the importance of coordinated, cross-sector collaboration. These structural and cultural foundations are important to sustain and develop pragmatic responses over time.

7. Governance, Vision, and Coordination Challenges

Participants across different policy areas (MSHT, homelessness, asylum/migration) discussed a range of governance-related challenges that shape the development and delivery of MSHT partnership work in Greater Manchester. These concerns centred not only on the strategic alignment of goals, but also on how priorities are communicated, coordinated, and operationalised across organisations. The following sections contain outlines of how issues such as the absence of a shared vision, inconsistent governance structures, siloed working, and difficulties in information-sharing can all limit collaboration. Together, they highlight some of the tensions that influence the ability of MSHT partnerships to function cohesively and with sustained momentum.

(a) Lack of a clear shared vision

Several participants expressed concern about the lack of a shared strategic direction across the MSHT partnership landscape in Greater Manchester. It should be noted that groups such as the Greater Manchester Anti-Trafficking and Slavery NGO Forum have a purpose statement which contains key aims in line with the 4P structure (Prepare, Prevent, Pursue, Protect), which is circulated among members. It may be the case that some partners are not aware of these aims, or if they are, do not necessarily regard the NGO Forum structure as solely responsible for setting the MSHT strategy across Greater Manchester.

Nevertheless, this (perceived) absence of collective direction was seen to limit both collaboration and the ability to build momentum over time:

> "What's potentially missing is that clear sense of shared direction of what we are all working towards, which would enable more productive conversations to come together". (Local-Government-01)

> "I think the biggest challenge is nobody is setting a target and saying, in five years' time we are going to bring down modern slavery, homelessness, whatever it is, down by 0.5%. It doesn't have to be massive targets, one clear target and how to achieve it, and then the next year double the target. The thinking has to be year upon year, term upon term, the term can be for 2, 3, 4, 5 years, whatever people decide. We are going to achieve more, and that long-term vision is non-existent. Who takes the ownership of the long-term vision?". (NGO-07)

> "I do think there needs to be something that we all actually work towards, done by the GMCA, so that we actually come together and collaborate a bit more". (Local-Government-06)

> “Making sure that everyone's on the same agenda, singing from the same hymn sheet. There's different political agendas, there's different conflicts that might arise in terms of resources, in terms of budget, in terms of people's time, but making sure that you know where at all possible you can come together and know that actually it's the victim at the centre, that their needs need to be met, and let's pull together to get that done”. (Law-Enforcement-03)

Without such direction, individual efforts risk becoming fragmented or short-term in nature. There is also an underlying question of governance, especially around who holds responsibility for setting and driving forward region-wide objectives. While there are efforts to develop such a shared strategy – for instance, through the Greater Manchester Anti-Trafficking Forum, and separately at the national level, the 2025 Action Plan on Modern Slavery (Home Office, 2025b), participants did not refer to such shared objectives or how these had been communicated or developed with them.

Linked to the (perceived) vision issue is a need for more structured governance, which can help collective goals to be turned into tangible outcomes. Participants reflected on the importance of practical mechanisms that can help to encourage action and track delivery:

> “In terms of governance, I would make sure that's there and say, what are we working towards and as part of the agenda pack saying, this is what we're doing from there. It's not just actions but a deliverable. For example … every local authority has a single point of contact for modern slavery or understanding has been delivered by these local authorities, and they would check around, and they'd say, have you done it yet? Yes or no? If they would say yes, when was that, etc. Well, no. How can we support them to do that? How can we deliver on that strategic objective as well? … Just having real key objectives that are determined that can be delivered upon”. (Local-Government-05)

Aligning political priorities and organisational interests behind victim-centred goals is presented as both a challenge and an opportunity, especially in ensuring consistent action across local authorities and statutory partners. To some extent, the issues related to single points of contact within local authorities connect to the issues raised in section 9(e) on potential disconnects between local areas, as well as to the challenges of embedding more structured partnership work and not over-relying on individuals in section 7(d).

> “What we try to work on, in terms of getting our lines straight, is being able to very clearly say this is what we want to work towards. Having a clear position in terms of our objectives in this space and being able to evidence those positions as well. I feel like this is part of the problem with the contracts all the time. It definitely goes for working with any other local government organisation, that you can say anecdotally this is a problem, but you need to back it up, and maybe that's not very natural. We all sit as charities, in terms of being really statistical focused and bringing really strong cases and pushing. Trying to get into that more professionalised, objective-based kind of engagement, so we can really go, right, these are the issues, this is us, this is our suggestion. Being in the position to take that to the right people”. (NGO-03)

Participants identified operational communication and data-sharing as key areas that could be more consistent. The ability to engage others, particularly statutory stakeholders, was seen to depend on the clarity of messaging and the strength of supporting evidence.

> “A big ask for us is to more consistently share information. I've got an e-mail about it just this week, a sense that it’s gone quiet, we want to hear from you, we want to know what's going on, etc, which is difficult. A challenge from our perspective, because sometimes you're in firefighting mode and there's not much structured information in terms of this is where we're going with the strategy etc, because actually we’ve just had our heads down dealing with five different emergencies, and it's the nature of the work”. (Local-Government-01)

Some organisations are seeking to engage more professionally with policy and commissioning structures by backing up their insights with data and clearly articulated objectives for future work. At the same time, operational pressures, especially in crisis-driven environments, can make it difficult to sustain the type of structured information exchange that supports longer-term planning and joined-up working – which also relates to the capacity issues highlighted later in section 9. These issues feed into the central issue of developing but also communicating and linking ongoing partnership work to a shared vision and/or objectives, which could also be useful for PLE consultants where organisations integrate these into their projects.

(b) Addressing 'silo mentalities'

A recurring theme involved issues of siloed working across organisations and sectors involved in addressing MSHT in Greater Manchester. Despite the over-arching commitment to support individuals with experience of MSHT, homelessness, and/or the migration and asylum process – fragmentation in funding, governance, and thematic focus may undermine the potential for joined-up responses:

> "There's a lot of siloed stuff happening from [organisation]. I don't think we join up across different government spaces that overlap well enough. I don't have the answer to that uniquely and make sure that everything that needs space to discuss gets discussed. The NGO Forum would certainly overlap with [one of our networks] or if I decided, we've got funding, we're going to do asylum, migration, and NGO forum as well. There would be a huge amount of overlap there too. Even if that's what large parts of the sector would be asking us for, we know that there's inefficiencies there and you would say the same for the networks that exist in the community cohesion, safety space, the networks that exist in the homelessness space as well. Just an enormous amount of siloed working and overlap but is really difficult to overcome in a sensible way in the way that we engage with our voluntary sector". (Local-Government-01)

> "One of the areas that I think could be done better in Greater Manchester is the join up. There's almost a slight unintentional siloing between modern slavery and exploitation. They are one and the same thing but what you will often find is your contextual safeguarding hubs and your contextual safeguarding agenda is primarily talking about child sexual exploitation of UK nationals or children with EU-settled status and criminal exploitation that's quite specific to county lines … Your forced theft, your forced begging, cannabis growth, those kinds of other forms of exploitation are not generally making it through to the complex safeguarding teams. So, often when they're talking about complex safeguarding, the natural steer is county lines and CSE and a model that very much sits with UK national children". (NGO-10)

> "It just feels like all of them are separated because the funding is separated and the evaluation work is always separated as well … What is currently happening is the Combined Authority do something, the local authorities do something else, another organisation is doing something else. They're not speaking to each other. And by the time they get to know each other, the funding is finished, and the post is gone. All the knowledge and learning is gone". (NGO-07)

A central challenge running through the extracts is the structural separation that can be linked to fragmented funding and project-based commissioning, which may lead to time-limited roles, disjointed evaluation processes, and a potential loss of institutional knowledge when projects end. Participants felt that these challenges were associated primarily with local authorities, and while the Combined Authority was not excluded from these concerns, there was a sense that GMCA at least had more of a 'birds eye view' across the region on issues such as the commissioning process. There is a suggestion that organisations may begin to collaborate only after funding has already expired, with little opportunity to build sustained, cross-sectoral learning or continuity.

Another key concern is the thematic siloing between different forms of exploitation. While MSHT is a broad and interconnected issue, some operational frameworks may focus on certain types of harm, such as county lines and child sexual exploitation that involve UK nationals. As a result, other forms of exploitation (e.g., forced labour, cannabis cultivation, forced begging) could be overlooked or marginalised in practice. This raises wider questions about how current approaches and organisational priorities may unintentionally sideline broader MSHT challenges.

There is a wider reflection on the perceived inefficiencies created by the presence of overlapping networks and forums. From a victim or service user perspective, the risk of practitioners attending multiple forums is that it limits their availability to focus on delivery with service users. In addition, the potential for 'information overload' from multiple forums may discourage some practitioners from attending (as many) future events, which means that key voices could be omitted from forum discussions. While these forum structures aim to provide space for collaboration, their lack of coordination can result in duplication and competition for attention or resources.

Therefore, the challenge lies not just in bringing groups together, but in developing the infrastructure and culture that provide sustained integration across overlapping policy areas – not just MSHT, but also homelessness, migration, and asylum.

> "I really do like that there's different types of services now being included … that's not necessarily just modern slavery, but who work with asylum seekers, refugees, in the homelessness sector. I think it's really good to see these other services and organisations being linked into the partnership work … I do find it really helpful to meet new people, for example at the forums, and exchange the contact details and get to know about their organisation or service. I do like the fact that it's opening more and it's inviting the other services to join in to at least get a better awareness or better understanding of those issues". (NGO-12)

As per the discussion in section 6, the overall partnerships culture in Greater Manchester does indicate an openness and willingness to learn more about associated service/policy areas. Despite the above challenges with siloing, there are some indicators of overlaps (and the need for them) between MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness, as suggested in the above extract. The point of reflection for practitioners here might be how to transform

such examples of individual enthusiasm into more structured approaches to service delivery.

(c) Perceived lack of named individuals for MSHT within local authorities

The following extracts explore the importance of establishing named individuals within the 10 local authorities of Greater Manchester to support joined-up responses to MSHT.

> "Because local authorities are a first responder and because they have such a key role to play as part of the state, within each local authority, I think there should be a modern slavery lead. At least a modern slavery lead, ideally a modern slavery team that coordinates the response of that local authority to the needs of modern slavery within their patch, if you like, and be a focal point for other agencies to collaborate and partnership with. At the moment it varies, some local authorities have got the modern slavery leads, other local authorities you go around the houses, trying to find someone who you can have a conversation with about particular service user in their area". (Local-Government-03)

> "I think that would be a really good response to victims of modern slavery in each borough, if you had a single point contact and a trainer who was consistently looking at ways to educate both the community, professionals, first responders, all that kind of thing". (Law-Enforcement-02)

> "It's also important to have a single point of contact within every local authority for modern slavery. This is the person I want to talk to about this, and you know exactly who it is and it's on the website, so if you want to talk to someone, e-mail this or you ring this number. And then if it's an emergency obviously here's the policing and the guardian numbers.". (Local-Government-05)

Participants highlight some inconsistency across boroughs and suggest how the absence of designated individuals and/or clear communication pathways can limit partnership working. They also emphasised the value of having named individuals for MSHT within each local authority. From these views, such a role would be useful to help develop more consistent, coordinated responses to victim support and inter-agency collaboration, especially in relation to the impact on first responders regarding the NRM process, and therefore victims and survivors of MSHT.

However, the current picture seems inconsistent: while some local authorities may have named individuals (e.g., single points of contact), others lack any clearly identified role,

which may contribute to delays and miscommunications when practitioners attempt to engage with local services. This variability can lead to inefficiencies, especially when professionals are unsure who to approach. In a similar vein, if practitioners are required to navigate unclear and/or informal referral routes, this can also lead to delays and potential confusion with the support and services available to victims.

The above issues seemed especially relevant in relation to some housing services, where poor coordination may have an impact on service delivery:

> "The collaboration with us and the boroughs is really hard for us to get anybody specific in a housing department to liaise with if we're having a problem with a housing officer or trying to get information for our service user. One of the things that we would find really useful is if the housing officers asked the service user if they had a support worker and could they provide the details of the support worker, and then we could get a direct link with them. That's a huge gap. We often find that a housing officer has been liaising with our service user and we're not aware of what's going on. So, you know we're doubling up on work which has already been actioned maybe". (NGO-06)

Housing departments were identified as a key area where the absence of clear liaison points can have a direct impact on service users. The lack of communication between housing officers and support workers can result in fragmented or duplicated efforts, with vulnerable individuals potentially falling through the cracks. The suggestion here that even small changes, such as routinely asking clients for the contact details of their support worker, could improve coordination and help ensure that advocacy and housing support efforts are aligned. This reflects the above concerns about siloed service delivery (section 7(b)) and the need for stronger, cross-departmental awareness of MSHT-related issues.

(d) Reliance on individuals and potential instability of partnerships

As a point of nuance to section 7(c), a common theme across the review was the potentially fragile nature of some MSHT partnerships that rely heavily on motivated individuals:

> "One thing that I've found … it's that if you have an individual who is really on board, as soon as they leave that post, you have to start all over again. So, it's about ingraining the importance of the work in the culture part of an organisation, rather than just resting on one individual who gatekeeps that information, and then if anything did happen and they weren't able to be in the network anymore, then that local authority is almost losing such a key part of what they're doing." (NGO-02)

> “I think you're very much relying on an individual. Not necessarily an individual who's responsible or necessarily everyone should be responsible. But, you know, it's not necessarily their role or something, but to suddenly raise a concern and then take that to someone who usually doesn't know where else to take it. It's a mess. It's not clear what people should be thinking about, noticing, picking up on, how to respond to something that might be a concern, where you take that concern. Do we have the support systems in place to actually support people?” (Local-Government-03)

> “I feel there's sometimes changes in the organisations, people leaving, new people coming. I think we came across it in the police forces, for example, as well, once you get some good contacts and certain departments or teams are really familiar and connected with what we do. But then people move and there's new [staff], it does make a big difference”. (NGO-12)

There are at least two interrelated challenges to note here: first, a potential over-reliance on individuals who develop expertise in areas such as MSHT, homelessness, or migration and asylum, whereby efforts to embed this knowledge within wider organisational structures or designated roles may be incomplete. Second, a degree of uncertainty around the ‘ownership’ of specific issues which, linked to the first point, can lead to confusion in task allocation and inconsistent responses to emerging concerns.

Beyond ‘traditional’ reasons for staff turnover, such as promotions, change of organisation, or retirement, several participants pointed to recurring factors that drive personnel changes, including burnout, insecure employment contracts, and, as further discussed in section 9(c), the prevalence of short-term funding models in many commissioned services and projects. These factors can make it difficult to maintain continuity in collaborative work:

> “I think significant turnover of staff in police and local authorities, large percentages of agency staff in local authorities always make partnerships more challenging. I think the systems are set up very well in Greater Manchester, but I still think parts of those systems are maintained by personal relationships, where systemic relationships aren't as strong. But again, it exists in Greater Manchester, but I think that's less significant than I have seen in other areas. But if certain people left Greater Manchester those systemic relationships wouldn't hold”. (NGO-10)

> “People are not retiring, they're burning out and they’re leaving. No matter how much money they get, jobs at local authorities and Combined Authorities got unsustainable. People are expected to do admin jobs and senior strategic jobs. How can you do both? You can't”. (NGO-07)

These extracts highlight the potential vulnerabilities of partnership work in the context of workforce instability, and underline some of the pressures, including limited capacity, that organisations face. A central concern is the degree to which collaboration depends on individual relationships rather than institutionalised systems. As noted, while Greater Manchester may have well-developed structures in place, personal connections are often what holds partnerships together, which raises concerns about continuity when key individuals move on.

Compounding the above issues of individual relationships / institutionalised systems are the challenges of burnout and unsustainable workloads. The second quote underscores how unrealistic job expectations, which stretch individuals across administrative and strategic roles, may contribute to staff departures. This not only disrupts partnership continuity but may affect the capacity to maintain strategic direction and long-term planning.

These reflections suggest an underlying tension between the need for resilient, system-level collaboration and the vulnerabilities that are introduced by workforce instability. Depending on specific job roles and whether these include any direct contact with service users, frequent turnover of staff may also contribute to a lack of trust or confusion over service provision among service users/clients.

8. Structural and Political Barriers to MSHT Partnerships

In recent years, the MSHT, homelessness, and migration spaces at the UK level have been characterised by various forms of austerity (e.g., imposed on local authorities), conflation between social issues/policy challenges (e.g., between modern slavery and immigration), and other forms of punitive and restrictive approaches to addressing perceived problems (e.g., the 'hostile environment' most recently represented by the NABA, and IMA).

Austerity measures, which have a strong legacy influence especially from the 2010s (e.g., Hoddinott et al., 2022), were widely seen to have depleted local authority resources for social housing and support services, leading to increased competition and less availability of safe and stable accommodation. The conflation of immigration enforcement with access to public services, especially under the 'Right to Rent' scheme was also identified, thereby deterring some landlords from renting to individuals with insecure status and increasing homelessness risks. Most participants referred in some way to these 'structural' and 'political' policy factors, which often stem from the national level, that usually fell beyond the direct control or day-to-day responsibility of their Greater Manchester-based organisations.

While it is not the authors' intention to hold Greater Manchester stakeholders accountable for these (inter)national policy developments and potentially broader social attitudes that may develop beyond the city-region, they nevertheless can have an impact on regional and local service delivery and victims/survivors of MSHT, which was strongly reflected by participants. The 'hostile' immigration policy landscape, and the unhelpful conflation of it with MSHT – both of which can affect local and regional efforts to address MSHT via partnership work, are discussed here. This is followed by an outline of how healthcare and existing housing models can serve as a further structural backdrop and have impacts on partnerships and victims/service users.

(a) Hostile immigration policy landscape

Regarding a perceived 'hostile' immigration policy landscape, participants referred to a number of concerns related to provision of support for potential MSHT victims, an over-reliance on the VCFSE sector, as well as the seemingly political treatment of MSHT at the national level:

> "We believe it's [NABA/IMA] impacted the numbers entering support. The data appears to support our view that the number of negative decisions being made have increased; the number of people being returned by the Home Office assisted voluntary return scheme, the number of people being detained in immigration, in deport detention centres has increased. Some of our service users have gone along to report as normal and they've been detained in detention centres without our knowledge, and we find out some time later … So overall, it's been adverse". (NGO-09)

> "It's a reflection of where national policy has gone. Whilst I've been in contact with migration, asylum and housing and homelessness colleagues here and in other spaces across Greater Manchester for a number of years, over the past two years or so there's been a quite purposeful shift to place modern slavery out of safeguarding. This actually happened in terms of moving it from the safeguarding minister's portfolio to the illegal migration minister's portfolio for example, although it has now shifted back. The Illegal Migration Act, the Nationality and Borders Act all created this space where modern slavery, human trafficking, organised immigration crime, and illegal migration all became part of the same issue". (Local-Government-02)

> "Everything that we do is responding to those types of things and it's things like the Illegal Migration Act, which reduce statutory duties, basically shrink the government duties to even more people. Just serves to highlight how much we rely on the voluntary sector and how key those partnerships are. That prompted us to do things like pushing funding into organisations that are targeting the people that we think we are least likely to reach, refused asylum seekers and finding clever ways of our funding reaching there. It's just trying to make up for the shrinking government duties to hold cohorts of individuals who will end up victims of modern slavery or on the streets". (Local-Government-01)

Across these extracts, participants discuss a political and policy environment that is increasingly characterised by exclusionary and enforcement-led approaches. The cumulative effect of recent legislative and administrative changes, particularly the IMA and the NABA, is perceived to diminish access to protection and support for potential victims of MSHT.

A key concern expressed is the retraction of some statutory duties, which risks shifting the burden of care and intervention onto the voluntary sector, and may lead to growing gaps in support provision, especially for individuals with irregular immigration status, including refused asylum seekers. This shift is arguably not merely logistical, but also ideological, since MSHT can be portrayed as an immigration control issue (see also section 8(b)) rather than one rooted in safeguarding and victim protection. Similarly, the reclassification of MSHT within governmental portfolios, whereby responsibility was (briefly) moved from safeguarding to immigration enforcement, was described as a symbolic and practical repositioning. This reframing, even if partially reversed, was viewed as contributing to a systemic narrowing of the state's protective lens.

Participants also raised alarm about the direct practical consequences of this hostile policy environment. These include an increase in detentions of service users during routine immigration reporting and a rise in negative decisions for those seeking protection. Such developments are not just policy outcomes but are experienced on the ground as

unpredictable, non-transparent, and deeply disruptive to partnership-based support. The result is a climate in which trust and continuity of care are undermined, with negative implications for both individual victims and the wider impacts of partnership responses. For some, these changes risk leading to reactive practice, whereby partners might have little choice but to work around rather than with statutory systems to reach those most at risk.

As the political context evolves, especially under a relatively new Labour government, there is cautious interest in whether these trajectories might shift (Cuibus, 2025). However, at the time of writing, the prevailing policy framework risks destabilising coordinated efforts that are intended to address MSHT and may even recentre them around immigration policy.

(b) Conflation of MSHT with immigration and smuggling

As part of the policy issues discussed above, participants referred to the longstanding concern of how MSHT can easily become conflated with other priorities:

> "With so much confusion and fear around it [MSHT], traffickers are able to utilise that, so it certainly hasn't stopped children being trafficked into the UK at all, largely because policy makers and the Home Office conflate trafficking and smuggling all the time … what it has done is provided them with something additional to control and to hold over children. We see that more primarily with children who are arriving by boat … they are the ones that are being most openly targeted by Home Office speeches, by what the media are representing." (NGO-10)

> "We've seen that during the riots in the summer [of 2024], there were incidents where some of our service users and staff had bad experiences, and we feel that all of that is around the rhetoric that built up around immigration. There's been that conflation of immigration and modern slavery that we have battled against for many years, and that heightened in recent years with the Rwanda Bill, for example". (NGO-09)

The confusion between such terms can lead to barriers to both meaningful safeguarding and public understanding. Practitioners highlighted how this conflation not only misrepresents the legal and practical realities of trafficking versus smuggling (albeit the distinctions between both can become blurred) but also contributes to a policy environment that is hostile to victims and the professionals who advocate for them.

Children arriving by boat, for example, can face greater risks not only due to the physical and psychological vulnerabilities associated with their journeys, but also because of how they are positioned within a politicised narrative that casts them as illegal entrants rather than as potential victims of MSHT. Such framings may make these groups more susceptible to exploitation and less likely to seek or receive support.

Stakeholders pointed to the strategic manipulation of this confusion by offenders, who exploit victims' fear of immigration enforcement to maintain control. This was noted as a powerful tool in the coercion of children and young people, for whom the threat of detention, deportation, or being disbelieved by authorities may prevent disclosure or escape.

Our intention within the report is not to rehash these well-trodden discussions on the conflations between modern slavery and immigration, as well as other policy areas alluded to in the above extracts. Nevertheless, these findings are worth highlighting, to reiterate ongoing misunderstandings of MSHT, despite (or perhaps because of) the policy and public attention it has received during the last 25+ years. These discussion points underline the need for partnerships that have enduring ethical commitments to victims and survivors, which Greater Manchester has.

Somewhat related to the above discussion, participants occasionally referred to the potential of broader migration concerns and public attitudes as having the potential to disrupt partnership work:

> "What I've been struck by recently, even from members of what you might describe as the engaged members of the faith communities, are views which are borderline far right … or they are just far right … around issues of migration. And I do worry that we're not constantly talking about that issue of community cohesion, awareness, dignity of a person in favour of allowing people who are from the far right to invade and get into the general consciousness of people's minds. The forum, the people that we engage, they're naturally aware of these things, but I worry that sometimes we're talking to a bit of an echo chamber, bubble in that regard. Are we aware of public social attitudes more broadly and the challenge that we're facing?" (NGO-11)

In this context, some participants questioned the reach and resonance of MSHT messaging, both within and beyond Greater Manchester. There was a sense that while awareness may be high within specialist groups such as the Greater Manchester Anti-Trafficking Forum, there remains a potential disconnect between those engaged in MSHT work and wider public sentiment, which can be shaped by immigration anxieties rather than the need to support potential victims and address key enabling factors.

While 'hostile' policy environments and the conflation of trafficking, smuggling, and migration are not new developments, their strong presence within current political and social discussions appear to have a role in shaping operational responses and public attitudes in ways that may undermine efforts to develop and maintain MSHT partnerships. This background sets a challenging tone for both direct service provision and broader systemic reform.

(c) Relevance of healthcare as cross-cutting MSHT partnerships

While not originally intended as a direct focus point of this review, the issue of healthcare provision across various NHS and ICB (Integrated Care Board) services in relation to MSHT partnerships was a recurring theme. Simply put, healthcare has the potential to – and does – serve as a fulcrum between the areas of MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness:

> "There's an awful lot of services that we commission where victims and survivors may pass through, and I would say there's a very mixed; we have clinicians in those services, they're not modern slavery experts, so this is work that we need to cascade down into those services to make sure they're aware of what the emerging themes are around modern slavery and also how to get that response right, because you just get that one chance … A lot of the time our services are often first responders to victims and survivors coming through services. It could be GP, could be district nurse, it could be A&E but not as a statutory function in terms of they're not being recognised as first responders and being able to do an NRM". (NHS-02)

> "We've got health visitors and nurses and doctors working in some of our most deprived areas, who are regularly in contact with people who are of great interest to us and marked OCG [organised crime group] members. They're going into their houses; they're coming in for appointments. They've got a level of access to information that we can never get and that's just absolutely invaluable. They get told all sorts of things because people come in and talk to them, guards down, and they're just chatting to the doctors, just disclose things. We've done a lot of training in [organisation] with those partners in [Greater Manchester area] to say this is why all that sort of stuff is relevant. When you're hearing these kind of things, if you think it's something that might be beneficial to [organisation], this is how you get it to us and the take up on that has been, some people are very good with that, some people are not". (Law-Enforcement-04)

There are some key issues worth noting from these discussion points:

- The role of healthcare services in MSHT partnership work emerged as a significant, though often under-recognised, dimension. Health professionals frequently come into routine contact with individuals who are at high risk of exploitation, including through GP visits, community nursing, and emergency care. Despite this, healthcare workers are not first responders under the NRM (unless part of local authority services), which limits their ability to make direct referrals and could result in missed opportunities to respond in a timely manner to disclosures.
- Participants also highlighted the potential value of healthcare settings in identifying not only victims but also offenders or patterns of organised criminal activity. Some

staff have access to settings where individuals may disclose sensitive information, thereby providing intelligence that might not surface through other channels, such as via GMP. In some cases, this has been harnessed through localised training and connections to MSHT partnership work, although engagement seems inconsistent.

- These discussions echo broader partnership challenges across the MSHT sector, especially in relation to siloed ways of working (section 7(b)), lack of continuity (section 7(d)), and turnover of staff (also section 7(d)). The use of named individuals within healthcare settings who can then help to embed a stronger understanding of MSHT, was signposted as a potential way forward.

(d) Challenges with housing models

In a similar vein to concerns around healthcare, some participants highlighted challenges with existing housing services and the various nuances of associated practices:

> "We're trying to work with housing to increase awareness that a survivor's journey doesn't end when they leave exploitation; it's almost the start of their journey and there needs to be long-term support in place and understanding of the needs that come later in their recovery". (NGO-02)

> "Building on the self-esteem and the confidence and a sense of purpose. It just doesn't happen in the housing models that we've got now. We need a housing model that is more nurturing and that's more supportive around helping them to identify and change, modify their lifestyles, and make some changes. But we never get the chance to do that, it's just not well done in temporary accommodation. They just they never get the chance to do that ... in temporary accommodation". (NGO-08)

> "There's no will [from landlords] to work with you. But we don't have a choice, we've got to place people in private rents, but that is getting much harder. There's a four bed at the minute in [Greater Manchester area] and it's £2500 per month and that rent is just absolutely ridiculous and just not affordable for people. From that point of view, it's difficult to get any kind of partnership working. But we have to use them. We have no choice. So really the power in that relationship is on the landlord side". (Local-Government-04)

The extracts highlight ongoing challenges in aligning housing provision with the long-term recovery needs of survivors of MSHT. An identified risk is the potential disconnect between housing services and a rigorous understanding of survivor recovery from trauma.

A second concern relates to the quality and appropriateness of available housing options. Existing accommodation models are seen as failing to encourage self-esteem,

independence, or behavioural changes, which can be key components of recovery and reintegration. The limitations of temporary and unsupported housing risk reinforcing cycles of vulnerability and isolation. Potential issues around fear should also not be underestimated – for instance, victims of MSHT and/or violence/sexual violence may be fearful of their surroundings, especially in HMOs (House in Multiple Occupation), which could worsen such feelings for individuals.

Similarly, there are structural barriers to partnership working with the housing sector, especially in relation to the private rental market. High costs and perceptions of power imbalances between local authorities and private landlords were identified as significant obstacles to securing stable and affordable accommodation. This may undermine both partnership collaboration and survivors' ability to secure long-term housing outcomes.

9. Sector Overload: Funding, Capacity, and Service Limitations

This section explores the capacity constraints, financial pressures, and structural fragmentation that affects both statutory and voluntary sectors involved in MSHT work across Greater Manchester. In particular, it highlights how under-resourcing may risk limiting some service delivery, undermining partnerships, and leaving potential victims without adequate support.

(a) Capacity constraints and shortage of services

Across the Greater Manchester MSHT sector, a chronic lack of capacity was repeatedly cited as a major barrier to partnership working and good quality service delivery. Participants outlined a sector that is operating under sustained pressure, whereby limited resources have effects on both day-to-day practice and strategic engagement:

> "Everyone in the sector is at capacity and working above and beyond. So, I think a challenge probably would just be capacity, or at least at the beginning when you're establishing something, you'd hope that it creates capacity at some point, but there's often that kind of front loading to get something off the ground". (NGO-13)

> "We do tend to go to the usual suspects for a lot of stuff because we just don't have the capacity. It's [partnership] always a priority. It's always on everyone's list of something to do more. I say to my officers, do it more, but we're literally firefighting here. I know that that's what's missing, but it's not something that we've been able to do enough of, which leads us to that only very slowly growing network of ad hoc individuals". (Local-Government-01)

> "… lack of capacity sometimes in services, that's one of the other things that we've seen. Even if services are back up and running [post-Covid], they seem to be running low in terms of capacity, so they're not able to deliver in the way that they were delivering before. That can be a barrier and that can be difficult for our frontline staff because they end up then putting sticking plasters on everything for that person because they've just got to work harder with them to meet their needs. It can make it a lot harder". (NGO-08)

Given that capacity constraints were highlighted in almost every interview, these extracts may not be surprising for many working across the MSHT and associated sectors. However, providing an up-to-date evidence base for such issues may be useful when advocating for additional resources at a more political/governmental level – which the authors would support.

These challenges around capacity, which in many organisations are long-standing concerns, have the potential to directly affect the quality of partnership work, and by extension, support for service users:

> "We don't sit around the table, which I know is a frustration, but we just don't have the capacity anymore". (NGO-09)

> "The biggest challenge that is preventing a lot of that activity is the availability of resources and response there. Because as soon as you turn over the rock, you've then got to respond to it. Sometimes there is the willingness but not the capacity to be able to do that, so people don't want to turn over the rock". (Local-Government-02)

> "Maybe local authority engagement isn't quite there, but then maybe that's the role of the Combined Authority to disseminate back to local authorities, because they too are stretched. I think we all recognise that". (NGO-11)

There are at least three issues worth noting from these discussion points:

1. The fact that some stakeholders feel unable to "sit around the table" due to organisational capacity issues and the need to prioritise service delivery is significant in its own right, since their 'voice' risks being omitted as part of forums and similar collective efforts. In addition, this potentially results in a lack of organisational presence as potential or actual partners, thereby reducing the likelihood of mutual support/collaboration and improved quality of service delivery. In simple terms, a lack of organisational capacity risks becoming a downwards spiral in relation to good quality partnership work and support for service users.
2. If some stakeholders "don't want to turn over the rock" and are therefore reluctant to become involved in MSHT cases, there is a need to be clear that even where a strong willingness to support service users exists, the lack of resources available may affect some partners to get too involved due to concerns over their ability to provide good quality support. Ultimately this may lead to service users not having the chance to engage with potential support that is available.
3. Regarding the concerns over local authority engagement, this extract highlights a theme that is addressed in section 9(e), whereby there are some perceptions that local authorities across Greater Manchester seem more disconnected from each other when compared to projects or initiatives led by GMCA. As above, this may not be a question of willingness to engage, but a question of available resources to support consistent communication and coordination between local authorities. There is an implicit suggestion here that it may be useful for GMCA to maintain and/or possibly expand their coordination role to help address gaps that local authorities are

unable to, which could result in a more consistent approach to service delivery across Greater Manchester.

As a prominent example of the challenges associated with partnership work and service delivery highlighted above, there were specific concerns with addressing NRM referrals and associated support:

> "I do think there is so much more we could do. But we just physically or practically are not able to … I think in our organisation we have a very good success rate with NRM referrals as far as responders and our clients getting positive RG. So, there was this discussion at one of the forums, there's a lot of RGs coming back negative, is there a capacity somewhere or some service organisation challenging these decisions or applying for reconsideration? As much as I would love to say we could, our capacity is not big enough to be able to step in and say we can help with any negative RG decision that comes in." (NGO-12)

> "… the NRM and having RG decisions. The people with the decision should be eligible for certain support and services. For example, legal aid, solicitors, but it's very hard to access that because lots of solicitors are at full capacity. They might not take these types of cases on, so it's in one way saying yeah, you're eligible for it, but practically they can't access it because there's either no solicitors with capacity or they're not taking these cases on". (NGO-12)

Although NGO-12's organisation is reported to have a strong success rate for NRM referrals, Figure 6 in section 4 shows that in recent years there has been a decreasing proportion of positive NRM (RG and CG) decisions. In some instances, such as for certain nationalities (see Figure 9), there has also been an increase in negative RG decisions. Aside from these specific figures, the wider issue of support for NRM-related work that NGO-12 refers to surfaced in other ways as well:

In some respects, the legitimacy of the NRM process relies on having an NGO sector to make it work in a fair manner. Even so, the above extracts point to a tangible example of how a lack of organisational capacity and collaboration across the MSHT sector can have detrimental effects on potential victims.

There may be a case for clarifying expectations with how support/services are accessed following a positive NRM decision, since the NRM process does not guarantee access to all services – instead, it provides victims with an advocate who can assist with getting such services. Nevertheless, the extracts above indicate that crucial factors such as legal and mental health support may not be readily available, which not only carries significant risks for victims, but could be reflected in other areas of support such as housing, employment, and education.

> "There's a reason why [organisation] is struggling because it doesn't have the financial support to deal with massive cases that's taking place in dealing with victims. And unfortunately, the backlog of housing, the backlog of support for them is suffering because of that funding issue". (Local-Government-05)

> "Accessing counselling, we find that that is not always available at the point of need. So often, if a service user is in urgent need of counselling, we do have to pay privately for that". (NGO-09)

While not the focus of this report, a 'middle way' for thinking longer term about these challenges might be to have some form of regional NRM that devolves decision-making processes from the national level.

(b) Limited financial resources

Closely intertwined with the issue of organisational capacity is that of funding and financial resources available to the MSHT sector across Greater Manchester:

> "I talked about budgets at a higher level, but I know some of the smaller organisations have to source funding from a number of organisations. Within local authorities, the commitment's there, the money's made available, but outside of that there are some good smaller networks but their funding year on year is less certain. Could they be adopted by their local authority? You know, could we just all combine our efforts more effectively?" (NGO-09)

> "It would be nice if we had more resources. We currently only record certain key fields and stuff. It's down to limitations in our systems and also limitations in resources as well, so it'd be nice if we could do more". (Law-Enforcement-01)

"The chronic problem of underfunding of the voluntary sector in this space, those community organisations that are creating those safe, inclusive spaces for non-UK nationals ultimately comes down from national government. There's no community cohesion, no meaningful cohesion strategy or budget for local authorities to issue on and recognise the role of those organisations. Most of them have never received statutory funding. I think that goes up the chain, that there's a local authority role there too. While the mitigation with government is escalation of policy problems and operational issues with the asylum system and funding". (Local-Government-01)

There is a recurring theme of underfunding across organisations working with victims of MSHT, non-UK nationals, and vulnerable children. Many voluntary and community-based services highlight not receiving statutory funding and being reliant on fragmented, short-term grants. This chronic underinvestment limits their capacity to provide adequate support and sustain services over time, which directly affects their ability to meet increasing and complex demands.

While there is evidence of local authority commitment, organisations note a lack of cohesive strategy or coordinated support at both local and national levels. These financial and wider capacity limitations not only affect organisations' abilities to deliver frontline services, but they also restrict data collection and reporting capabilities, which are essential for monitoring needs, evaluating impact, and securing further funding. These systemic issues may reduce overall quality and accountability across the MSHT sector.

(c) Challenges of funding models

A specific aspect of the above financial challenges relates to the short-term cyclical nature of funding, whether this stems from local authorities or other (e.g., national/governmental) funding streams:

"For exploited children, short-term commission services aren't helpful, so they might commission a year's worth of work. Exploited and trafficked children, all the research says they need consistency, they need persistence, they need long term support and so commissioning a service for one year is really unhelpful because it limits what can be done with those children. I know this is about commissioning, but it is about partnerships because those partnerships, those commission services sit within those partnerships, and they are a vital part of that partnership. And they really need to be looking at a minimum of 2-3 years of funding. Otherwise, those partnerships just cannot be effective. Because you just build in those partnerships and you start to set up and you're doing really great work as a collective, operationally and strategically, and then it ends and those children are the ones that are left, ultimately, with unfinished work, unfinished support". (NGO-10)

> "From a project perspective, it's a year-on-year project … It's March and we still don't know if we've got money from April. But that's not unusual, is it? We've managed to stretch it so that we can keep people for longer than April. But yeah, that is always a limitation from our side, is the funding". (NHS-01)

A key concern raised is the prevalence of year-to-year project funding, which contributes to instability in staffing, planning, and service delivery. Contracts tied to annual budgets can make it more difficult for organisations to retain staff or build trust with service users, which is especially critical in supporting victims who require long-term, consistent engagement. Short-term commissioning practices risk disrupting partnerships and may result in unfinished or fragmented support for those most in need. These challenges associated with short-term funding are supported in existing research findings within the Greater Manchester area (e.g., Davies et al., 2025).

To some extent, these challenges around funding cycles stem from the national level, whereby government funding cycles have typically lasted for just one year, including how they fund local government. In turn, this makes it difficult, if not impossible, for local governments (who may fund several NGOs/charities) to set their own budgets for longer than one year.

Based on the recent Spending Review (House of Commons Library, 2025), the current UK government is moving towards multi-year funding cycles, whereby departmental resource budgets will be specified over three years rather than one year. These changes at the national level may have positive implications for how funding is allocated to local government, since it may provide greater certainty for funded projects and similar commitments.

(d) Linking up different challenges

The following discussion points illustrate concerns about the potential lack of integration between MSHT and other key policy areas:

> "I think the other thing we can do better is probably articulate the ways in which other priority areas manifest themselves within modern slavery and human trafficking experiences. Particularly big national policy areas at the moment, gender-based violence and serious violence. Both of those are so solidly ingrained in the way that modern slavery and human trafficking is done and manifests itself and the experience of the individuals within that. I think sometimes it's seen separate to it when very much both of those things were a part of it". (Local-Government-02)

"I think we need to highlight the risks of the asylum system for exploitation more than we do in our conversations. We look at dispersal, we look at having office policies, but we don't talk about the impact it has on people. I think it would be really helpful for us to do that, and for other partners to do that, that are specialists on this. We sit in meetings pretty much every day talking about what's happening on the ground, but I've never seen them around in those conversations". (Local-Government-03)

"We need to be better at coming into the other networks to discuss modern slavery there. I'm so sure that there's an asylum and migration partnership, more than just the mailing list that I'm on, maybe events happening, which I think is really important that we go into those spaces". (NGO-02)

These extracts highlight some potential separation between MSHT work and broader policy and practice areas such as gender-based violence and 'serious violence'. Despite clear intersections, such as the exploitation risks embedded within the asylum system or the gendered nature of many MSHT experiences, MSHT may be treated as a distinct or siloed issue. This separation may limit opportunities for joint learning, coordinated responses, and the embedding of MSHT perspectives within other strategic frameworks. Participants pointed to the need for greater cross-sectoral engagement and better articulation of how MSHT issues develop within, and are shaped by, wider social and policy contexts.

(e) Risks of disconnect and duplication across Greater Manchester

From the preceding section on the need to link up various challenges across the MSHT/migration/asylum/homelessness spaces, some participants suggested that there was significant disconnect between different local authorities across Greater Manchester with regards to MSHT partnerships, despite the presence of GMCA:

"It's [partnership work] a very hard thing to do, especially when all your different districts and local authorities work kind of separately as well". (Law-Enforcement-01)

"Although we come under a Combined Authority, the individual localities still have their own priorities. Funds and commissioning are all in different places and their pictures of modern slavery can sometimes be different". (Law-Enforcement-02)

"There's no connection between what's happening in the field across the local authorities in terms of the policy direction". (Local-Government-05)

> "The understanding of other boroughs, although we have obviously lots of GMCA meetings, the actual understanding of their structures, how they work, that's one thing we don't actually know … It is disconnected in between each borough. I don't think there's enough partnership work outside your local authority or even understanding of how different local authorities work and deliver services. It is quite disjointed sometimes that it feels like we're almost not working together". (Local-Government-06)

These extracts suggest some level of fragmentation across local authorities, even within the framework of a Combined Authority. While Greater Manchester's devolution arrangements offer a regional structure, in practice, local authorities continue to operate with considerable autonomy, which can lead to diverging priorities, disjointed commissioning processes, and inconsistent approaches to MSHT partnership work. This resulting patchwork may undermine coherence in both policy implementation and service provision.

Respondents pointed to a lack of shared understanding and limited cross-borough engagement, suggesting that even basic knowledge of how neighbouring authorities function is sometimes absent. Despite the role of Combined Authority meetings, frontline practitioners suggest that collaborative working across local authority boundaries is minimal. This perceived disconnect between service delivery and overarching policy direction contributes to a sense of fragmentation, which limits the potential for shared learning, coordination, and consistent survivor support across the region.

Related to this potential disconnect between local authorities, there is a risk of duplication and repetition in the MSHT space, which apparently includes some misunderstanding within statutory organisations of their obligations:

> "There appears to be a lot of overlap and duplication. There are pockets of good practice around the country. We are better at sharing that, but sometimes there's so much being shared, it's difficult to keep up with everything that's going on". (NGO-09)

> "From our perspective, if every stakeholder, if every statutory organisation simply did what they were obligated to do within the statutory guidance, that would be a really good start because a lot of our time is spent just having conversations about actually what people are obligated to do in the first place. I think if those obligations were being met that would solve a lot of the issues". (NGO-10)

The extracts point to inefficiencies in the wider MSHT response landscape, where overlap, duplication, and inconsistent adherence to statutory obligations can lead to significant challenges. While examples of good practice exist and are increasingly shared (i.e., there is a suggestion here that Greater Manchester is better at sharing MSHT-related information

than other parts of the UK), the volume and fragmentation of this information can overwhelm rather than assist those working in the field. Simultaneously, there is a sense of frustration that foundational duties outlined in statutory guidance are not consistently met, which then requires stakeholders to spend time and resources on basic compliance issues rather than building on a shared baseline of good quality practice.

In terms of the Greater Manchester partnership focus on MSHT, as well as migration/asylum, and homelessness, some participants pointed to connections between these areas and how individuals may be affected across each of the spaces:

> "One of the things we've seen in asylum in the past year is fast tracked asylum decision making. Which led to this weird time where there was seven-day eviction notices, street homelessness. You can see how people were desperate to find work because they don't want to be street homeless because there's no social housing". (Local-Government-03)

In general terms, Greater Manchester's Housing Strategy (GMCA, 2019: 7) suggests a decreasing proportion of social housing since the early 1980s, with over 97,000 households across the region now waiting for a social home – 26,000 of which are identified as 'in priority need' for a social rented home.

Additionally, the Mayor of Greater Manchester more recently set out plans to 'unlock' land for thousands of new homes, and that by 2027, Greater Manchester will be building more social housing than it is losing through Right to Buy (GMCA 2025b). In line with the above extract, while the 2019-24 Strategy and more recent announcements contain an ambition to enable those in need to quickly access social housing, this seems to be an ongoing challenge.

For some, the 'desperation' for work alluded to above, and related to uncertainties with their immigration status and accommodation provisions, can result in individuals taking whatever form of employment they can get and potentially becoming overly reliant on unscrupulous employers and/or the illicit economy in some cases (FLEX, 2022). Therefore, the risks of disconnect between MSHT and other policy areas, including (but not limited to) migration/asylum and homelessness, are particularly important to be aware of. Some local

> "To be honest, we have a very centralised system here. I think there are good and bad points about that. I think from a safeguarding point of view, it does mean that it's easy to have conversations about it … I think in other areas in Greater Manchester, the number of agencies involved could be much larger, and I think there are pros and cons about that … I think the weakness of that is though, it means that we might all be looking at an issue with the same view, whereas if you have a lot of agencies involved, you might have many different views on it". (Local-Government_04)

authorities within Greater Manchester felt that these overlapping areas were relatively well joined up within their borough:

Based on the above, while it may be the case that communication is easier if overlapping concerns related to MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum are joined up or more centralised, there may still be concerns over the quality of this communication – in other words, whether some diversity of opinion is lost by having fewer organisational 'voices' involved. Even so, the signposting of these issues closely relates to how participants felt that current gaps and challenges across key partnership focus areas could be joined up more constructively.

(f) Competition between organisations/services/NGOs

While not a prominent concern when compared to many of the preceding discussion points in this review, on occasions participants felt as though limited resources and funding in the MSHT sector could lead to competition rather than collaboration:

> "In terms of if we're launching a campaign, even if we're wanting to get involved in a research project, the spirit of collaboration might not be as genuine as it would ideally be, because ultimately, we are competing for the same pots of money in terms of donations from the public, in terms of contracts for research. So, I do feel that there's that limitation there in terms of not just quality, but all the kind of NGOs that might be involved of not being fully open about what we have in the pipeline, what we're developing, about collaborating together because there's always that element of work and competing for the same pots of money and so, you want to kind of hold things to your chest". (NGO-04)

> "Sometimes there tends to be conflict in terms of budget and funding as well and who's going to get that work and who's going to get that funding going forward? That's a shame. I get it, but it is a shame because again, the victim needs to be at the at the forefront". (Law-Enforcement-03)

The main risk here is that of creating a more rivalrous environment that does not encourage honest communication, knowledge sharing, and partnership. To be clear, in Greater Manchester this risk seems minimal, keeping in mind the content covered in section 6.

Nevertheless, the above participants reflected on tensions that can arise between organisations working in the MSHT sector, particularly in relation to funding and project development. While there seems to be a shared commitment to victim-centred support, the reality of limited resources, whether through public donations, commissioned contracts, or research grants, can lead to competition, i.e., reduced transparency and reluctance to share ideas or work collaboratively, even when joint efforts could strengthen outcomes. These concerns intersect with broader sector-wide issues around sustainability, partnership working, and the challenge of maintaining collaboration under financial pressure.

(g) Awareness and identification challenges among first responders

The following extracts from participants illustrate how frontline awareness of MSHT and its overlap with other social issues varies significantly, sometimes relying on individual exposure or chance rather than systematic training or coordination:

> "I think on a support side it functions very well, but probably on a societal understanding or even with some statutory agencies, like the understanding of the overlap between modern slavery and homelessness isn't quite there". (NGO-02)

> "I think I've noticed a drop in quality of NRMs being submitted from first responders and I think that might be that there's a not as much training and raising awareness around that currently, which potentially is needed". (Law-Enforcement-02)

> "The difficulty I find in that is that the only reason I was aware of this was because I'd gone to Programme Challenger meetings and NGO forums before, while the licence team may have not known who to contact immediately from there, it's only because [our local government] was aware of the work we've done as a policy team in modern slavery that they could come to us. Obviously, that's really good, but it would be great if all licencing teams were aware of, say, programme Challenger or different tools and assets that could be used". (Local-Government-05)

Ongoing challenges of recognising and responding to the intersections between MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum are highlighted here. In this respect, there may be a question of developing public awareness/education on such topics. For instance, the risks of vulnerable people becoming homeless and then involved in criminal exploitation. In other words, a 'safer Manchester' is needed for everyone.

Even so, despite support systems functioning relatively well once individuals are identified, frontline and statutory awareness of how these issues connect may not be as joined up as they could be. This limited understanding can affect early identification and appropriate referral of individuals who may be at risk or in need of protection.

Some interviewees observed a decline in the quality of NRM submissions from First Responders, partly due to a lack of up-to-date training or awareness-raising activities. When frontline staff lack the necessary knowledge or confidence to make accurate referrals, potential victims may not receive timely support, which suggests that NRM awareness is not evenly embedded across services or consistently maintained. The issue of individual initiative rather systemic organisational practices has been highlighted in section 7(d), although it is still worth noting the potential reliance on personal networks or prior attendance at meetings as a potential gap in more systemic communication.

These potential gaps in awareness suggest a wider fragmentation between related policy areas, especially where service users present with multiple, interconnected vulnerabilities. In this context, some staff may struggle to recognise the signs or indicators of MSHT alongside homelessness or immigration-related concerns or may even not understand the relevance of doing so, thereby risking a limited approach to safeguarding and victim identification.

10. Inclusion of Lived Experience Perspectives

In recent years, the integration of lived experience perspectives into projects, policy priorities, and other MSHT initiatives has emerged as a crucial step. This integration is essential to ensure that such work prioritises the needs of victims, survivors, and individuals with lived experience, thereby shaping impactful findings and interventions (e.g., Ayiwe et al., 2022). Within the context of MSHT in Greater Manchester, the value of these perspectives was largely supported yet significant gaps were identified:

> "I think in terms of the work that we do, we're really trying to take on board the lived experience voice a lot more. I don't think it was something that if I'm honest we did very well in the past or considered in the past. I think it's something that is hugely important to learn from, but it has to be done in the right way and empathetically … people need to be commissioned, they're not just a story on legs. You know, you have to commission that piece of work properly." (Law-Enforcement-04)

> "I would love to see more partnership working with lived experience consultants. I think at the moment it's still a little bit of an afterthought with a lot of the partnership working, so it'd be good to really get that ingrained in". (NGO-02)

> "It would be lovely if they could have some kind of priority on different waiting lists, but I quite often feel that once our survivors receive, let's say, positive conclusive grounds decision, it doesn't seem to make much difference when they're accessing other services … it would be really good if they could kind of open some more doors for the clients when it comes to their needs and support". (NGO-12)

Participants recognised the value of including PLE in their work, and in some cases, anecdotally had experience of doing so. Indeed, approaches such as the Greater Manchester Homelessness Prevention Strategy 2021-2026 recommend co-production and working with PLE as part of decision-making processes related to designing and delivering services (GMCA, 2021).

However, there seems to be recognition that PLE are underutilised in such MSHT partnership work. While the value of PLE insight is broadly recognised, its integration into partnership structures and decision-making processes remains somewhat limited and, as one respondent put it, "still a little bit of an afterthought."

From various discussions, there is a shared recognition that engaging PLE has the potential to significantly enhance the relevance, sensitivity, and value of support services. However, participants emphasised that such engagement must be more than symbolic. Survivors should be meaningfully involved and not merely consulted as a token gesture or for narrative

appeal. A strong sentiment emerged that those with lived experience must be formally recognised and appropriately compensated for their contributions.

Rather than positioning PLE as "just a story on legs," properly commissioned roles that reflect the professional value of their input would be a useful step forward, where there are available resources to do so.

A related barrier raised is the limited material impact of positive NRM decisions on the ability of individuals to access services. Even where survivors receive a positive Conclusive Grounds decision, this formal recognition may not translate into prioritised or streamlined access to wider systems of support such as housing, mental health services, or education.

While the NRM process cannot guarantee how access to all services will work in practice, the potential gaps between a survivor's entitlement to support, and how this is (or is not) delivered in practice, can leave survivors in limbo, who are formally acknowledged as victims but not substantively supported as such. This lack of follow-through, regardless of the underlying explanation(s), may undermine both recovery and reintegration efforts, which in some circumstances can indicate gaps between policy intentions and practice.

As a potential concern, 'PLE' is by no means a single unified group – there will be various perspectives on different issues with regards to project decisions and implementation. For instance, it may be the case that PLE who are unable or find it harder to access opportunities to engage in the co-design and consultation process of projects are a key voice being omitted. In such cases, there may be questions on how to engage with a wider range of PLE.

Referring to the data in especially Figures 7-10, part of the challenge with PLE consultancy is that, although it is both necessary and valuable to involve a wide range of experts by experience, it is not always clear at the start of a project which types of experiences require more detailed exploration. For example, certain subgroups of PLE consultants, such as Eastern European men who have been affected by labour exploitation, or British nationals with a background of moving in and out of care or young offender institutions, may be underrepresented as PLEs even though they might in fact represent some of the most common victim profiles in particular situations.

These reflections suggest some mismatch between rhetoric and practice when it comes to making lived experience more central to MSHT partnerships. While progress is being made, some current engagement appears to be fragmented or not fully incorporated into existing work. Ensuring that lived experience is embedded in partnership work, through robust frameworks, fair compensation, and influence over service design and delivery, would be a useful step in developing the MSHT response.

11. Limited Engagement of (and by) the Private Sector

Somewhat related to the bigger picture of addressing MSHT as well as issues specific to Greater Manchester, most participants felt that there was a lack of partnership work and wider engagement with the private sector, especially in relation to businesses who are not directly involved in providing services such as accommodation:

> "I think we utilise the private sector in terms of us going out and telling them, but do we necessarily listen to the private sector and think about how we can engage them better? Probably not". (NGO-09)

> "We've actually struggled a little bit to find businesses in Greater Manchester to be involved with the programme, which is something we've been trying to do for quite a while". (NGO-02)

> "We have no choice but to engage the private sector in a range of different settings. A large number of children's accommodation is now run by the private sector. You've got, for example, the night-time economy and other businesses that are integral to models of exploitation. And so, we need to engage hotels, we need to engage fast food shops, we need to engage taxis and licensing, all of those". (NGO-10)

> "I do see our disparity sometimes, when I compare Greater Manchester figures to the national figures. The national figures are much more focused on labour exploitation, which could link into, information from the private sector, whereas we don't have that information in Greater Manchester, we don't seem to have as much. I don't have access to intelligence suggesting that. It looks like there's a gap there. I cannot say it's because there's no business forum, that would be the answer. But it kind of alludes to, there could be this disconnect with the businesses and the private sector potentially". (241212_001_Law-Enforcement-01)

While outreach to businesses does occur, this may be one-directional and focused on delivering messages or awareness-raising rather than encouraging mutual dialogue or more sustained collaboration. There is also a practical challenge in mobilising local businesses to participate in anti-trafficking initiatives, despite their integral role in both potential risk settings and prevention efforts.

For instance, as discussed in section 4, since 'labour exploitation' currently appears to be among the most significant type of MSHT experienced by victims living in Greater Manchester (at least when 'out of force' data are included – see Figures 12 and 14), in practice this means that individuals will be subject to exploitation across a number of otherwise legitimate sectors and businesses within them, including within agriculture, food, construction, social care, hospitality, food deliveries, taxi services, and so on.

This disconnect between the private sector and the statutory/NGO sectors may contribute to a lack of local intelligence, especially around labour exploitation, suggesting that limited engagement with the private sector could limit a more complete understanding of the regional exploitation landscape.

While MSHT was the main discussion point for potential business involvement, associated issues related to homelessness also emerged:

> "… there is a role for businesses to play in terms of the policy engagement that they might want to do on raising their concerns around how, if homelessness is an increasing issue or addiction challenges, if people aren't getting that support, that can be exacerbating their risk of falling into a situation of forced labour and that could present a risk that forced labour is infiltrating their business. ... Whilst homelessness might not seem like an immediately obvious thing for a business to be prioritising, where in the region that they work in, that is a challenge that could be indirectly creating an increased risk of forced labour within their business and supply chain". (NGO-14)

Such a discussion point demonstrates the wide variety of areas in which businesses may be able to contribute, both in terms of supporting their local areas as well as protecting the robustness of their own supply chains. In this sense, providing the 'added value' or 'business case' argument for private sector organisations to become more involved in MSHT partnership work could be a useful starting point.

While some businesses have taken a proactive stance in addressing MSHT, thereby developing notable expertise over time, much of the UK's current compliance framework still relies on voluntary engagement beyond baseline statutory requirements. One such requirement is Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which requires that large companies publish an annual statement outlining the steps they are taking to prevent exploitation within their organisations and supply chains.

The key challenges for existing MSHT partners in this area are twofold: first, to assess the potential roles businesses can have and the value they could bring to existing MSHT partnership efforts; and second, to identify more effective ways of engaging businesses, within Greater Manchester and beyond where necessary, to support this agenda. Although the voluntary nature of much of this engagement can limit progress, there remains scope for significantly improving coordination and participation.

More broadly, the role of the private sector is likely to become increasingly central, particularly in light of emerging international frameworks around mandatory due diligence and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) obligations. At the time of writing, the UK arguably lags behind supranational bodies such as the EU in embedding mandatory business requirements, regional and local engagement in MSHT partnerships could present businesses with a strategic opportunity. Active participation may allow businesses to demonstrate their ESG commitments in a credible, locally grounded way, particularly as expectations around responsible business conduct and human rights continue to rise.

12. Recommendations

We make six key recommendations to address the development areas with MSHT partnership work across Greater Manchester.

1. Develop a vision and clear objectives for MSHT partnership work across Greater Manchester

Participants consistently highlighted the need for a more unified and clearly communicated strategy at the Greater Manchester level. While collaboration is strong in principle, operational silos and confusion over partnership governance may limit the translation of good intent into coordinated action. A shared framework of priorities, potentially led by GMCA and/or the NGO Anti-Trafficking Forum, could include city-region-wide objectives, outcome indicators, and expectations for all stakeholders. The authors appreciate that some of this work is already ongoing. Therefore, transparent and consistent communication of these priorities would help to strengthen awareness and accountability across the regional MSHT sector.

This recommendation is also supported by the SNA (see section 5), especially since it identifies a relatively strong and interconnected MSHT partnerships network across Greater Manchester. Importantly, the SNA suggests that while there is not a single organisation that dominates the overall network, there are several highly ranked organisations that are central to it. These organisations may be well placed in terms of resources and positioning within the network to take ownership of and lead the development of such a longer-term strategy for others to work towards.

Expanding on the above, this review highlights a strong culture of collaboration across Greater Manchester, especially at the city-region level, which is underpinned by proactive mindsets, mutual respect, trust, and a genuine commitment to addressing challenges related to MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum. Participants praised the openness to challenge, and the proactive environment that is encouraged by structures such as the Anti-Trafficking Forum. Continued investment in this culture, both financially and through leadership, will be essential to maintain momentum, avoid partnership 'fatigue', and ensure long-term sustainability. Therefore, stakeholders should continue to prioritise regular, meaningful opportunities for cross-sector dialogue and avoid complacency in the face of external pressures such as policy developments at the national level and various funding constraints.

Part of developing the city-region's key missions would ideally include some (re)consideration of its specialised forums. The perceived benefits of forums varied, with some praised and others criticised for inconsistency or lack of focus. To improve coordination, clearer agendas, action tracking, and stronger links between local and regional groups are recommended, while avoiding the pitfalls of either over-expansion or excessive narrowing of participation. Suggestions include hosting annual conferences, appointing Forum representatives to liaise across groups, and involving senior decision-makers to enhance accountability and communication.

By establishing a unified and clearly communicated strategy for MSHT partnerships (including its Forums) across Greater Manchester, survivors will benefit from more

coordinated and consistent support. Clear priorities and shared accountability among partners will help to ensure timely, meaningful, and informed responses that are tailored to survivors' needs.

2. Establish formalised governance structures to lead MSHT work in Greater Manchester

A similar theme was ambiguity over the governance of MSHT at various levels, especially between GMCA, local authorities, NGOs, and other statutory services. Greater clarity around roles, responsibilities, reporting, and escalation pathways would help to avoid duplication and ensure a more coherent response with regards to strategic oversight, and to ensure adequate resourcing to guide partnership priorities across the sector.

As part of enhancing the governance of MSHT across the city-region, some key points that could be considered include:

- Any implementation of roles that relate to coordination functions, organisational structures, and/or leadership should be supported by GMCA so that any new governance structures have statutory backing, which would help to reduce the risks of obstacles such as non-engagement from the MSHT sector.
- Partners generally felt that the function of having a properly resourced, central organisation with the authority to direct and deliver on MSHT partnership work is more important than whether a person is named with an official role or job title. Therefore, it would be important to consider whether any new governance structures duplicate or overlap with existing roles (e.g., Deputy Mayor, other GMCA roles).

One of the advantages associated with more formalised governance structures is the ability to raise awareness and coordinate across Greater Manchester's 'big ticket' policies, such as homelessness, gender-based violence, migration/asylum, and Trauma Responsive Greater Manchester.

Related to governance, there is a clear need for improved awareness of MSHT in adjacent sectors, such as housing, health, licensing, and the private sector. Inconsistent training and knowledge among first responders, such as housing officers or licensing teams, contribute to missed opportunities for early intervention. A targeted awareness strategy that potentially involves sector-specific toolkits and ongoing training would help integrate MSHT considerations into routine practice across a wider range of public services and private sector activities.

As part of 'awareness raising', further training for organisations on how to complete good quality NRM referrals would be beneficial. This suggestion stems mainly from the perceived low quality of some NRM referrals (e.g., incomplete forms, a general lack of MSHT understanding), whereby additional training on the process of completing NRM referral forms would be useful and would benefit both partners and survivors. Arguably, survivors have a key role in challenging government policy on the NRM process where it has detrimental impacts on potential NRM victims (e.g., see Figures 6 and 9). Ideally, it should not fall to (small) NGOs to challenge such policy – or if it does, then they need the backing of politicians, business, other professionals in the MSHT sector, and university leaders. More formalised governance structures may help with these issues.

A formalised governance function across the city-region would help to create clearer accountability and coordination across services, thereby reducing gaps and confusion that may delay or dilute support. For survivors, this would mean a more seamless journey through various support services, where their needs are recognised earlier, and support is more consistent regardless of where in Greater Manchester they engage with services.

3. Identify and engage named individuals in local authorities to support MSHT coordination

The perceived absence of consistent MSHT contact points in local authorities was frequently cited as a barrier to more coordinated responses, especially between local authorities. Where contacts do exist, their role may be informal or vulnerable to staff turnover, which can result in a sudden loss of expertise or momentum.

Each local authority should designate a named individual (or individuals) who has clear responsibilities in relation to MSHT work and, where appropriate, decision-making authority. For example, such individuals could consist of an 'internal' MSHT lead/champion for queries that arise within the organisation, as well as a more 'external' facing role for other organisations to liaise with – in other words, a single point of contact. Embedding these roles within organisational structures and ensuring that they are part of strategic and operational forums, would help to bridge gaps in continuity and improve both information flow and survivor outcomes.

There was a general perception that while leadership/coordination at the Greater Manchester level (i.e., from GMCA) was well placed to support local authorities, communication and awareness within and between local authorities was less well-developed. Having MSHT leads and single points of contact to develop any existing collaboration, not just with GMCA but with other local authorities as well, would be a useful step.

There are two further potential advantages linked with having named individuals within each local authority. First, these individuals would be well placed to co-ordinate an expansion of structured secondments, observation placements, or joint training across the MSHT, migration/asylum, and homelessness spaces, which could significantly improve coordination and help to break down 'silos' in the overall response to supporting victims, survivors, and service users. Some innovative examples of staff shadowing were shared during the review, especially in local authorities where staff gained insights into partner organisations' work. These initiatives, which seem to be more prominent in homelessness-related work, were seen to help in developing empathy, mutual understanding, and practical skills. Such initiatives could potentially be more expansive, both in terms of frequency/amount as well as across areas of policy, given the overlap between MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum.

Second, having named individuals across local authorities may help in strengthening data sharing protocols. While strong personal relationships underpin much current collaboration in Greater Manchester, this approach can be vulnerable to staff turnover, whereby (at least in the short term) there could be negative impacts on communication and organisational expertise. For instance, several participants noted difficulties in accessing data or understanding who was doing what across boroughs.

Establishing shared data platforms, which are underpinned by clear information governance structures, could improve efficiency and communication. As an example, some partners from NGOs stated that in the field of adult safeguarding, they currently do not know how many MSHT referrals have been made through the safeguarding process across the ten local authorities, whereby they would find even a summary of data useful to have. Named individuals across the local authorities may be well placed to coordinate such efforts.

As part of this recommendation, there should ideally be a comprehensive 'handover' process in place for subsequent leads/single points of contact as and when such individuals move on to new roles, which would minimise the challenges around loss of expertise and staff turnover discussed in section 7(d). For victims, survivors, and service users, having named individuals embedded in each local authority with clear MSHT responsibilities will create more consistent (internal) leads, (external facing) points of contact, improve coordination, continuity, and accountability across services. For survivors, this means fewer missed opportunities for support, better-informed professionals, and more joined-up responses across local authorities that reflect the complexity of their needs.

4. Ensure a consistent positive experience for victims and survivors of MSHT across Greater Manchester

While provisions from the MSVCC sector contain an important foundation for supporting survivors within the NRM, its remit and capacity are limited. Across Greater Manchester, survivor experiences continue to vary widely, especially in relation to housing, legal access, mental health support, and post-NRM pathways. There is a need to integrate MSHT-related support more smoothly into mainstream (statutory) local services and not assume that MSVCC and VCFSE provisions by themselves are sufficient to meet the needs of victims and survivors.

This includes recognising and responding to individuals who may be excluded from the NRM or who receive negative decisions, but who have still experienced significant exploitation and/or other harm. A consistent, survivor-informed approach, potentially that is underpinned by minimum service standards or locally agreed best practice, would help to reduce fragmentation and ensure that survivors are left without support simply because of national eligibility frameworks.

By developing more consistent, survivor-centred support across Greater Manchester, survivors will face fewer barriers to accessing essential services, regardless of their referral status or location. This would encourage more stable, longer-term recovery pathways that reflect the complexity of survivors' experiences and needs.

5. Include people with lived experience in developing services and responses to tackle MSHT

Closely related to the previous recommendation, the inclusion of PLE was widely acknowledged as essential to shaping relevant and ethical partnership work. Where possible, the authors of this review strongly support PLE involvement as standard practice across MSHT-related activities. However, such roles should be resourced appropriately and embedded into partnership/project plans, rather than being treated as tokenistic additions. Organisations should therefore explore formal mechanisms (e.g., advisory panels, co-production roles) to sustain meaningful PLE engagement.

More consistently involving PLE in MSHT (and similar) projects is intended to ensure that services and strategies are shaped by practical insights, thereby making them more relevant, respectful, and useful. For survivors, this will ideally lead to support systems that better reflect their realities, empower their voices, and promote longer-term recovery and agency.

6. Develop a stronger MSHT partnership with the private sector

Engagement with businesses remains somewhat limited and often one-directional. Yet many forms of labour exploitation occur in otherwise legitimate sectors such as hospitality, social care, agriculture, and construction. There is considerable potential to engage employers more meaningfully – not just as audiences for awareness-raising, but as proactive partners in prevention, intelligence gathering, and survivor support. Developing a business engagement strategy with clear incentives (e.g., ESG alignment, reputational benefits, community engagement) could build sustained collaboration with the private sector.

At the time of writing, there are discussions under way to potentially re-establish the Greater Manchester Modern Slavery Business Network, which was active between 2018 to 2022 (an exploratory workshop to consider restarting the network took place in 2025[4]). The purpose of this network was to provide businesses who are based in or have a connection to the region to work together and support each other in addressing MSHT. Related to earlier recommendations in this report, it may be the case that businesses would be more engaged with issues related to MSHT if public awareness were to focus on mobilising consumers to ask questions about issues such as business supply chains, the treatment of workers, and so on.

A stronger partnership with the private sector will help to prevent exploitation by making workplaces safer and more accountable, especially in high-risk industries. For survivors, this means earlier identification, more pathways to support and redress, and increased opportunities for recovery through ethical employment and business-led initiatives. Opportunities to develop this further with existing infrastructure such as the Good Employment Charter, Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce and Greater Manchester Social Value Network should be explored.

[4] It is not yet fully clear if or how the Business Network will operate going forward, since discussions are evolving – although initial expressions of interest from the private sector (and others) have been promising.

13. Conclusion

The review concludes that while partners in Greater Manchester have laid strong foundations for partnership-based responses to MSHT, substantial work remains to embed consistency, resilience, and sustainability across the MSHT sector. Organisations across the city-region show a clear dedication to tackling exploitation and are supported by a generally constructive culture of collaboration and openness to improvement. Nevertheless, persistent challenges, including capacity shortfalls, fragmented governance, as well as a restrictive and shifting national policy context, continue to undermine service quality and equity. These challenges mean that there is a pressing need for a more cohesive long-term vision and leadership to go with this, and not solely a forum that existing stakeholders are comfortable in.

The various intersections between MSHT, homelessness, and migration/asylum require more integrated approaches to policy and practice. Survivors often straddle multiple systems that operate in silos, which results in fragmented support that does not always account for the complexity of their experiences. The report calls for bold regional leadership, longer-term funding solutions, and a renewed commitment to survivor engagement – not as a symbolic gesture but as a central pillar of partnership design and service delivery, which would also help to anticipate challenges of prevention, as well as their social policy and criminal justice implications.

Looking ahead, Greater Manchester is well-placed to lead by example. By encouraging coherent strategies, improving cross-borough coordination, and advocating for systemic reforms at the national level, the city-region can further strengthen its collective ability to address exploitation and protect those at risk. This report provides a roadmap to support that ambition.

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