

Exploitation in focus

British woman repeatedly trafficked for sex after Home Office failures

High court judge intervenes to prevent victim of county lines sex exploitation being made street homeless after refusal to find her safe housing

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A young and highly vulnerable British sex trafficking victim was re-trafficked by **county lines drug gangs** on multiple occasions after the Home Office repeatedly refused to fulfil its legal obligation to provide her with safe accommodation.

A high court judge was forced to intervene to compel the **Home Office** to house the woman, who was about to become street homeless.

The 22-year-old has a history of sexual and drug abuse and exploitation and grew up in the care system; she was allegedly sexually abused while in foster care. She has complex physical and mental health issues and has attempted suicide on multiple occasions.

As a teenager she fell under the control of county lines gangs who advertised her for sex on escort websites and used her as a drugs mule. She was also forced to commit petty crimes and her social media account was used to advertise sexual services.

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In June 2019, she was identified as a potential victim of trafficking by the Home Office. At this point she should have been provided with safe accommodation and mental health support, yet the Home Office failed to find her somewhere safe to stay. Shortly after this she was re-trafficked by criminal gangs and was again forced into prostitution in various locations in London.

One month later, the woman was found walking along a motorway in distress by police and was admitted to a mental health facility as an in-patient. When she was deemed fit enough to be discharged, the hospital and her lawyers wrote to the Home Office asking for safe housing to be sourced. Yet despite repeated appeals, she was left at the hospital for a further two months.

On 2 January this year, the Home Office replied to the hospital, saying the woman's complex mental health needs made her a danger to herself and others and that there were no appropriate safe-house places available.

Hours before she was due to be discharged on to the street, a high court judge forced the Home Office to act, and 24-hour support was found.

"The failure to provide our client with the specialist support and accommodation to which she was legally entitled has had devastating consequences, including her having been repeatedly re-trafficked, sexually assaulted and financially exploited," said Rachael Davis, a solicitor at Duncan Lewis.

"Our client was recognised as a victim of modern slavery as long ago as June 2019, yet she was not provided with a safe place to live until January 2020 - and only once we had obtained a court order compelling the secretary of state for the home department to do so.

"It is wholly unacceptable to refuse to provide specialist support and accommodation to a victim of modern slavery because their needs are too complex. Ultimately these are the people who need it the most."

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A Home Office spokesperson said: "We do not routinely comment on individual cases.

"Modern slavery and human trafficking are barbaric crimes and we remain committed to stamping them out. Our world-leading Modern Slavery Act has given law enforcement the tools they need to tackle this and

introduced a maximum life sentence for perpetrators.

"Our significant reforms to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for victims of modern slavery, such as the introduction of new Single Competent Authority and the launch of a digital referral form, ensure victims get the support they need more quickly."

The government has faced **persistent criticism** that its rhetoric on ending modern slavery in the UK does not match the levels of funding and support offered to victims. Although in 2019 more than 2,000 people were given housing and specialist support through the Victim Care Contract (VCC) - specifically intended to support survivors of modern day slavery - campaigners warn that delays in support and a lack of specialist and safe accommodation is leaving many traumatised victims isolated and vulnerable to re-trafficking.

Other trafficking survivors told the Guardian of serious problems they had encountered in safe house accommodation provided by the government. One woman, who had experienced domestic servitude and sexual violence at the hands of her employer, said she had been placed in a B&B in Dover, where she and other survivors were propositioned by male lorry drivers who believed they were prostitutes.

Another woman, who had been forced to be a drugs mule by a criminal gang, said she was placed in a hostel with male victims of forced labour, where she was harassed and had money and possessions stolen. “I was so scared that I stayed in my room all day,” she said. “It was like being back in detention.”

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