

Home Office U-turns after unlawfully slashing support for trafficking survivors during pandemic

Exclusive: Financial support reinstated for suspected modern slavery victims following threat of legal challenge

The Home Office has made a U-turn on a decision to cut financial support for trafficking victims during the pandemic days before legal action is due to take place, *The Independent* can reveal.

Hundreds of people recognised as potential survivors of modern slavery who had been placed in hotels and other interim accommodation during lockdown stopped receiving their weekly government allowance – which is designed to aid their recovery – without warning in July.

In one case, a Kenyan woman – believed to have been trafficked to the UK and held in a brothel where she was forced to have sex daily – was unable to access essential toiletries, including sanitary pads and toothpaste, and top-up for her phone in order to contact her support worker and lawyers.

Legal representatives said there was no legal basis for such practice as it placed vulnerable people at risk of re-trafficking. A number of individuals have successfully challenged the cuts in court and had their support reinstated as a result, but the Home Office initially declined to reinstate support for all of those affected.

The department was due in court next week to face lawyers arguing that the government should reinstate support to all potential modern slavery survivors in initial asylum accommodation, in line with the law.

However, on Thursday, days before the court hearing, the Home Office made changes to its modern slavery guidance to state that this group would continue to receive support, although the rate was reduced from £35 per week to £25.40 – which campaigners said was “nowhere near enough”.

The government said it would also backdate payments for all potential victims of modern slavery housed in initial asylum accommodation to the date in July when payments were stopped.

In cases where the government decides there are “reasonable grounds” to believe someone has been subjected to modern slavery, the individual enters a framework called the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), under which they receive weekly subsistence of either £35 or £65 per week. Those who are also seeking asylum often live in asylum accommodation, but they continue to receive the same rates of financial support.

During the coronavirus lockdown, a number of these individuals were placed in hotels along with other asylum seekers because of a shortage of accommodation. While there was initially no change to their support rates, they were reduced to nothing in early July, with no warning given to them or their lawyers.

Dame Sara Thornton, the UK’s independent anti-slavery commissioner, wrote to the minister for safeguarding, Victoria Atkins, at the start of August demanding clarity on the change to subsistence rates, and warning that it would “only further exacerbate the vulnerability of victims of modern slavery”.

Dame Sara stated in the letter that multiple organisations had contacted her office expressing “significant concerns” regarding the change, with some having to provide supermarket vouchers to survivors to enable them to meet their essential needs. She cited one case where a trafficking survivor had resorted to begging following their loss of financial support.

After being threatened with court action, the Home Office’s modern slavery unit sent out a newsletter to stakeholders on Thursday stating that from 28 August, it would provide potential victims in initial asylum accommodation with £25.40 per week, to “help aid their recovery from exploitation”.

The government legal department wrote a letter to the Royal Courts of Justice on Thursday stating that the Home Office would also backdate payments at the rate of £35 per week for this cohort. It stated that as a result of the new financial assistance, the court hearing could be “vacated”.

A Home Office spokesperson told *The Independent* that the new payment was introduced following a review into support available for potential or confirmed victims of modern slavery in initial asylum accommodation.

Responding to the change in policy, Rachael Davis, of Duncan Lewis Solicitors, the legal firm that launched the action, said: “The government left hundreds of survivors of trafficking without any financial support for two months during a global pandemic. Survivors should not have to fight so hard to receive the little financial support to which they are legally entitled.”

Anna Sereni, researcher and co-ordinator for the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, said the move to reinstate support was “welcome” but that the reduced sum of money provided was “nowhere near enough”.

She added: “We hope people affected by the cut will receive back payments given the precarious position they’ve been forced into. The ongoing lack of transparency and corresponding lack of security causes harm and undermines trust in the very system that is supposed to support asylum-seeking victims of trafficking.”

Silvia Nicolaou Garcia, from Simpson Millar Solicitors, who works with victims of trafficking, said imposing financial cuts on asylum-seeking victims of trafficking in full-board accommodation in the midst of the pandemic was “cruel and inhumane”.

“Many trafficking survivors were left penniless, without adequate support and at risk of further harm. The Home Office had no regard whatsoever to their individual needs as victims of trafficking and to the harm caused. Such decisions by the Home Office disempower trafficking survivors, which echoes of the disempowerment they suffered from their abusers,” she said

A Home Office spokesperson said: “We are proud to provide world-leading support to modern slavery victims to help them to rebuild their lives.

“Following a review into support available for potential or confirmed victims of modern slavery in initial asylum accommodation, we have introduced a weekly payment of £25.40 for recovery needs.

“This is in addition to the support they receive as asylum seekers, which includes accommodation and help with their essential living needs whilst their claims are being assessed.”