Cases are truly shocking, says chair of the Modern Slavery Act review

Home Office sending modern slavery victims back to addresses where they were abused, lawyers warn

Exclusive: Ministers accused of showing 'clear incompetence and sheer disregard' for trafficking victims

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Victims of trafficking are being released from immigration detention back to the addresses where they were enslaved in what has been branded an "unacceptable" failure to protect vulnerable people from re-exploitation.

Lawyers said the Home Office was showing disregard for the safety of people who had been trafficked after it emerged safe housing was not being arranged for victims on their release – often leaving them with no option but to return to the location where they were abused.

In one case, a Chinese woman who was exploited as a sex slave for five years in London, was released from Yarl's Wood immigration removal centre last month and told to make her way to the address in Barking where she had previously been discovered being forced to work in the sex trade.

When a decision has been made through the national referral mechanism (NRM) –

the UK's framework for identifying victims of modern slavery – that a person is a potential victim, they are entitled to receive specialist support which is subcontracted out to the Salvation Army. In order for arrangements to be made for that person to be transferred from a detention centre, the Home Office is expected to liaise with the charity.

However *The Independent* has been informed of numerous cases where the Salvation Army has not been informed, leaving vulnerable victims with no safe address to go to.

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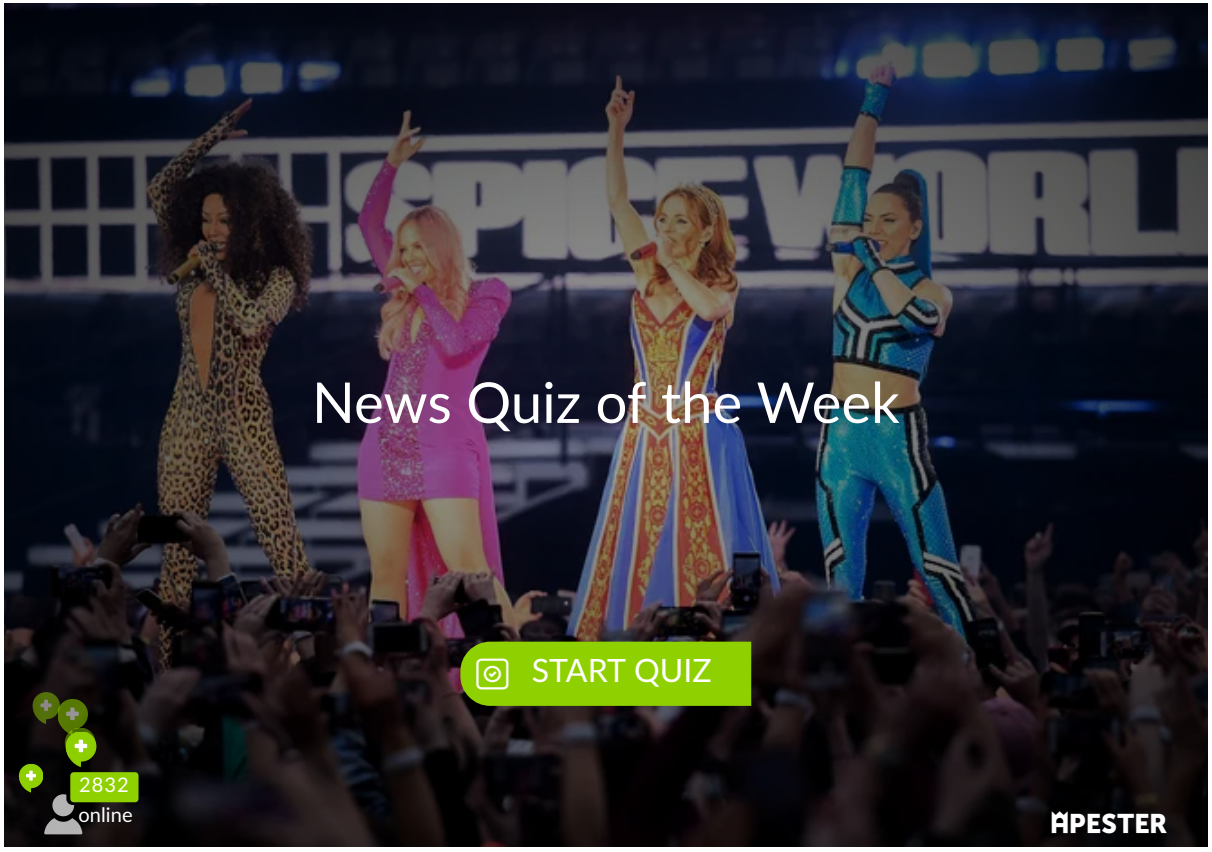
Shalini Patel from Duncan Lewis Solicitors, who represents the Chinese woman, said she received a call from the victim – known only as "H" – on 20 May, saying she had been released and was sitting in the visit reception area and didn't know where to go.

Ms Patel contacted the Salvation Army, who informed her they had "no record" of the woman. The caseworker at the Salvation Army subsequently submitted a complaint to the Home Office stating that the woman had been "released to nobody" and that this "implied grave safeguarding concerns".

The caseworker added: “This is not the first time this situation has occurred within Home Office and IRCs [immigration removal centres]. It is completely unacceptable and we need to liaise, communicate and understand each other’s processes to find a positive solution to dealing with victims of modern day slavery and human trafficking.”



A Home Office spokesperson told *The Independent* the department “accepted and regretted that the correct processes were not initially followed” and said they were investigating the case.

In a separate case, a female trafficking victim who was released from detention and not provided with safe housing through the Salvation Army last December subsequently went missing, which her solicitor said indicated she may have been re-trafficked.

Frank Field MP, chair of the Modern Slavery Act review, said the cases were "truly shocking" and highlighted "carelessness" among Home Office caseworkers, while Labour MP Paul Blomfield said they demonstrated that support for modern slavery victims was "failing".

Ms Patel said the case of her client showed that the safeguarding of detainees was "not a priority" for the Home Office and was "yet another example of the complete lack of empathy for their cases and what they have been through".

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"There is clear incompetence and sheer disregard for the safety of these women who have already been subjected to such horrendous sexual abuse and exploitation," she added.

Adam Spray, legal manager at Bail for Immigration Detainees, said the Home Office was failing to carry out the relevant procedures when releasing vulnerable people from detention.

He told of one case where a man who had been trafficked into cannabis cultivation was released to "his friend's house" and later went missing.

“The Home Office wants to release them as soon as possible because they’re scared of an unlawful detention claim being brought, and they just want them out. They don’t do the checks,” he said.

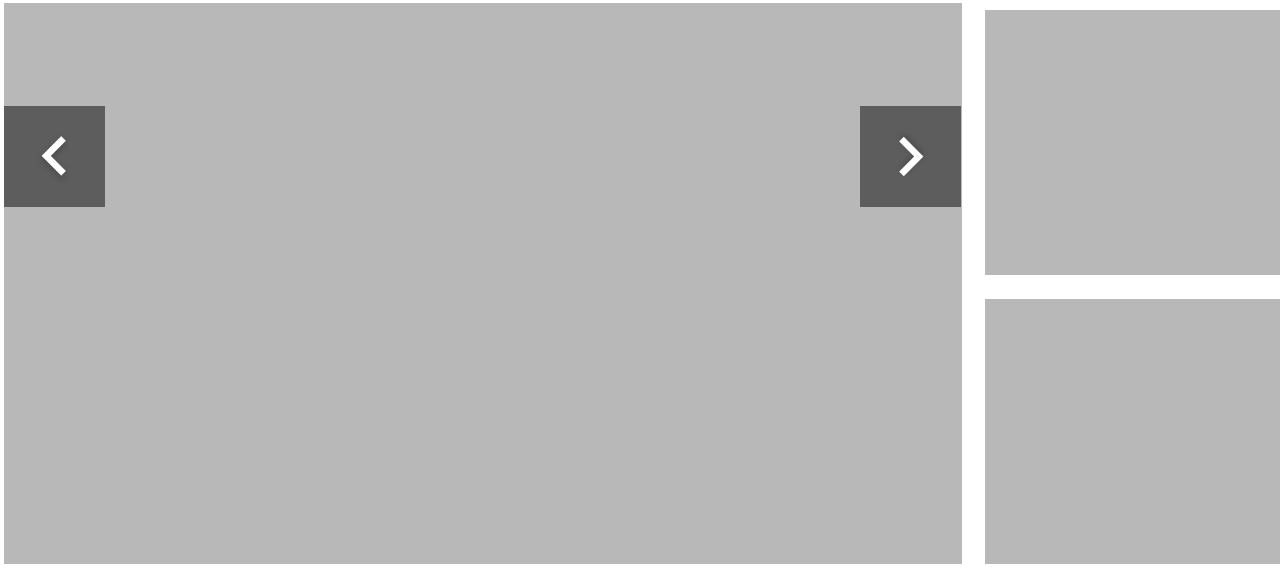
“It’s not exclusive to victims of trafficking. People can have vulnerabilities for any number of reasons, and when the Home Office has decided they want somebody out, they fail to do checks on where they’re going to.

“It’s compartmentalised thinking – not thinking about all the other aspects of their case. It is concerning and even more concerning with victims of trafficking because of their particular vulnerabilities.”

Natasha Walter, director of Women for Refugee Women, who referred H to Duncan Lewis Solicitors, said her “horrifying” case was part of a “pattern of disregard for the safety of trafficked women on the part of the Home Office”.

She added: “We have seen time and time again how women are being detained in Yarl’s Wood despite clear signs of being trafficked and are often traumatised further because of their treatment by the Home Office. Rhetoric is not enough, the Home Office must do much more in reality to protect victims of trafficking.”

Modern Slavery in the UK Show all 13



The Salvation Army said in a statement: “When people have been subjected to slavery, they are often bewildered and frightened and may not even know where they are. Delivering them swiftly into our specialist care is essential.

“Sadly, there have been some occasions where we have encountered difficulties in the coordination of safe transfer of potential victims from IRCs. In all instances we follow up and highlight our concerns to the officials involved.

“There are often multiple staff members involved in one person’s case which can mean that crucial information is not always passed to us in time. We have worked with IRCs to improve information sharing which has led to significant improvements, but this case shows how important it is to keep refining these arrangements.”

A Home Office spokesperson said: “When considering accommodation needs all requests are considered on a case-by-case basis, reflecting each individual’s circumstances.

“The Home Office contacted the Salvation Army to arrange accommodation [for H] once the address provided was deemed unsafe.

“However, we accept and regret that the correct processes were not initially followed. We have reminded all staff of the correct procedures and are investigating this case to see what more can be done to prevent incidents like this happening again.”

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