

Cross-Party Group on Human Trafficking

6.00 pm Tuesday 6 May 2025

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Rhoda Grant MSP
Bill Kidd MSP

Invited guests

Joy Gillespie (SOHTIS)
Bronagh Andrew (TARA)

Non-MSP Group Members

Alison Raybould (The Salvation Army)
Anna Balboa (UN House Scotland)
Ann Hayne (COSLA)
Brogan Grimley (Scottish Anti-Trafficking and Exploitation Centre)
Gari Donn (UN House Scotland)
Iain Whyte (City of Edinburgh Council)
Janet Warren
Janice Wilson
Karen Murdarasi (Restore Glasgow)
Katey Tabner (COSLA)
Magnus C. Storvik (UN House Scotland)
Matthew John (Scottish Government)
Michael Perera (Scottish Government)
Nina Munson (UN House Scotland)
Pat Black (Soroptimist International Edinburgh)
Renee Phan (UN House Scotland)
Rosita Yordanova (UN House Scotland)
Steve Rawbone (Scottish Women's Convention)
Susan McKellar (Scottish Women's Convention)

Apologies

Agnes Tolmie (Scottish Women's Convention)

Carola Eyber (Scottish Government)

Gordon Smith (Scottish Government)

Nick Herbert (Human Trafficking Foundation)

Rebecca Wallace

Sheila Miller (Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership)

Adopt Minutes of the previous meeting

Accepted.

Presentation - Joy Gillespie

SOHTIS (Survivors of Human Trafficking in Scotland)

Joy Gillespie opened with a contextual overview of current trends in human trafficking across Scotland. She outlined key legal definitions, emerging patterns of exploitation, and the systemic barriers that continue to shape outcomes for survivors and the frontline services that assist them. Trafficking affects both rural and urban communities and increasingly involves overlapping forms of abuse that challenge existing service delivery models.

Key data and observations included:

- In 2024, one third of all recovered victims in Scotland were children.
- Labour exploitation remains the most prevalent form, followed by criminal exploitation and domestic servitude.
- Vietnamese nationals constituted the largest group of non-UK victims recovered during the year.
- Approximately 10 percent of identified survivors in Scotland were British nationals.

Joy also introduced SOHTIS's three central programmes:

- Project Light – focusing on prevention and early identification
- Project Freedom – offering long-term, person-centred support for survivors
- Policy Unit – driving evidence-based advocacy and systemic reform

She stressed the need for:

- Early intervention, particularly for individuals with complex immigration or care histories.
- A trauma-informed approach across all levels of support, from initial contact to long-term recovery.

- Stronger collaboration between statutory bodies and the third sector, especially in cases involving no recourse to public funds.
- Attention to structural barriers such as housing insecurity, low public awareness, and under-resourced mental health provision.

Joy concluded by highlighting SOHTIS's current work supporting over 100 survivors through Project Freedom and reaffirmed the organisation's commitment to improving Scotland's long-term response to trafficking.

Presentation Bronagh Andrew

TARA (Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance)

Bronagh Andrew shared a detailed update on recent developments within the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and reflected on the ongoing challenges faced by women supported through the Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance (TARA).

She began by noting a significant increase in referrals to the NRM across the UK. In 2024, a total of 19,125 potential victims were referred to the mechanism, including 920 individuals from Scotland.

Bronagh expressed concern about the prolonged decision-making process:

- The average time to receive a conclusive grounds decision was 803 days, with the longest case exceeding 1,600 days.
- Many survivors were left in legal limbo, often unaware of their right to appeal, and with inconsistent access to legal representation.

She outlined the following statistics from the same reporting period:

- 8,123 negative and 5,412 positive reasonable grounds decisions were issued
- 5,947 negative and 4,054 positive conclusive grounds decisions were issued
- 740 reconsideration requests were submitted for negative reasonable grounds decisions, representing 8 percent of those eligible
- 338 reconsideration requests were submitted for negative conclusive grounds decisions, representing 4 percent of those eligible

Where reconsideration occurred, over 70 percent of decisions were overturned. TARA also received 132 requests for information or updates from competent authorities during the year. Bronagh welcomed the launch of the new NRM referral form on 30 April 2025. She highlighted that it was designed to be more trauma-informed and accessible for frontline professionals.

In her remarks, Bronagh underscored the mental health toll of prolonged uncertainty for survivors, particularly where housing is unstable, income limited, or families separated. She pointed out that TARA currently has four full-time caseworkers and called for sustained resources to ensure all survivors can access consistent, long-term assistance.

Contribution

Matthew John, Scottish Government

Matthew John contributed on behalf of the Scottish Government, offering a brief update during the discussion. He stated that the revised Human Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy, originally introduced in 2017, is in its final stages and adopts a public health approach.

He emphasised the Government's commitment to working with stakeholders and indicated that further opportunities for input will follow its publication. He also acknowledged the need for improved data collection, adding that the Duty to Notify (DTN) system has not yet been implemented in Scotland but remains a government priority.

Discussion

Participants engaged in a detailed discussion that surfaced a number of structural and practical concerns. Key issues raised included:

- Shifts in trafficking trends following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a marked rise in criminal exploitation
- Inadequate child protection systems, and the need for more gender-sensitive services
- The complex overlap between asylum and trafficking processes, leading to legal uncertainty and risk of re-trafficking
- Limited survivor-led models of support and inconsistent access to mental health services

Attendees also expressed concern about:

- The volume of negative NRM decisions issued without adequate explanation
- The length and consequences of NRM delays, particularly in relation to accommodation, income support, and immigration outcomes
- Barriers faced by survivors with no recourse to public funds, even after recovery

It was noted that TARA supports women regardless of immigration status, and that trauma-informed care must extend beyond the initial recovery period.

Date of Next Meeting

6.00 pm Tuesday 9 September 2025