

For Immediate Release:

Add delayed modern slavery support bill to next Queens Speech say campaigners

Campaigners are calling on the Government to adopt a Private Members Bill extending support for victims of modern slavery in the forthcoming Queens Speech.

The Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill was first introduced by Conservative peer Lord McColl of Dulwich in 2017 and passed through the House of Lords but ran out of time in the Commons. The current version of the Bill was introduced after the last election but has fallen victim to restrictions on parliamentary time caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. With rumours that the parliamentary session will end in April, the Bill is running out of time.

NGOs and businesses from the Free for Good campaign say that the Government must act now to prevent yet more victims of modern slavery being unable to rebuild their lives or feel secure enough to act as witnesses in criminal investigations into their exploiters.

Statutory guidance makes clear that the current support structures are designed as a crisis intervention calling it a 'bridge to lift adult victims out of a situation of exploitation' offering only 'temporary support'.

But without pathways to long term recovery this support is little more than a sticking plaster leaving victims at risk of re-trafficking while traffickers continue to operate with impunity, exploiting more and more victims.

The current support system relies on transferring victims to other services for their long term recovery. However, without immigration leave many victims are ineligible for those services, ending up either homeless and destitute, or stuck in safe house accommodation stretching the capacity of those services and unable to regain their independence and continue their recovery.

Too few victims are being granted discretionary leave (the only special form of immigration status available for victims of modern slavery) which would enable them to access services, work and rebuild their lives. Just 70 victims were granted discretionary leave in 2019 compared with 123 in 2015.

The Free for Good Campaign is calling on the Government to provide victims with at least one year of support with leave to remain as set out in the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, giving victims the certainty needed for a proper recovery process to begin.

The Campaign is urging the Government to take the opportunity of the Queens Speech to commit to introducing its own legislation offering support and leave to remain for all confirmed victims for at least a year after they leave the National Referral Mechanism.

In doing so the Government would respond to the challenge set by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner who outlined the issues with the discretionary leave system in January and commented 'surely 2021 is the year to resolve this'.

Nola Leach, CARE Chief Executive said "Lord McColl's Bill will give confirmed victims of trafficking the chance to receive support in the UK for at least a year helping them to build a stable and safe future. Not only is this the morally right thing to do for people who have been so terribly exploited, it is essential to breaking the cycles of trafficking. Long term support is key to preventing victims being re-exploited and enabling them to give evidence against their traffickers. With a new session of parliament on the horizon we are calling on the Government to take this opportunity to commit in the Queen's Speech to introducing Lord McColl's Bill, to stop cycles of exploitation and help victims into a better future."

Kate Roberts, from Anti-Slavery International, said: “If the UK is serious about tackling modern slavery it has to put people affected by exploitation at the centre of public policy, rather than treating them as statistics or inconveniences. Current policy makes it next to impossible for many victims and survivors to rebuild their lives, as many are deterred from talking to the authorities about their experiences for fear of detention, deportation or removal from the UK. What we need instead is a system which is focused on social care and recovery, which puts survivors first, giving them at least 12 months’ support and leave to remain, and facilitating access to education and employment. This way the Government could help survivors to put their exploitation behind them. It’s six years since the Modern Slavery Act passed into law. It’s past time the Government started to listen to survivors’ needs.”

Phillipa Roberts, Director of Legal Policy and Solicitor at Hope for Justice, said: “If the UK is to establish itself as a world leader in the fight against modern slavery, it must place survivors at the heart of this strategy. All too often, survivors slip through the gaps in existing policy and legislation, placing them at risk of being exploited again. This Bill would be a crucial step forward. It would ensure victims feel confident to come forward and obtain the protection and support they need, to empower them to escape exploitation and to rebuild their lives and thrive in society.”

Christian Guy, CEO of Justice and Care said “It is critical that victims of human trafficking are given the right support - not only because it is the right thing to do for those who have been through unimaginable experiences, but also because it is the surest way we are going to bring those responsible to justice. If we make outstanding care a priority, as Lord McColl's Bill seeks to do, we will see breakthroughs in investigations follow.”

Tamara Barnett, Human Trafficking Foundation said “The lack of long-term support provided to modern slavery survivors – some of the most at-risk individuals in our society - is clearly connected to the small number of convictions and limited amount of compensation given to victims that we see.

There are some success stories in the NRM, but when so many who enter the NRM are so vulnerable to begin with, short-term support is never going to be adequate and so leaves many survivors feeling misled and placed back at risk of human trafficking, by support or a roof being provided that is then snatched away. Our priority must be long-term outcomes when rescuing survivors of modern slavery and this Bill would finally ensure we start to have this approach.”

Notes:

The Free for Good campaign is supported by 27 anti-slavery charities and business groups. For the full list of supporters see <https://www.freeforgood.org.uk/supporters>

The campaign can be contacted at freeforgood@care.org.uk