

Scottish Government guidance on support for adult victims of trafficking and exploitation: consultation Social Work Scotland response

June 2026

Introduction

Social Work Scotland is the professional body for social work leaders, working closely with our partners to shape policy and practice, and improve the quality and experience of social services. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the support for adult victims of trafficking and exploitation.

Overview

This response has been informed by a multi-agency workshop bringing together Social Work Scotland members who include practitioners with experience of supporting adult victims of trafficking and exploitation. Overall, members welcomed the development of the Guidance and recognised its comprehensive coverage, clear alignment with legislation and strategy, and its intention to promote a trauma-informed, person-centred and collaborative approach.

However, a number of consistent themes emerged across the discussion. Participants highlighted a gap between the policy intent of the Guidance and its practical application, particularly in relation to clarity on roles, responsibilities and decision-making across agencies. There were also concerns that the document is often text-heavy and complex, which limits its accessibility for frontline practitioners

and for victims and survivors themselves. The use of language was a recurring issue, with feedback suggesting that some sections are overly aspirational or ambiguous, making it difficult to distinguish between statutory duties, expected practice and discretionary support, and potentially raising unrealistic expectations.

Further themes included the need for clearer treatment of cross-cutting issues, particularly around age thresholds and the interaction with other public protection frameworks, and the importance of reflecting real-world challenges such as service access, resource constraints, and variation across local areas. Participants also identified opportunities to improve usability through clearer structure, stronger signposting and the inclusion of visual or multimedia aids.

In summary, while the Guidance provides a framework, the feedback emphasises the need to strengthen clarity, practicality and accessibility to support consistent and effective implementation in practice.

Questions and responses

The questions from the consultation are presented below, along with the responses from members of Social Work Scotland who attended the workshop.

- **1. Does the Guidance clearly set out its purpose and who it applies to? (Section 1 of the guidance)**

The Guidance does set out its purpose and intended audience with a reasonable level of clarity, particularly at a high level. Section 1 clearly explains that the document is designed to outline the support structure available to adult victims of trafficking and exploitation in Scotland, with adults defined as those aged 18 and over. It also identifies a broad range of users, including organisations delivering support, local authorities, practitioners, and victims or survivors themselves. Member feedback generally supported this, noting that the overall purpose and scope of the Guidance are explicit and easy to follow.

However, while the overarching intent is clear, there are a number of areas where clarity is reduced in practice. A key issue raised by members was the treatment of age. Although the Guidance is explicitly focused on adults, there are multiple references throughout to children and young people, including those aged 16 and 17. This creates ambiguity about who the Guidance is primarily intended to apply to, particularly given the overlap with adult support and protection legislation, which applies from age 16. The distinction between adult and child frameworks is therefore not consistently or clearly articulated, and this is likely to cause confusion for readers, especially those less familiar with the legislation.

There is also a lack of clarity in how the Guidance sits alongside other related frameworks, such as child protection processes, adult support and protection, and the National Referral Mechanism. While these are all referenced, the relationships between them are not always explicitly explained, making it more difficult for practitioners to understand how responsibilities and processes align in practice. This links to a broader issue, namely that the Guidance appears to be written for a wide range of audiences without clearly distinguishing between them. Although it is

positive that victims and survivors are included as a potential audience, alongside professionals and organisations, this breadth makes it less clear how each group is expected to use the document, and whether the level of detail and language is appropriate for all users.

Finally, while the purpose is clear conceptually, members suggested that it could be made more accessible in practical terms. There was a view that additional clarification or visual summaries, such as diagrams or flowcharts, could help to reinforce understanding of who the Guidance applies to and how it should be used.

- **2. Does the guidance clearly set out the context, including the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, subsequent regulations and the 2025 Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy, within which it will operate? (Section 2 of the guidance)**

The Guidance does clearly set out the key legislative and strategic context within which it operates. However, while the main elements are clearly identified, the section would benefit from stronger links between them. Although the legislation, regulations and strategy are each explained, it is not always clear how they work together in practice or how they shape expectations for practitioners. In addition, the level of detail may reduce accessibility for some audiences, particularly non-specialists, given that the Guidance is intended for a wide range of users.

- **3. Does the guidance clearly explain how to identify and refer a potential victim of trafficking or exploitation to the National Referral Mechanism? (Section 4 of the guidance)?**

The Guidance explains the referral process to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) clearly but is less clear on how to identify potential victims before referral. Section 4 sets out the steps involved in making a referral, including the role of First Responder organisations, the requirement for adult consent, and how referrals should be submitted through the NRM portal. Member feedback reflected a broad

consensus that the referral pathway itself is well described and easy to follow, with sufficient detail to support practitioners through the process.

However, a key gap identified was the lack of guidance on how to identify a potential victim in the first place. Participants noted that the section appears to assume a level of prior knowledge and effectively begins at the point of referral, without setting out indicators, signs, or criteria to support initial identification. This was seen as a significant omission, particularly for less experienced practitioners or those outside specialist services and may limit the accessibility and practical value of the Guidance.

As a result, while the process of referral is clear, the absence of information on identification creates an incomplete picture. It would be beneficial to include either a concise overview of indicators or clear signposting to existing resources to support identification, ensuring that practitioners are equipped to recognise potential victims as well as refer them.

- **4. Does the guidance set out clearly the key principles informing adult human trafficking victim support in Scotland? (Section 5 of the guidance)**

The Guidance sets out the key principles informing support for adult victims of trafficking clearly at a conceptual level. Section 5 identifies core approaches such as trauma-informed and culturally competent practice, multi-agency working, and responsiveness to individual needs, which align well with current policy expectations and provide a strong theoretical framework for delivering support.

However, feedback highlighted that the section is largely descriptive and would benefit from clearer links to how these principles should be applied in practice. There is limited explanation of how concepts such as trauma-informed practice should translate into day-to-day decision-making for frontline practitioners. This may reduce the usefulness of the Guidance for those seeking practical direction, especially

where more applied examples or case-based illustrations could support understanding.

There were also concerns about consistency and completeness. Some participants noted that not all relevant principles from the wider Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy appear to be fully reflected, including aspects such as gender- or age-sensitivity. In addition, the relationship between the adult focus of the Guidance and the application of Adult Support and Protection legislation from age 16 creates potential confusion, reinforcing the need for clearer explanation of how age-related frameworks intersect.

It was also noted that the link to Adult Support and Protection guidance is not fully accurate as it takes you to the Codes of Practice, not guidance. The current link to the Code of Practice appears to suggest that it provides direction on how to make a referral, which it does not. Consideration should be given to more appropriate signposting, such as including a reference to the Care Information Scotland resource outlining Adult Support and Protection processes and providing local authority contact details for making referrals.

Overall, while the principles are clearly articulated and aligned with policy intent, the section would be strengthened by greater clarity on their operational application, improved consistency with the wider strategic framework, and clearer explanation of how they relate to different age groups and statutory duties.

- **5. Does the guidance set out clearly the accommodation support for adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.1 of the guidance)**

Member feedback highlighted that the way this information is presented can be confusing and difficult to follow. There is a lack of clarity about how decisions are made in practice and who is responsible for them. The use of conditional language throughout the section creates uncertainty about whether support will be provided, which may lead to inconsistent interpretation across agencies. Participants were

concerned that this could result in individuals being passed between services without a clear resolution, particularly in complex situations.

This lack of clarity is especially evident in relation to people with no recourse to public funds, where responsibilities between different agencies are not clearly defined. The Guidance sets out that support may be available in certain circumstances but does not sufficiently explain how disagreements or gaps in provision should be managed. As a result, there is a risk that the person at the centre of the process does not receive timely or appropriate accommodation.

Overall, while the Guidance provides a comprehensive overview of accommodation options and eligibility criteria, it would benefit from clearer explanation of decision-making processes, roles and responsibilities, and expected outcomes. Strengthening these areas would improve consistency and help ensure that the focus remains on providing safe and timely accommodation for victims.

- **6. Does the guidance set out clearly the approach to financial support for adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.2 of the guidance)**

The Guidance sets out a comprehensive approach to financial support, but it is not always clear or easy to follow in practice. Member feedback indicated that the section can be difficult to interpret, particularly due to its complexity and the way information is presented. Members noted that it often requires multiple readings to fully understand entitlements, and that the structure can lead to uncertainty about what individuals are actually entitled to receive in different circumstances. The frequent use of conditional language, such as “may” and “should,” further adds to this ambiguity and makes it harder to distinguish between entitlements and discretionary support.

There were also concerns about a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities. While the Guidance outlines what support may be available, it does not clearly specify who is responsible for assessing eligibility, making decisions, or supporting individuals to access financial assistance. This creates a risk of inconsistent

application across agencies and may lead to gaps in provision if responsibilities are not clearly understood.

In addition, some elements of the presentation were seen as unhelpful or potentially confusing, such as the inclusion of specific payment rates within the text, which may quickly become outdated, and unclear terminology in some areas. Overall, while the section is thorough in scope, it would benefit from simplification, clearer distinction between entitlements and discretionary support, and stronger explanation of decision-making processes and responsibilities to improve usability and consistency.

- **7. Does the guidance set out clearly the rights and information that should, where relevant, be made available to victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.3 of the guidance)?**

The Guidance sets out the rights and information that should be made available to victims in a broadly clear and comprehensive way. Section 6.3 outlines a wide range of areas in which victims should be informed and supported, including access to healthcare, legal advice, financial support, education, employment, and immigration advice. It also recognises the need to tailor information to individual circumstances and recovery plans, which aligns with a person-centred approach.

However, there are limitations in how this is presented. A key issue identified by members was the lack of clarity about who is responsible for providing this information. While the Guidance states that victims should be given access to information and support, it does not consistently specify which agency or practitioner is accountable for ensuring this happens. This creates a risk that responsibility becomes unclear in multi-agency contexts, potentially leading to gaps or duplication in practice.

There were also concerns about whether the section is sufficiently trauma-informed and accessible, particularly given that the Guidance is intended to be used by victims and survivors as well as professionals. The language and structure are largely service-focused, and it is not always clear that information is presented in a way that

reflects the needs, perspective, or understanding of individuals experiencing trauma. In addition, some elements appear to be prioritised differently, with more functional supports clearly set out, while areas such as mental health or specialist support are framed as more conditional.

Overall, the section provides a strong overview of the rights and information that should be available, but would benefit from clearer allocation of responsibility, more consistent use of person-centred and trauma-informed language, and improved accessibility for all intended users.

- **8. Does the guidance set out clearly the approach to health and wellbeing for adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.4 of the guidance)**

The Guidance sets out the approach to health and wellbeing in a generally clear and structured way, with Section 6.4 covering access to NHS services, GP registration, emergency care, mental health support, and specialist services. It provides useful practical information, particularly in relation to healthcare entitlements, and clearly confirms that victims or suspected victims are exempt from NHS charges, which helps to reinforce access to services.

However, there are limitations in how this information reflects the realities of practice. Social Work Scotland members highlighted that access to services, particularly GP registration and ongoing healthcare, can be challenging in practice, and the Guidance does not fully acknowledge these barriers or provide a realistic sense of timescales for accessing support. This may lead to a gap between expectation and delivery, particularly where individuals require timely access to primary or mental health services.

There were also concerns about how information is presented. The section largely lists available services, which may imply a standard level of access without recognising variability or prioritisation of need. This approach risks suggesting that some services are secondary or optional, particularly in relation to mental health and

psychological support, which were viewed as central to recovery rather than an additional consideration. In addition, as with other sections, there is limited clarity on who is responsible for supporting individuals to access healthcare and coordinating this support across services.

Overall, while the Guidance provides an overview of healthcare entitlements and available services, it would benefit from a stronger reflection of practical challenges, clearer prioritisation of key areas such as mental health, and more explicit explanation of how support is accessed and delivered in real-world settings.

- **9. Does the guidance set out clearly the approach to translation and interpretation for adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.5 of the guidance)**

The Guidance sets out the approach to translation and interpretation in a basic level. Section 6.5 states that translation and interpretation services should be provided where required to enable victims to access support and emphasises the use of professional and approved interpreters across key stages such as assessments, meetings, and engagement with other services.

However, while the principle is clear, there is limited detail on how this should be implemented in practice. Members highlight there is a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, including who is responsible for arranging interpreters and ensuring consistent provision across agencies. This creates a risk of variation in practice, particularly in multi-agency contexts where accountability is not explicitly defined.

There is scope to strengthen the Guidance in relation to practical challenges. It does not address issues around the availability of interpreters in remote and rural areas, where access to appropriately qualified professionals may be more limited. Similarly, the potential role of alternative approaches, including the use of technology or AI-supported translation tools, is not considered. While these may not be suitable in all circumstances, especially given the need for confidentiality and trauma-informed practice, some acknowledgement of their role and limitations would be helpful.

- **10. Does the guidance set out clearly the legal assistance that may be available to adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.6 of the guidance)**

Member feedback recognised that this section provides a helpful summary of the types of legal assistance that may be accessed, and that it appropriately directs practitioners and victims towards existing systems such as legal aid and regulated legal services. This supports a general understanding of rights and entitlements in relation to legal support.

However, as with other sections, there is limited clarity on how this support is accessed in practice. In particular, the Guidance does not consistently specify who is responsible for ensuring that individuals are referred to legal services or supported through the process. This creates potential uncertainty in multi-agency contexts, where responsibility for facilitating access to legal advice may not be clearly assigned.

There is scope to strengthen the connection between immigration advice, trafficking support, and the wider legal framework. While these areas are referenced, the Guidance does not always make clear how they interact or how individuals should be supported to navigate complex legal issues, particularly in cases involving asylum or immigration status.

- **11. Does the guidance set out clearly information on compensation for adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.7 of the guidance)**

Member feedback suggests that, while the information is clearly presented at a high level, it is relatively brief and would benefit from further detail on how these routes operate in practice. In particular, the Guidance does not fully explain the processes involved, the potential barriers to accessing compensation, or the role of practitioners and support providers in assisting individuals through what can be complex and lengthy procedures.

As with other sections, there is also limited clarity about who is responsible for ensuring that victims are informed about and supported to pursue compensation. While access to legal advice is highlighted, the Guidance does not explicitly set out how individuals are supported to navigate decisions about compensation or how this links with other aspects of their support and recovery.

- **12. Does the guidance set out clearly the transition support available to adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.8 of the guidance)**

Social Work Scotland members recognised that the section clearly describes the range of transition options and the relevant timelines, which helps to set expectations around how long support may be available and the role of discretionary decision-making. However, there were similar concerns to those raised in other sections regarding the lack of clarity on how this support is delivered in practice. In particular, the Guidance does not consistently specify who is responsible for coordinating transition planning, supporting individuals to access services, or ensuring continuity of care across different systems.

There is also a lack of clarity around how decisions are made, particularly where discretionary extensions of support are considered or where individuals have complex needs. While the Guidance emphasises the use of needs assessments, it does not fully explain how these are applied in practice or how disagreements between agencies should be resolved. This may create uncertainty and inconsistency in how transition support is implemented across different areas.

Overall, the section provides an overview of transition support and associated processes, but would benefit from greater clarity on roles, responsibilities, and decision-making. Strengthening these aspects would help ensure that transition support is delivered consistently and that individuals experience a planned and supported move from specialist services.

- **13. Does the guidance set out clearly the outreach support available to adult victims of human trafficking? (Section 6.9 of the guidance)**

Member feedback suggests that this section is easy to understand in principle, but lacks detail on how outreach support operates in practice. There is limited explanation of how outreach services are delivered, how frequently individuals should expect contact, or what level of support they should receive in different circumstances. As with other sections of the Guidance, the roles and responsibilities of different agencies are not clearly defined, which may lead to inconsistency in how outreach support is implemented across different areas.

There is also a lack of clarity around how outreach support links with other services, including local provision and wider public protection arrangements. While the Guidance notes that individuals may be connected to services in their local area, it does not fully explain how this coordination is managed or who is responsible for ensuring continuity of support.

- **14. Would additional visual aids (i.e. flow charts or diagrams) be helpful within the guidance?**

Additional visual aids would be very helpful within the Guidance. Member feedback strongly supported the inclusion of flow charts, diagrams, or similar tools to improve clarity, particularly given the complexity of the processes described throughout the document.

Members noted that many sections are text-heavy and can be difficult to interpret, especially where they involve multiple pathways, conditional decisions, or interactions between different agencies. Visual aids would help to simplify this information and make it easier to understand how different elements fit together, particularly for frontline practitioners who need to apply the Guidance in practice. Flow charts would be particularly useful in areas such as referral to the NRM, eligibility for support, and access to accommodation or financial assistance, where decision-making processes are currently complex and not always intuitive.

There was also recognition that different formats may enhance accessibility, including the potential use of short video or digital guidance to complement written materials. While not a substitute for formal guidance, these could support understanding by walking users through key processes in a more practical and engaging way. This may be particularly beneficial for practitioners new to the area and for victims and survivors themselves, given that the Guidance is intended for a wide audience.

Overall, the inclusion of visual and multimedia aids would significantly enhance the usability and accessibility of the Guidance, helping to translate complex information into clearer, more practical formats.

- **15. Is the guidance easy to read, navigate, and understand for all audiences?**

The Guidance is generally well structured and covers a comprehensive range of topics, but it is not consistently easy to read, navigate, or understand for all intended audiences. Member feedback highlighted that while the document is logically organised and follows a clear progression, the overall presentation can be challenging due to its length, level of detail, and heavy reliance on text.

Members noted that many sections are dense and technical, which may make the Guidance difficult to navigate, particularly for frontline practitioners who need to quickly locate and apply relevant information. This is compounded by the complexity of the subject matter and the frequent use of conditional or ambiguous language, which can make it harder to interpret key messages or distinguish between what is required and what is discretionary. As a result, the Guidance often requires multiple readings to fully understand, reducing its practical usability.

There were also concerns about accessibility for different audiences. Although the Guidance states that it is intended for victims and survivors as well as professionals, the language and format are primarily geared towards practitioners and may not be easily understood by individuals without prior knowledge of the system. This raises

questions about whether the document is fully accessible or trauma-informed in its current form.

In addition, navigation could be improved. While the structure is clear, it is not always easy to move between related sections or understand how different parts of the Guidance connect. Participants suggested that greater use of summaries, clearer signposting, and visual aids such as flowcharts would significantly enhance usability.

- **16. Do you have any other comments or suggestions about the guidance?**

Overall, the Guidance reflects a strong commitment to supporting adult victims of trafficking and exploitation. It aligns with the legislative and strategic framework and demonstrates an intention to take a trauma-informed, multi-agency, and person-centred approach.

However, a consistent theme across the Guidance is the gap between policy intent and practical application. While the document describes what support should be available, it is less clear on how this should be delivered in practice, who is responsible for key actions, and how decisions should be made and coordinated across agencies. Strengthening clarity around roles, responsibilities, and accountability would improve consistency and reduce the risk of individuals falling between services.

There is also a need to improve accessibility and usability. The Guidance is often text-heavy, with complex language and structure that may limit its effectiveness for frontline practitioners and make it difficult for victims and survivors to engage with directly. Greater use of concise summaries, consistent terminology, and visual or multimedia aids would enhance understanding and make the document more practical to use.

In addition, the treatment of cross-cutting issues such as age, public protection frameworks, and links to wider systems could be more clearly articulated. Providing a clearer explanation of how the Guidance interacts with other processes,

particularly in relation to the 16–18 age group and multi-agency working, would help practitioners navigate complex cases more effectively.

Finally, there is a need to ensure that the language used is realistic and grounded in what can be consistently delivered in practice. Several sections are framed in aspirational terms, which, while well intentioned, may create uncertainty about entitlements and risk raising unrealistic expectations for victims and practitioners alike. Clearer distinction between statutory duties, expected practice, and discretionary elements would help manage expectations and support more consistent delivery. Members have also highlighted that, although there is an intention for this to be trauma informed and person centred, the language used does not always align to this intent.

In summary, the Guidance would benefit from greater clarity, improved practical application, and enhanced accessibility to ensure it can be consistently and effectively implemented across all settings.

Conclusion

This consultation response reflects a strong level of support for the aims and overall direction of the Guidance, particularly its focus on strengthening support for adult victims of trafficking and exploitation.

The feedback provided is intended to be constructive and to support the further development of a document that is both robust in principle and effective in practice. By addressing the areas highlighted, particularly around clarity, accessibility, roles and responsibilities, and alignment with real-world delivery, the Guidance has the potential to become a more practical and impactful tool for those working within this complex area, and ultimately to improve outcomes for victims and survivors.

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