



Enhancing support for people who experienced modern-day slavery through learning and skills activities

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Introduction

In the UK, people subject to modern slavery and trafficking (MDS) receive formal identification through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). While people are waiting for a decision on whether they will be positively identified (known as a conclusive ground decision), they are entitled to receive support, such as accommodation, financial assistance and access to specialist services.

This report outlines the journey and impact of implementing a project to develop learning and skills opportunities for people subject to MDS and who are supported under the NRM. The aim was to offer opportunities for each person to develop skill and experiences based on their interests.

About the project

The project was piloted over 12 months in services that specialise in providing accommodation and support to people who have been subject to modern day slavery and trafficking. This was led by a full time, multilingual, learning and skills project officer.

By observing, listening, and talking to people supported in services it was possible to identify needs and shape the delivery of the project.

The aims of the project were to:

1. Chart interests/activities that people wished to be involved in.
2. Chart people's skills and the skills they would like to acquire and/or improve.
3. Provide bespoke training in an easy access format to meet the needs of the people supported.
4. Deliver cultural experience opportunities to build confidence and life skills.

Rationale: The need for acquiring life and learning skills for people who experienced modern day slavery and trafficking

People who are identified as potential survivors of modern-day slavery and trafficking receive support under the Victim Care Contract, which is currently delivered by the Salvation Army and its subcontractors, such as SJOG, on behalf of the Home Office. Support can consist of accommodation

and a range of outreach services, including financial assistance, medical treatment, and help in accessing specialist services.

Once support provided under the NRM ends, there is no further access to services. People in this situation might be eligible for some support, including social security, dependent on their immigration status. Added to this, integration within society is impacted by additional factors, including mental health, language barrier, lack of housing and employment options or skills¹.

While intensive casework support is required for addressing peoples most pressing needs (physical and mental health needs, legal representation, delivering a safe environment), a more specialist knowledge, that includes acquiring life skills and wellbeing is equally necessary.

Learning skills can contribute to:

- Providing tools to live independently within their community once people exit the NRM.
- Addressing periods of 'Limbo'
- Supporting mental health and preventing retraumatisation

We describe each in more detail below.

Providing tools for living independently within their community once exiting NRM

Research identifies weaknesses in long-term integration of survivors after ending the statutory period of support made available through the NRM. Barriers include accommodation, employability, health, and can lead to higher risks of destitution and re-trafficking².

For example, a 2014 Government review reported concerns that survivors “are still profoundly vulnerable and are left to negotiate on their own a return home or re-integration into the community” after exiting NRM³. A further study by the Human Trafficking Foundation (HTF) concluded that “a significant proportion of survivors are failed after leaving Government funded safe houses” and that “this means either becoming homeless, going back to the control of traffickers or falling back into

¹ The British Red Cross STEP report, 2018

² Balch et al, 2018

³ Oppenheim, 2014

abusive or exploitative situations”⁴. These findings, although now 10 years old highlight that “survivors are vulnerable to isolation and even re-trafficking”, due to “a lack of focus on complete reintegration”⁵. The challenge continues today.

Whitin this context, acquiring life skills before exiting the program contributes to a better long-term integration and independence and transformed area of vulnerability into strengths.

While life skills can be understood as “a broad set of skills, behaviours, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals”⁶, they can facilitate communication, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and employability through improved confidents, psychosocial and interpersonal skills.⁷

Adapting a life skills and wellbeing program for people subject to modern slavery required consideration of individual needs and the complexity of lived trauma.

Additionally, adopting strengths-based activities, that recognised the person as a human being, with unique interests, concerns, assets, and goals, improved their social skills, such as having close family relationships or a stronger social support network, enables people to have access to professional resources and social services and engaging with the community⁸.

Addressing periods of “limbo”

A previous study conducted in 2022 by SJOG regarding the need of adopting trauma-informed approaches, underlined how many of the stress factors that survivors experience, are due to their current social environment. Immigration status, lack of trust in support services, lack of familiarity with the host country, lack of a stable shelter and income, and even lack of purpose and demotivation due to long waiting times, all contribute.

Often, the long waiting times while addressing immigration practices or conclusive decision for their MDS allegations, hinder a sense of belonging and ability to integrate. In particular, undocumented

⁴ Beddoe et al, 2015

⁵ Centre for Social Justice, 2013

⁶ Gates et al., 2016

⁷ Honeyman, 2018

⁸ Balch et al, 2018

migrants experience waiting as a sense of powerless due to the fact they constantly depend on the decision and assistance coming from others and do not have agency.

In this context, survivors may show symptoms of trauma such as flashbacks, distress, overwhelming emotions, difficulties in controlling fear and anger, and may have other mental health needs such as depression and anxiety or may struggle with substance misuse⁹.

Providing the strategies for the management of traumatic stress, such as relaxation techniques, and/or the possibility to dedicate time and resources to hobbies, may help increase the ability to respond to stress in ways that is less damaging. The learning and skills project aimed do just this – giving purpose to the periods of limbo.

Supporting mental health and preventing retraumatisation

The need to address trauma is increasingly viewed as an important component of effective support and improved ability to cope with retraumatisation.

Research conducted by the University of Birmingham, the University of Nottingham, and the Survivor Alliance, assessed the experiences of survivors of modern slavery in getting psychological support. Based on this study, 97% claimed they are in need of psychological assistance, while 44% confessed their needs were not fully met. Different factors and barriers can impact the support received by people with complex needs. Whilst practitioners tend to address mental health challenges such as the lack of sleep or anxiety independently, survivors see a much wider picture, where issues such as uncertainty of immigration status, lack of access to jobs or education have a significant impact on their overall wellbeing¹⁰.

The Learning and Skills project focused on creating person-centred spaces to prevent the risk of retraumatisation and safeguard wellbeing. Several factors were considered; from creating a safe space that avoids retraumatisation within MDS services (the environment, policies and procedures, communication and training, physical and psychological wellbeing) to the adoption of external specialised intervention, such as wellbeing sessions and activities that promoted regular social interactions.

⁹ Brezeanu et al, 2022

¹⁰ Dang M, 2022

There are few models of successful life skills projects specifically developed for people who have experienced modern slavery. This report unpacks what a successful project might look like for enabling learning environment tailored to survivors' needs.

Implementing the project

Involving people in the development of activities

The participation of survivors in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs is crucial to anti-slavery efforts. Working together to shape projects based on their lived experience results in developing and implementing interventions that reflect their needs.

The interventions, carried out by the Learning and Skills Officer in all 9 safe houses in the midlands over the past 12 months, had their roots in initial one-to-one consultations, held with n=37 out of the n=61 people supported the services. Additionally, meetings took place, where introductions were done, and the new role of the L&S Officer was explained. In total, n=28 group sessions and three individual sessions were held.

These consultations represented an effort to understand the real needs and aspirations of people in MDS services. Discussions with the support team in service reinforced the need for proactive engagement. Therefore, the first month focused on needs assessments. The process revealed common challenges, particularly language barriers and that addressing these are a gateway to further participation in activities.

Delivery, activities, and participation

The project was delivered between April 2023 – May 2024. In total, N=25 different activities were delivered during the project (table 1/appendix A):

Table 1 – Breakdown of activities over project.

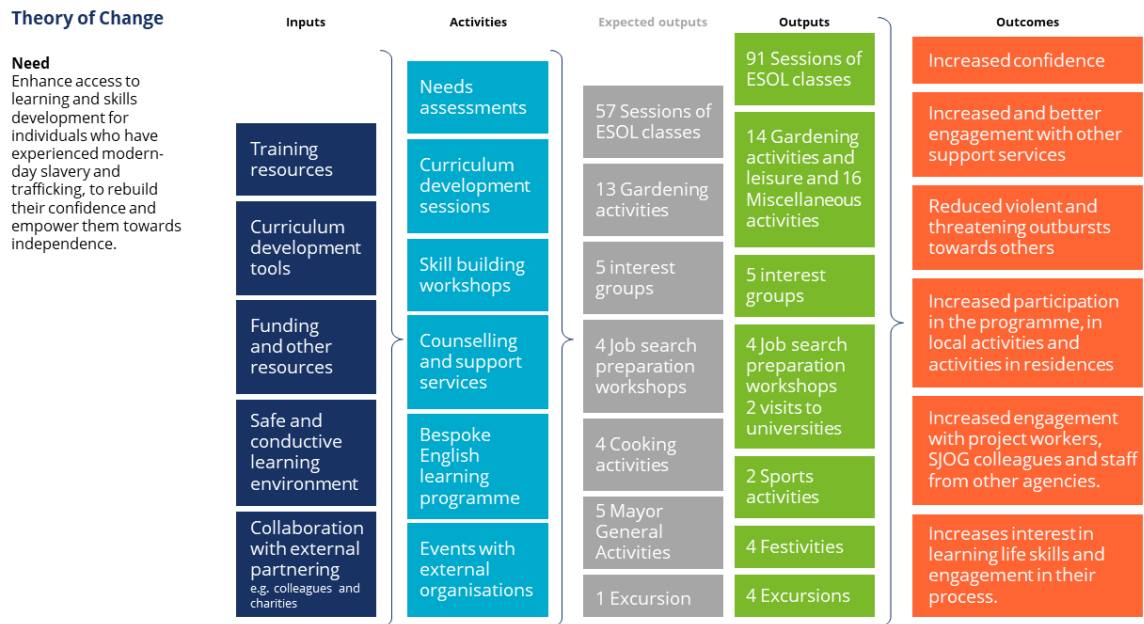
Activity	Number of times delivered during project
SJOG ESOL classes	91
Bespoke activities including games nights, one to one chats, henna therapy, and CV and career workshops.	16
Leisure/ therapy activities (gardening, cooking)	14
Celebration and festive activities	4
Cultural outings to museum, zoon, castles	2
Sports	2

Most activities involved groups. Over the 12 months over 600 places were available to attend of which 557 spaces were filled. The project engaged n=70 people with experience for modern slavery

Continuous monitoring and evaluation were integral to the success of the project. Regular feedback sessions with survivors allowed the team to assess the effectiveness of interventions and to make necessary adjustments.

A Theory of Change model was used as a tool to guide project evaluation and learning (figure 1).

Figure 1 – Theory of change model for learning and skills project



Project outcomes and reflections

People who were supported reported significant improvements in language proficiency, confidence, and general well-being. Additionally, monitoring the activities highlighted the importance of addressing individual challenges and providing tailored support where needed.

Key learning and outcomes are described below. This covers:

1. Implementing interventions, and
2. Satisfaction and engagement

Implementing tailored interventions

ESOL Classes

Many of the people supported face rejection from externally provided ESOL classes due as they did not have the language skills to meet the threshold for participant. In response to this challenge, the project offered personalised English lessons. With the help of tools such as Google Translate, English

texts and a variety of online resources, the L&S Officer tailored the lessons to individual needs and preferences. Lessons were run at the pace people wanted and the goal was engagement and enjoyment.

The approach yielded success. A notable increase in participation resulted, with the initial one-on-one sessions evolving into group lessons conducted at SJOG office.

Workshops and Trainings

Due to a series of factors such as dealing trauma and lack of integration skills, some people with work permits faced challenges in initiating their job search process. Recognising this, sessions were created to support people towards considering employment.

During these sessions, people engaged in open discussions about their aspirations and needs to achieve career goals. Topics covered CV writing, job application strategies, and interview preparation. The positive outcomes of these initiatives were evident, with several people successfully securing employment opportunities following the CV revamp and workshop sessions. This resulted in people transitioning out of SJOG services, marking a significant step towards their self-sufficiency and integration into society.

Partnerships with Jericho, Sophie Hayes, and Active Wellbeing, which specialise in delivering support to individuals in similar circumstances were established. These organisations offer diverse programs, including kitchen services, charity shops, and carpentry workshops - aiming to provide work experiences and skill development opportunities. Through these partnerships, n=7 people were supported to successfully engaged in employment opportunities provided by these organisations.

Additionally, recognising the therapeutic and empowering nature of creative activities, the project introduced cooking, knitting, and crochet sessions and the opportunities for self-expression and skill development. These activities not only fostered a sense of community and belonging, but also served as platforms for learning and personal growth.

Building Connections and Partnerships

The importance of multi-agency collaboration has been already recognised as beneficial for the effective recovery of people who experienced modern-day slavery.

In addition to the collaborations with the organisations mentioned above, skill-building and social integration were also acquired through participation to leisure activities and celebrations. For those who were trafficked from abroad, language is a barrier to integration, especially where there is little understanding of legal and socio-cultural situations. It was, therefore, important to understand that even day-to-day decisions can bring challenges; patience and constancy played important role in this.

For this reason, the organisation of periodic outings and events helped facilitating engagement and creating a sense of community and belonging, while developing new social skills and interest, boosting creativity and self-esteem. Importantly, this built a sense of trust which unlocked opportunities for further support beyond SJOG.

Satisfaction and engagement

The impact of the project was transformative. Feedback was collected at the end of activities with three simple questions:

- *Did the person enjoy the activity?*
- *Did they find it useful?*
- *Would they like to attend again?*

100% of attendees answered yes to these three questions for ESOL, which reflected the number of times classes were repeated (N=91 times). By the end of the project 10 people attended each session. Additionally, one-on-one lessons which sat alongside group classes.

“There was someone that I never knew could talk. She had never said a word to me for several months – this happened more than six months ago. One day during an activity, it was like a tap had been turned, words were flowing, and she just kept talking and talking. She was so excited! Since then, she would always call me to say: ‘please don't forget me’. When I asked her what she liked most about it, she said it was the whole idea of having to move with people and interact with people and going to places”. Learning and Skills Officer

The participation in activities like outings and festivities showed an increase in confidence to socialise. Interest in these activities grew over time.

“When we began to do more of outings, it really had more impact because everyone was excited. Even [people] that were the least engaging prior to that time, became more excited. They'll call me, they'll write messages asking, where are we going to next?” - Learning and Skills Officer

Positive feedback was also shown in form of actions. For example, one person who attended an outing to a museum expressed how happy and accomplished they felt because it was their first time taking a train. Learning to do this was meaningful and demonstrates the constructive impact of the project on gaining life skills.

For another person, the benefit of the activities was reflected in a reduced number of incidents and signs of risky behaviours. Although the reduction on incidents is influenced by other factors, for the duration of the project this person showed improvement and was more committed to engage in activities.

“There were few [people]...and within the period when they were busy doing one activity or the other, we didn't have incidents with them. They were out of trouble.” - Learning and Skills Officer

Learning to improve delivery

Creating a life skills project and associated activities can have long-lasting benefits that exceed the duration of support entitled under NRM. While this report highlighted the successful outcomes, some challenges amplified the limitations of activities delivery:

1. Decline in attendance to the English classes in wintertime: The cold during winter was responsible for the decline in attendance as most people supported in SJOG services had to walk about 30 minutes in the morning to attend the classes. As a result, lessons were delivered in the accommodation where possible.

2. Lack of trust: On one occasion an activity had to be cancelled. As a result, people were reluctant to participate in subsequent activities. Consistency is important for continued engagement. Ensuring that information about activities and events was timely, and up to date, managed people's expectations.
3. Seasonal activities: Gardening activities were very popular. These were difficult to deliver during winter. In response to this, all interaction and communication occurred online, via the WhatsApp group, where they shared ideas and made plans for future activities and gardening tips. Creating opportunities for activities during winter could improve lack of motivation and participation. For example, the project delivered a week of arts and craft, a trip to the Christmas German market, and a Christmas party.
4. Wider colleague engagement: It was noted that when a wider range of colleagues were engaged in activities, offering support, more people were willing to engage. This may be down to trusted relationships with project workers.

Final thoughts

The journey of implementing a learning and skills project noted successes and useful lessons for future projects.

Participation in ESOL classes and leisure activities demonstrated the need for people to connect and to gain communication and creative skills, while improving their wellbeing and creating a space for self-expression and growth. The implementation of activities that aimed to assist those pursuing a vocational pathway saw several people successfully secure employment opportunities.

Having dedicated support targeting areas of need, identified by the people who require the support, makes a difference. By prioritising the unique needs and aspirations of people, we can foster resilience, self-sufficiency, and general well-being within their community.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

A summary of progression of core activities.

- April 2023 - One-to-one and group sessions were held with people in MDS services and colleagues from MDS services to understand needs.
- May 2023 – May 2024 - Bespoke English language learning and practice class (increasing to twice a week) was launched for people who do not speak or understand English language to meet, learn, and interact.
- May 2023 - A sports day event which had n=30 people in attendance.
- June 2023 – November 2023 - 20 in-house events including board games, gardening, and cooking activities.
- October 2023 - n=13 people visited the Royal Air force Museum in Cosford. They also participated and were placed third in a football competition organised by The Salvation Army.
- November 2023 - N=35 people participated to a Diwali celebration, engaging both with the preparations and attended the party itself. A board games day was organised in the third week of November.
- January 2024 - n=15 people linked to external agencies (Building Mentoring Programme, Jericho, Sophie Hayes Employability Programme and college courses).
- May 2023 – May 2024 – Five interest groups were created including the fitness club, beauty club, gardening club, literary club, and food club. These act as forums to facilitate engagement, create a sense of community and belonging, help develop new skills and interest, boost skills, creativity and communication.