

Scottish Women's Convention
response to the Scottish
Government's Consultation
on:

Support Provisions for
Victims of Human
Trafficking in Scotland:
Published Guidance

10th June 2026



Premise

Human trafficking and exploitation continue to be significant issues in Scotland, affecting hundreds of adults and children every year. In 2024 alone, there were 920 referrals made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) relating to Scotland, the highest number ever recorded and a significant increase of 20% from the previous year.¹

For women and girls, trafficking is often closely linked to wider forms of gender-based violence, inequality, poverty, insecure immigration status and other factors that increase their vulnerability to exploitation. Any response to trafficking must fully recognise this and ensure that women and girls can access specialist gender-based support.

Our organisation believes that Scotland's approach to trafficking should continue to be guided by a human rights-based approach. A programme of effective partnership working between the government, public services, the police and justice services and the third sector would be essential in achieving the Scottish Government's aims and objectives on this important piece of legislation.



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

¹ Scottish Government Scotland's Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy 2025
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-trafficking-exploitation-strategy-2025/>

“I’ve tried to raise the issue of trafficking in my community. Most of the people I’ve tried to talk to about it, however, have the attitude that it ‘can’t be happening in a quiet place like this’. It’s seen as far removed from real life, as opposed to something which is actually happening.”

Scottish Women’s Convention *Scottish Government Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy*, November 2016

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

Our organisation believes so, yes.

The guidance clearly explains its intention to help organisations and professionals understand what support and services should be made available to adult victims of human trafficking and exploitation in Scotland. This clearly reflects the duties already established under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015², which places the responsibility on Scottish Ministers to ensure proper assistance and support to adult victims of trafficking.

However, our organisation would like to see proper acknowledgement that women and girls are disproportionately affected by some forms of trafficking, particularly sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. By doing this, this would then align with Scotland’s wider commitment to addressing violence against women and girls through the Equally Safe Strategy.³ We would ask for explicit wording that highlights the gendered nature of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

“The guidance must explicitly recognise the gendered nature of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation and make clear it applies to people selling sex who are affected by exploitation, not to criminalise them”⁴

Question 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).

² Scottish Government *Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015*
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/human-trafficking-exploitation-scotland-act-2015-guide/>

³ Scottish Government *Equally Safe Strategy: Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)*
<https://www.gov.scot/policies/violence-against-women-and-girls/equally-safe-strategy/>

⁴ Scottish Women’s Convention *Understanding the Prostitution Bill*
<https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/prostitution-report-final.pdf>
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Yes, we believe that the guidance provides a clear explanation of the legal frameworks, strategies and proposed regulations for any future legislation. Our organisation welcomes the strategy's focus on identifying victims, supporting their recovery, properly tackling and dealing with perpetrators and fully addressing the conditions and situations that allow human trafficking to arise.

We would also like to encourage stronger links to Scotland's wider work on violence against women and girls, as many women who experience human trafficking are more often than not affected by other forms of abuse and exploitation.⁵

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

Partly, yes. The guidance sets out the basic referral pathways and the role of first responder organisations in Scotland, including the police, local authorities, Migrant Help Scotland and Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance - these are in addition to UK Government agencies.⁶ The requirement for informed consent before referral is also clearly stated.

However, we feel that including more practical examples would be helpful. Many women do not recognise themselves as victims because of past trauma, cultural shame, language barriers, threats from their captors and perpetrators or serious concerns about their immigration status.

We would also welcome clearer guidance on safeguarding, where women could disclose experiences of sexual exploitation or abuse that may amount to trafficking.

“Once money has changed hands, there is no going back.”

The Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy 2025 highlights the importance of improving victim identification and ensuring practitioners are equipped to recognise signs of exploitation and so cross referencing and aligning with this would be helpful.⁸

⁵Scottish Government *Human Trafficking* <https://www.gov.scot/policies/human-trafficking/support-victims-trafficking/>

⁶Gov.UK *National referral mechanism guidance: adult (Northern Ireland and Scotland)* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/national-referral-mechanism-guidance-adult-northern-ireland-and-scotland>

⁷Scottish Women's Convention *Understanding the Prostitution Bill* <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/prostitution-report-final.pdf>

⁸Scottish Government *Scotland's Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy 2025* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-trafficking-exploitation-strategy-2025/>

We also believe that the inclusion of a referral flowchart would significantly improve accessibility and understanding.

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

Yes. We particularly welcome the guidance's focus on safety, dignity, recovery and person-centred support. These principles are consistent with the support and recovery duties outlined within the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015⁹ and the Victim's Code for Scotland¹⁰, whose aims are to assist with victims and survivors physical, psychological and social recoveries.

However, as a women's organisation, we feel there should be a much stronger emphasis on trauma-informed practice, gender specific support services and survivor involvement and testimony in any decision-making processes going forward. We also ask that there is non-criminalisation of people exploited in selling sex.

In addition to this, we would also like to highlight the importance of long-term recovery strategies rather than relying on crisis intervention alone.

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

In theory yes, the guidance certainly provides useful information on accommodation support in line with the requirements set out within the Victim's Code for Scotland¹¹.

However, we would welcome the inclusion of more information around women-only accommodation, additional support measures for women with children, accessible accommodation as well as accommodation specifically designed for survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse. Through our conference it was also highlighted about the shortage of specialist, trauma informed exiting services and ask that there are minimum standards and pathways for women who have been exploited into selling sex. We also believe that there needs to be a plan to address geographical gaps (Highlands & Islands and rural)

We would also like to see the inclusion of safety planning measures where there is an increased risk of control and abuse from traffickers.

⁹ Scottish Government *Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015*

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/human-trafficking-exploitation-scotland-act-2015-guide/>

¹⁰ Scottish Government *Right to Support: Victim's Code for Scotland* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/victims-code-scotland/pages/6/>

¹¹ Ibid

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

Technically yes, the guidance explains that financial support may be made available during the recovery period, which certainly aligns with the information within the Victim's Code for Scotland. However, our organisation would welcome more information on emergency sources of funding, access to benefits and support for women with no access to public funds.¹²

Question 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 generally provides useful information regarding rights and entitlements. However, we recommend a stronger commitment to ensuring information is accessible to those who need it and is made available in different languages and formats.

We would also like to see any information given during initial meetings revisited throughout the recovery journey as women experiencing trauma or abuse may not be able to fully absorb complex information during initial contact.

Question 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).

In general terms, yes. Although our organisation welcomes the recognition of physical and mental health needs, we would call for stronger references to trauma counselling, specialist mental health services, sexual and reproductive health care and substance abuse support, where relevant.

“I work in a maternity unit and there have been a few occasions when a woman who I have strongly believed to be a victim of human trafficking has presented for pre-natal care. It’s a really tricky situation as fundamentally I don’t want to put the woman in any kind of danger. We need to be better informed as to how to handle this type of situation.”

Scottish Women’s Convention *Scottish Government Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy, November 2016*

Question 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).

¹² Ibid

Yes. Access to interpretation is essential to ensuring victims and survivors of human trafficking can understand their rights and engage effectively with support services, which is consistent with the victim-centred approach set out in Scotland's Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy 2025.¹³

We recommend however that the guidance should explicitly state that professional interpreters should be used at all times (family members or acquaintances should never act as interpreters for various reasons including trauma, potential misinformation or incidences of familial control or abuse).

We also recommend that all interpretation services should be trauma-informed, having undertaken specialist training, be strictly confidential and that women have access to female interpreters as standard, if requested.

Question 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).

Generally, yes. The importance of ensuring victims can access support and justice is reflected in both Scotland's Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy 2025¹⁴ and the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015¹⁵ and the guidance meets that criteria in providing a helpful overview of legal support.

However, we recommend further information, and clear signposting, in such areas as:

- Immigration advice.
- Criminal proceedings.
- Employment rights.
- Housing rights.
- Compensation claims.

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

Yes, the guidance outlines available compensation routes, however, many survivors are unaware of their rights or often find the processes too difficult to navigate. As compensation can form an important part of recovery and also serve as an acknowledgement and recognition of harm, our organisation would recommend that some practical guidance on accessing compensation be introduced, there be more

¹³ Scottish Government *Scotland's Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy 2025*
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-trafficking-exploitation-strategy-2025/>

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ ¹⁵ Scottish Government *Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015*
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/human-trafficking-exploitation-scotland-act-2015-guide/>

support with evidence gathering and there be potential timescales and continued support and advocacy throughout the whole process.¹⁶

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

Our organisation is somewhat undecided on this point. Whilst we welcome the recognition of the need for transition support following the formal support period, recovery from human trafficking often extends far beyond statutory supporting timeframes. Our concern is, who would then decide on when support is withdrawn and no longer needed.

Taking this into consideration, we believe that greater detail and clarity is needed when considering long term housing pathways, employment support, education and training opportunities, community integration and ongoing mental health support.

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

Yes, the inclusion of outreach support is a positive step as this plays a crucial role in ensuring that survivors remain connected to services, particularly after leaving supported accommodation. However, additional detail in certain areas would be helpful. This would include the frequency and duration of outreach services, more information on support in rural and remote communities, specialist services for women, peer support opportunities and support for survivors who do not use accommodation services.

Question 14. Would additional visual aids (i.e. flowcharts or diagrams) be helpful within the guidance?

Yes. Flowcharts, diagrams and other visual summaries would help both practitioners and survivors understand and recognise support pathways and referral processes more easily. Accessible and easy read options should also be made available, if required.

Question 15. Is the guidance easy to read and understand?

Yes, overall, the guidance is well structured and clearly written. However, accessibility could be improved by including summaries at the start of each section, more visual content, case studies, some hyperlinks in digital versions as well as translated materials and easy-read versions.

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

¹⁶ Scottish Government *Scotland's Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy 2025*
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-trafficking-exploitation-strategy-2025/>

While our organisation welcomes the Scottish Government’s commitment to improving support for victims of trafficking and exploitation, we would recommend that the final guidance explicitly recognises the gendered nature of trafficking and exploitation. Women who have experienced trafficking have often experienced multiple forms of abuse and exploitation.

Effective support must recognise their experiences and provide long-term holistic support that helps these women recover, feel safe and have support to help rebuild their lives. As such we would recommend that:

- Any references to violence against women and girls are strengthened.
- Trauma-informed and gender-sensitive practices are embedded throughout.
- There is a stronger focus on long-term recovery and stability.

“Women are angry that we are still fighting against this in the 21st Century”¹⁷

¹⁷ Scottish Women’s Convention *Understanding the Prostitution Bill*
<https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/prostitution-report-final.pdf>

Conclusion

The Scottish Women’s Convention is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government’s consultation on Support Provisions for Victims of Human Trafficking in Scotland: Published Guidance.

As a women’s organisation, we work extensively with women who have experienced various forms of violence, including sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, coercive control and trafficking. We therefore welcome any guidance and legislative measures which aims to improve how victims and survivors are identified, protected and supported in their recovery.

Overall, we believe the guidance is helpful and provides a good overview of the support available. However, we fully believe that there are areas where it could be strengthened further, particularly in recognising the experiences of women and girls and ensuring support is trauma-informed, gender responsive and focused on long-term recovery strategies.

For further information or to share your views, please contact:

Email - info@scottishwomensconvention.org

Telephone - 0141 339 4797

Website – www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Facebook, X & Instagram - @SWCwomen



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