



Modern Slavery and Migration

Understanding Terminology and Tackling Common Myths

PURPOSE

Public messaging in the UK often confuses terms such as asylum seeker, refugee, migrant, and victim of modern slavery or exploitation, even though these terms are not interchangeable and multiple labels may apply to the same individual or circumstance at the same time. Misusing this language can fuel fear, stigma and misinformation, causing further harm to already vulnerable people. Providing clear and accurate information about migration and UK systems is essential in helping to prevent harm.

Traffickers and exploiters frequently seek out and prey on vulnerabilities, including poverty, social isolation, lack of language skills or immigration status, and desperation to protect family members. People seeking asylum have often faced these challenges as well as other traumas relating to torture, conflict, persecution and oppressive systems. Listening to their stories and accurately understanding the situations they face help us to show care to foreigners who live among us, like God calls his people to do in Leviticus.



Our goal is to take a victim-centred approach to raise awareness and provide resources to faith and community spaces to prevent and disrupt modern slavery and exploitation and show care and value to people living in our communities.

DEFINITIONS

Asylum seeker	An asylum seeker is someone who has fled their country and asked for protection in another country because they fear persecution, war or serious harm. They are waiting for the UK government to decide their claim. An asylum seeker is not yet legally recognised as a refugee.
Forced Labour	Forced labour is any work or service that people are forced to do against their will, usually under threat of punishment. This happens in the UK and abroad and can involve migrants and/or UK citizens.
Human Trafficking	Human trafficking involves the recruitment or movement of people for exploitation using threat, force, fraud, or the abuse of vulnerability. Trafficking is a crime that can occur across international borders or within a country.
Refugee	A refugee is someone whose asylum claim has been accepted under the 1951 Refugee Convention. A refugee has been found to have a “well-founded fear of persecution” because of factors such as race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group.
Migrant	A migrant is someone who moves from one place to another, either within a country or across borders. People migrate for many reasons, such as work, study, family reunion, safety and better opportunities. Most migrants are not asylum seekers.
Modern Slavery Victim/Survivor	Modern slavery is an umbrella term covering human trafficking, forced labour, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation (including county lines and forced cannabis cultivation). A victim of modern slavery can be a British citizen, migrant, refugee or asylum seeker. In fact, many victims in the UK are British nationals.
People Smuggling	People smuggling is the illegal transportation of people, such as out of a house or building, into a prison, or across an international border, in violation of applicable laws or other regulations. Smugglers may violate the human rights of those they smuggle, ranging from physical abuse to withholding food and water. Once people have been transported, their relationship with the smuggler is completed, whereas with trafficking there is usually ongoing control and exploitation as the purpose for transport.

COMMON MYTHS AND THE FACTS

MYTH

“ Most people seeking asylum are economic migrants.

FACT

People seeking asylum must show they fear credible threat of persecution or serious harm in their home country.

Economic hardship does not usually qualify someone for asylum. The UK grants protection to a significant proportion of applicants when claims are fully considered or successfully appealed, indicating there is a legitimate reason for seeking asylum.

MYTH

“ Asylum seekers get large benefits and preferential treatment.

FACT

People seeking asylum, or failed asylum claims, are not eligible for benefits. People seeking asylum who are destitute and housed by the Home Office receive very limited financial support and far below welfare levels as it is intended to cover essential living costs only.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work while waiting for a decision which can take many months or, in some cases, years.

MYTH

“ People arriving by small boat are illegal immigrants.

FACT

Under international law, seeking asylum is legal. Safe and legal routes to arrive in the country for asylum are limited to a handful of specific source countries, currently (2025-6) this includes Ukraine, Hong Kong and Afghanistan.

When there are no safe and legal routes available to people seeking asylum, taking desperate measures, such as travelling in small boats can appear like the only option. The method of arrival does not determine whether someone is a genuine refugee.

MYTH

“ Modern slavery only affects foreign nationals.

FACT

Currently UK nationals are the single largest nationality referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and are approximately 1 in every 5 referrals. Modern slavery is a UK issue affecting British citizens as well as people from overseas. In addition, victims referred in the UK can experience exploitation within the UK as well as overseas, and both, showing that exploitation is taking place here on British soil.



COMMON MYTHS AND THE FACTS

MYTH

“ People falsely claim to be victims of modern slavery so they can stay in the UK.

FACT

This is a common claim in public debate, but the evidence does not support the idea that false claims are widespread. Potential victims are referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), where evidence is assessed.

The minority of negative decisions made are because the claim is considered “not credible”, with the most common reason for refusal being insufficient information rather than dishonesty. For example, according to statistics released by the Home Office for 2025, only 0.026% of referrals (n=6) which were disqualified from modern slavery protections, were refused on the grounds of bad faith.

MYTH

“ Claiming asylum is quick, easy and open to anyone.

FACT

The asylum system is under pressure with long delays being common. There remains a considerable backlog in application responses, however this has reduced over recent years.

A typical waiting period is 6 months for the initial decision; however, this is extended if claimant appeals. These long waits can leave people in limbo, unable to rebuild their lives, and at greater risk of exploitation. You must apply from within the country, and the burden of proof (of the harm they are fleeing) is high.

MYTH

“ Migrants cause pressures on our public services.

FACTS

- Migrants on visas generally have to pay annual fees upwards of £1000 to access NHS.
- Asylum seekers can apply for financial support if they have health needs, and are allowed access to emergency care, which is a fundamental human right outlined by UNHCR's 1951 Refugee Convention.
- In fact, we need migrants to relieve pressures on our health services. There are an estimated 100,000 vacancies across the NHS in the UK, plus many more domestic carers. Healthcare workers now make up 75% of all long-term 'Skilled Worker' visa grants through the Health and Care Visa scheme which was launched in 2020 to meet the shortage.

Those seeking asylum are often facing destitution due to restrictions in funding and access to services.

FORCED LABOUR

Many asylum seekers rely on charity provision such as food banks to survive. This can push people to seek out desperate measures to provide for their families, including taking up precarious work. Those who are unfamiliar with the language, systems and basic worker rights also have no way to negotiate decent work and can end up in exploitative situations through a situation of 'choiceless choices'. Identifying work rights abuses early can help prevent further harm.



Workers are entitled to:

- Fair treatment and respect
- Written terms of employment
- At least minimum wage
- Safe working conditions
- Safe accommodation
- Paid holidays and rest breaks



Signs of forced labour

- Forced to work against their will
- Not paid the agreed amount
- ID documents taken away
- Threats of deportation
- Constant control or surveillance
- Deceived about work or conditions

While those seeking asylum typically do not have rights to work in the UK, forced labour is always a crime. Forced Labour is a form of modern slavery, and is when work is not performed by choice, and there is a threat or harm done if the worker tries to leave that situation.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If you have concerns about a migrant at risk, you can help them call **Migrant Help's Asylum** helpline:

0808 8010 503

or go to Refugee Council for information and guidance.

If you think someone is being exploited at work through threats and abuse, deception or withheld wages, control of visas or passport documentation or other abuses, you can call the

Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline:

08000 121 700