

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Victims of Modern Slavery, HC 803

Wednesday 14 December 2016

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 December 2016.

Session not filmed

Members present: Frank Field (Chair); Heidi Allen; Mhairi Black;

Questions 1 - 104

Witnesses

[II](#): Client S, Key Worker S, Ann-Marie Douglas, Project Director for the Adult Victims of Modern Slavery Care Contract, Salvation Army, and Alexandra Lands, Public Affairs Assistant, Salvation Army.

Interpreters for witnesses were present.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [The Salvation Army](#)



Client S, Key Worker S, Ann-Marie Douglas and Alexandra Lands.

Chair: As soon as Heidi is back, we will begin with Heidi. Heidi, are you going to begin?

Q56 **Heidi Allen:** Okay, thank you very much for coming to see us today. To start with, we are trying to understand how easy or difficult it is for people to reach a safe house and leave their traffickers behind, and who helps them.

Client S (Translation): It is very difficult, but I am trying.

Q57 **Chair:** But you have been successful, haven't you?

Client S (Translation): Yes.

Chair: Great, well done.

Q58 **Heidi Allen:** Who is helping you? Is anybody helping you?

Client S (Translation): Key worker S has helped me a lot and I have had many others, as well.

Q59 **Heidi Allen:** Did you find these people to help you, or did they come to you? How did it work?

Client S (Translation): They helped me one after the other. They spoke to me, they were showing their interest.

Key Worker S: She was referred when she was found. She was referred into the NRM and then the NRM made the referral to the Salvation Army, and client S was housed in the West Midlands, [REDACTED] holds the contract for the [REDACTED]. She was allocated a support worker for the 45-day reflection period.

Q60 **Chair:** Key worker S, can you just tell us how she, in a sense, managed to slip the slave master?

Key Worker S: Client S was trafficked across Europe and then into the UK. She was found in transit in the UK.

Q61 **Chair:** By the police?

Key Worker S: Yes.

Q62 **Chair:** The police made the referral to the NRM?

Key Worker S: I think so. She was heavily pregnant at the time.

Chair: Yes, great.

Q63 **Heidi Allen:** She is in a safe place now?



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Key Worker S: She is safe now. She is safe. But it has only been a year. This only happened last year. She was found in 2015 last year.

Q64 **Heidi Allen:** We are trying to understand how the Government, the system, in the UK, helps people like her. The jobcentre, what support has she—okay, that is the answer, probably.

Chair: Client S, if you want to get up and walk around with Baby Bunting, just do so, if you want to. We can talk to you; don't worry.

Key Worker S: That's okay. That's better. She will be all right. I'll watch her. Is she all right around there?

Q65 **Heidi Allen:** Just about the jobcentre. Is there any support, anything to help at all?

Client S (Translation): They helped me, but it was very difficult because it took a long time. I didn't have anything.

Q66 **Mhairi Black:** How long did it take?

Client S (Translation): It took about three months.

Q67 **Chair:** Client S, what would you like to do?

Client S (Translation): What has gone past has already gone and I cannot turn it back.

Q68 **Chair:** Sure. What about the future?

Client S (Translation): I hope that it will be all right for my future.

Q69 **Chair:** What do you want in the future? What would you like to do as a job?

Client S (Translation): I don't know. I have never worked. I have no idea what I would do. However, first of all I would like to learn English.

Q70 **Chair:** Very good, yes, sure. Is that hard, client S?

Client S (Translation): It is very difficult because I have never spoken the language before and it is the first time for me to hear it.

Q71 **Chair:** Did anyone at Jobcentre Plus offer you a course in English?

Client S (Translation): I have asked, but no, it's difficult.

Q72 **Chair:** Without English, you cannot be free, can you, here?

Client S (Translation): Of course.

Q73 **Chair:** Can we just bring the Salvation Army in, because client S is, in one sense, quite a success case, isn't she, because the NRM's facilities have extended beyond six weeks?

Ann-Marie Douglas: I would say it is only a success because she is one of the fortunate ones who has been able to access an after-care project. Adavu exists in Birmingham, but it could be, if she had been supported in



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another part of the country where an after-care project did not exist, her options would have been really, really limited. We find that victims who have dependent children are more fortunate because they have more entitlements, but actually negotiating the system to access those entitlements, as you have heard, still took three months. In that time, some will fall through the net if they do not have somebody working with them because they just haven't got the competence to engage with staff at DWP who do not fully understand some of their own regulations.

Q74 Mhairi Black: Is it a problem that quite often these regulations and things are changing so much? Because when you think of all these welfare reforms that we have had, even in just the last few years, do you think that is part of the problem?

Ann-Marie Douglas: There will be a period of time following a change in legislation where the staff themselves are familiarising themselves with it. The impact of that on the victims is that often the claims will be disallowed incorrectly and then support workers have to challenge that and wait again for it to be reconsidered. In that time, the victim is still unclear as to what is happening with them and what the outcomes are going to be. I would just say as well that I am sure DWP must have some performance targets and it would be interesting to know what they were and what their achievements are in relation to victims of modern slavery.

Heidi Allen: Training as well; training plans helping their work coaches to deal with people who have been through this.

Q75 Chair: To both of you, we have a Prime Minister who is really interested in this topic. If you were speaking to her now, what would you say were the key things she should change?

Key Worker S: Safe accommodation. Client S was not put into refuge space. She was highly vulnerable, she was suicidal, she was so traumatised by her experience, and it was horrific. I am not going to go into it because it will re-traumatise her.

Chair: Sure, no.

Key Worker S: She was fortunate in that the NRM actually worked for her. I am actually supporting two other women who were referred into the NRM and no support has been given by the Salvation Army or Women's Aid, so we do not know what went wrong there, and it has been a year after the fact. So, those cases are still pending.

Q76 Chair: What has happened to those two women?

Key Worker S: They are stuck in the asylum process. They are just stuck, they don't know which way to move. But with client S's case, she was put into G4S accommodation where she had to be moved. A client settles within an area and then they are being picked up and moved to somewhere else and having to start again with all these different other females in the house. That is really difficult, because you will have three or four different languages in the house, and they cannot necessarily



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communicate with one another. Client S was granted a year's discretionary leave by the NRM, which was amazing. I have only seen one other case like that. However, she also had an asylum case running alongside—her asylum case was immediately disallowed, so we had to go to appeal.

Q77 **Mhairi Black:** Sorry, why was it immediately disallowed?

Key Worker S: I have no idea. The reasons, we believe, are totally illogical; they make no sense. The Home Office believed that she could be returned to another part of Albania and be safe.

Q78 **Chair:** So you are trafficked into this country against your will, dangerous maybe to go back and you are still not thought of as an asylum—

Key Worker S: Yes, and they wanted to return her. She had a history of violence and abuse, hence the reason she was trafficked in the first place, because she was vulnerable. She would not have had any support back in Albania; none whatsoever. She would have been picked up by the traffickers again. So, as soon as we got the year's discretionary leave, she was then told she had to move out of G4S accommodation, which is normally 28 days. I worked with a charity called Brushstrokes who made the application for income support and child benefit on June 2016.

Chair: This year?

Key Worker S: Yes, that was this year. The following week, we were in court in Sheldon for client S's appeal hearing. Thank goodness the judge was incredibly knowledgeable around the area of modern slavery and he instructed the Home Office, "You will not question this client unless it is absolutely relevant. She is traumatised, she is vulnerable and I will not allow that to happen." He was very, very gracious with client S, explained the whole process, "If you need breaks, we will give you as many breaks as you need," and he upheld the appeal.

It did take the Home Office from June to late October to actually send the paperwork through that she had been granted Humanitarian Protection. That took several letters from the solicitor chasing it, chasing it, chasing it. In the interim, because she came under Sandwell Council, Sandwell Council wanted to house her immediately in a high-rise in an area that was known for drugs and antisocial behaviour. When we went to view, client S just froze. She just froze in absolute terror, because she was held in similar places. So that was a massive trigger for her and it just felt like I could not shield her from that.

After she received her year's discretionary leave, Women's Aid had two weeks to disengage, so then they referred to us at the Adavu Project. The council were basically saying to our client, if she doesn't take this property we have just discharged our duty and she will not be offered another property with them.

Q79 **Heidi Allen:** So, they did not understand? It is not just about



accommodation; it's so much more than that.

Key Worker S: We were explaining this to them: you cannot house her here. Due to the history of trafficking and where she was held. We went back to their main office, they got an interpreter on the phone to speak with client S and I knew what the housing manager was asking client S was not what the interpreter was asking client S, just from her reactions. They then gave us a week, to make a decision whether she wants the property or not. We knew there was no way she would accept it or move in and were extremely concerned for her and her child.

She had a GP appointment the following day. I accompanied her and informed the GP of what had happened and that GP was superb. There are many GPs who will do nothing. That GP sat in there and penned a letter immediately saying to Sandwell Council, "There is no way you are going to house her here. She is suffering post-trauma stress."

Q80 **Heidi Allen:** Why did the GP have to get involved and do that?

Key Worker S: Because they wanted medical evidence of trauma. We, as the professionals—we only work with trafficked persons—they were not taking our word for it.

Q81 **Chair:** That is one change that could take place?

Key Worker S: Yes. I was struggling, and I was thinking, "If I'm struggling and I'm competent and I'm a professional, oh my goodness." In order to safeguard client S and C—and we only do this with our most high-risk cases—we put client S in our adult foster care. They are very specialist-specific and it is only one couple at the moment; we only use them when it is absolutely necessary. That, for client S, was quite healing. That was quite transforming because she put on weight, and she looked happier. However, her benefits were still not coming through. We couldn't open a bank account for her and the DWP were demanding a bank account. We couldn't open a bank account because the bank wanted a letter from DWP stating she is entitled to this benefit. The DWP would not issue a letter stating that.

Q82 **Chair:** So, we could get a change, temporarily, that benefit be paid to you, couldn't we, and to similar organisations?

Key worker S: Yes. We had to refer to social services because C became a child in need because client S did not have the finances to care for her child. We were relying heavily on foodbanks and charity resource centres for baby clothes, nappies, wipes, personal hygiene items for client S. Basic things like sanitary towels that she could not buy for herself because she had no money.

The social worker would sometimes give her £20 for a week and sometimes two weeks would pass and she would have nothing. That system was not quite working. On the other hand, the social worker was



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very good at contacting the DWP. I was contacting the DWP, Brushstrokes were contacting the DWP.

Q83 **Chair:** But still nothing happening, though?

Key Worker S: Nothing. Nothing.

Q84 **Heidi Allen:** Did you involve the local MP? I have not heard about local MP's involvement at all today?

Key Worker S: No, we didn't. We just did not think of that option at that time. As I am part of the West Midlands Anti-Slavery Network; actually the Adavu Project helped to set that up —

Q85 **Chair:** So it is a good education for us, you see, of a problem, that it is not just—

Key Worker S: It was awful.

Chair: It is happening here. It is back to this theme again.

Key Worker S: I emailed Robin Brierley, who is the chair of the West Midlands anti-trafficking network, to say our client is going to lose the accommodation that we have secured via Black Country Housing and she will be made street homeless with a small child due to the benefit situation.

Q86 **Chair:** She still does not have housing benefit, though?

Key Worker S: No, she hadn't received any benefits. Coming to the end of August, she was going to lose that tenancy, and—

Q87 **Heidi Allen:** How did you manage to secure it without the money?

Key Worker S: The CEO, who has a real interest in assisting survivors of modern slavery. I think if you have somebody in that specific arena who has a passion for survivors of modern slavery—

Q88 **Chair:** Against modern slavery?

Key Worker S: Yes, they go into action because they understand the risks and the indicators and everything else that is involved in that.

Q89 **Mhairi Black:** It seems like every person that we have heard from today, the only times that they have been able to move forward and try and help the situation is that when they have been lucky enough to come across somebody that cares or somebody that understands. The system is—

Chair: The system cannot seem to comprehend, can it?

Key Worker S: Yes, and that is it, absolutely. Even though we had stated clearly and repeatedly to the DWP, "This is a trafficked person, you need to put her benefits through, she has a child," there was no regard for that, none whatsoever. So, it was only when Robin Brierley managed to find a contact with the DWP—



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Q90 **Chair:** Robin Brierley, is he the CEO?

Key Worker S: No, he is the chair of the West Midlands Anti-Slavery Network. Then that manager contacted me the following day, and her words, verbatim, were, "Key worker S, oh my God, this is my department and I cannot get to the bottom of what is going on with this case, where her papers are or what is going on," and she stated, "I am concerned. Leave it with me." Then, the following day, she called back to say client S needed to do the habitual residency test. This was the first time we had heard of this. DWP made no communication of this to us at all.

Q91 **Chair:** Given that they never get their accounts certified, DWP, you would have thought you would have some manager say, "We are going to pay the benefit," wouldn't you?

Key Worker S: Yes, it was just horrendous. I made the argument, "No, she does not. This is a trafficked person."

Chair: I mean, literally, it is for people who have lived here and gone abroad and come back again, habitual residency—

Q92 **Heidi Allen:** You have helped other people?

Key Worker S: Yes.

Heidi Allen: Is your experience always as bad as this?

Key Worker S: It is.

Q93 **Heidi Allen:** Are you just based in one part of the country or do you have experience of the rest of the country? Is it always like this, or is your knowledge just—

Key Worker S: I know with other charities based elsewhere, they have reported similar things, as we share our knowledge and experiences in the anti-slavery network. People from other regions come in to look at what is best practice here, as they want to take that back to their region and build a model of good practice, because a network has more power, knowledge and weight behind it.

Chair: Really good.

Key Worker S: I'm really proud of you. I can't look at her because I'll cry. You are doing really well.

Chair: Absolutely. So is Baby Bunting.

Key Worker S: Yes, she is very happy over there. She has found a new friend.

This was only because Robin contacted this manager and this manager must have let it rip in there that on the 1 September we were informed that she will have a payment, but then they would not make a payment because client S did not have a bank account, and they still would not issue the letters stating what she is entitled to. This put her in a really



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vulnerable position because then a friend offered their bank account. Straight away my anxiety went through the roof, because I thought, "This is a potential situation for exploitation."

Chair: Exploitation again, isn't it, yes?

Key Worker S: We had open conversations with the people who offered their bank account, we had a written agreement. We had to safeguard as much as we could. I would not recommend this at all.

Q94 **Mhairi Black:** There seems to be a total lack of acknowledgement that we can get these gang leaders and traffickers. If you leave a vacant spot for them where somebody is vulnerable, that is exactly why—

Key Worker S: Yes, that is exactly what traffickers do. We vetted these people and they were safe.

So, as soon as the money went in, it was about a week later that client S had written confirmation of what benefits she was entitled to. So now we are in mid-September. As soon as we received the letter, we went to the bank and they promptly opened a bank account, we then transferred all her money over. We contacted the DWP, removed the friends account and informed them of her bank account details.

Q95 **Heidi Allen:** If you could change the system, how should it work? What should the experience have been like from the beginning?

Key Worker S: I think, client S should have gone into refuge. She should have gone into a safe, secure accommodation, not Home Office accommodation. Women's Aid in this case were superb, faultless.

Q96 **Heidi Allen:** It is like she started to go down almost an illegal immigrant route rather than a trafficked route?

Key Worker S: She did, yes. She went straight down that route, before the NRM kicked in.

Q97 **Heidi Allen:** That is something for the Home Office Select Committee to look at, isn't it?

Key Worker S: Yes, then Women's Aid visited when she was actually in this accommodation, for a month or so after.

Q98 **Heidi Allen:** This was the G4S place that she was in?

Key Worker S: It was G4S, and she was kept in G4S accommodation.

Q99 **Heidi Allen:** In terms of the jobcentre and that part of the process, how should it work?

Key Worker S: My ideal would be a team or somebody who sits within every region within the DWP who only processes the trafficking claims, and that those claims are processed quickly.

Heidi Allen: For trafficking and women's refuge in general, perhaps,



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because that was the thing I was interested in looking at?

Key Worker S: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Heidi Allen: Just fast track?

Key Worker S: Fast track them.

Heidi Allen: No questions?

Key Worker S: The DWP just would not budge at all to ensure she had some money. So, too fast track it, it was very confusing because on the one hand we were being told by the DWP that she would get an emergency NI number, when they receive the claim they would give her an NI number. Then we were being told by the DWP, "No, she has to go and get it." We had to make phone calls for her to go to a different office altogether to get her NI number from there.

I remember another client of mine that that happened with, the adviser on the other side of the window—and it literally is one adviser, one adviser—"Oh, my God, you were trafficked. Oh my God, I've only seen that on the television." Everybody could hear, and my client just seized up. She was held at gunpoint. Her case was horrific, and because she was so frightened she just answered all the questions because she thought if she did not answer those questions she's not going to be given an NI number. The adviser behaved really unprofessionally. She should not be doing that.

Heidi Allen: They should not even have to go through the same route as everyone else?

Chair: No, there should be one person, shouldn't there, that does the whole lot for them.

Key Worker S: But they are being forced down that route. So, the NI number should be given at the point they receive the paperwork. It needs to be fast tracked so we can open bank accounts and ensure a smooth transition.

Q100 **Chair:** You have regional offices with that particular charge, yes?

Key Worker S: Yes.

Q101 **Chair:** But what about the Salvation Army? Any further changes you would like to see?

Ann-Marie Douglas: Maybe the staff at DWP need to be dealing with people, not cases, and there needs to be some accountability for them delivering outcomes, because if you look at their customer service standards, we are just asking for them to deliver those, and they are not. There does not appear to be any appreciation of the effect their conduct has on the person and on society, because what it means is that you have wounded people in society unable to contribute effectively and it impacts on all of us, at the end of the day. What we are asking for is



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relatively simple because the systems are there. We need to look at how the systems can operate more effectively and with empathy for real people, because sometimes it seems as if, with the Home Office, with DWP, they look at a person and they take the stance that they are there trying to get something they are not entitled to, rather than, "Actually, we are here to help you access your entitlements." If they just change their approach from the outset, the whole process could be a lot smoother.

Q102 **Chair:** You have been very helpful to us. You might think, on your journey home again, of things you want to tell us. Will you just communicate them to us?

Ann-Marie Douglas: Of course.

Key Worker S: Yes, of course.

Q103 **Mhairi Black:** Also, I just want to apologise that you have had this experience. It is just horrible.

Chair: It is terrible, isn't it?

Mhairi Black: I am so horrified.

Key Worker S: It is so traumatic. I felt traumatised and I remember thinking, "God only knows how she's feeling." But because of her vulnerability, there was a lot of stuff we protected her from, that we chose not to tell her in order to protect her, to safeguard her and her mental health.

Chair: That has happened under a regime where the Prime Minister is really interested in stopping it. So, anyway, our report will get wings for that reason.

Q104 **Heidi Allen:** Can you tell her, please, that she—she knows how brave she is?

Chair: Yes, wonderful.

Heidi Allen: Even braver today by sharing her story with us, which will hopefully make things better for other people.

Client S (Translation): Thank you so much for your help.

Heidi Allen: You are a very special person.

Chair: Thank you for coming. It was brilliant. Thank you for coming.

Heidi Allen: Have a happy Christmas.

Chair: Have a happier Christmas than you would otherwise have had. Great, well done.