

## **Evaluation of a trial of Independent Child Trafficking Advocates**

HYNES, Patricia

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# Evaluation of a trial of Independent Child Trafficking Advocates

Patricia Hynes

## Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK), there have been calls for independent guardians for unaccompanied children and young people arriving in England and Wales since at least 2009 (Pearce et al., 2009). However, it was not until Section 48 of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act 2015<sup>1</sup> that Independent Child Trafficking Advocates (ICTAs) were created<sup>2</sup> across some local authorities<sup>3</sup> in England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> Section 48 detailed how the Secretary of State was required, no later than nine months after the date of the Act being passed, to lay before Parliament a report on steps proposed in relation to the powers conferred under this Section.

From September 2014 a trial of a new ICTA service commenced, which was run by the children's charity Barnardo's, across 23 local authority areas<sup>5</sup> in England. The Home Office commissioned a parallel independent evaluation of this trial, appointing a research team from the University of Bedfordshire from September 2014 for one year up to August 2015, to produce a final report to be laid before Parliament in December 2015. This was the first time a trial and evaluation of Advocates for children who had experienced trafficking had taken place in England. The evaluation was to look at how the ICTA scheme was implemented, how the role of ICTAs worked in practice and the impact of ICTAs for children. For this latter aim, the evaluation used a random allocation process, prescribed by the Home Office in the initial tender document, as a basis for comparing children supported by ICTAs relative to those receiving existing provision. A mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative research tools was employed, including

case file analysis, surveys, focus groups and interviews with ICTAs, key stakeholders and children.

This chapter will describe the methods and key findings from the ICTA evaluation. It will then discuss two further issues that arose as part of this evaluation, and which are relevant to the aims of this volume.<sup>6</sup> Firstly, the challenging task of obtaining Research Ethics Committee (REC) approval and Data Sharing Agreements (DSAs) from the 23 local authorities taking part in the evaluation, plus the necessary associated ethics approvals. Secondly, details of the final evaluation report which was laid before Parliament alongside a government report that detailed findings and conclusions of the independent evaluation but with an additional focus on (a) a lack of evidence that ICTAs reduced the number of children going missing and (b) limited benefits found of ICTAs' impact on immigration and criminal justice processes. In contrast to the independent evaluation's main conclusions that the specialist ICTA service had been successful, as measured in relation to 'several beneficial outcomes for trafficked children' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 39), the government report described evidence from the independent evaluation as 'equivocal', which resulted in a delayed introduction to the ICTA provisions detailed within the Modern Slavery Act at that time.

The evaluation study described in this chapter was conducted during a period when reports of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in towns and cities across the UK such as Rotherham, Rochdale, Manchester and Oxford were firmly on the agenda of local authorities (for discussion of how responses to CSE changed dramatically over this period see, for example, Cockbain & Tufail, 2020). An Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham had just been published in August 2014 and, during the evaluation, the Government's response of March 2015 called for better sharing of information.<sup>7</sup> At that time, services and training for CSE for UK-born children were developed and developing across the local authorities within the trial and evaluation. These were resourced separately from services around human trafficking and children involved were therefore not always referred into the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM).<sup>8</sup> There were also established services for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, refugees and missing children in many of these locations.

The broader context in which research or evaluation is being conducted cannot be ignored, and the UK's concern at the time with controlling numbers of irregular migrants saw, from 2012, the creation of policies and legislation promoting a 'hostile environment'. As Clayton and Firth (2021) outlined, the intention to create this 'hostile environment', announced by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, was the aim

of the Immigration Act 2014. This situation was then escalated by the 2016 Immigration Act. The timing of these Acts, sitting either side of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, has since been explored by Hodkinson et al., who argue that 'state action to outlaw modern slavery is flawed, counter-productive and disingenuous' given the environment created in which a hostile state 'vulnerabilises migrants' (2021, p. 40). Clayton and Firth suggest that while the hostile environment was created for those with no permission to be in the UK, 'the hostility spills out onto lawful residents' (2021, p. 58). It is clear that the trajectory of asylum and immigration legislation and policy has resulted in any past focus on integration efforts being replaced by a culture of hostility, with the overt creation of this 'hostile environment' running counter to efforts to identify trafficking (Hynes, 2009, 2022). It is in this context that children and young people continue to go missing and/or become vulnerable to exploitation.

The subsequent roll-out of ICTAs (later re-named Independent Child Trafficking Guardians [ICTGs]) has since been glacial and staggered with evaluations (Keeble et al., 2018; Kohli et al., 2019; Shrimpton et al., 2020; Shrimpton et al., 2024) built-in at each step, plus the inclusion of a focus on ICTAs within an independent review of the Modern Slavery Act (Field et al., 2018). Now, almost a decade later, this national service still only reaches two-thirds of local authorities across England and Wales, with a full roll-out pending. To end, this contribution provides brief details of this roll-out and some concluding remarks.

## **Evaluation aims, approach, methods and characteristics of children**

Evaluation is embedded in Home Office programmes and delivery, and the trial and evaluation of ICTAs was no exception. The complexity of the ICTA service with its varying policies and practices across 23 local authorities and the short evaluation timescale demanded a range of research methods be utilised. Local authorities were required to participate in the evaluation but received no additional resources for the trial or engagement with the research effort. Their subsequent levels of engagement were varied and in some areas there were difficulties around accessing data for some children, resulting in some data collection challenges. Part way through the evaluation the research design was refined and simplified to ensure that the evaluation became 'lighter' for local authorities. The evaluation design therefore necessarily looked in more detail at children using the ICTA service, resulting in better quality data for children

receiving these services and less information on the impact of the service relative to existing child protection and safeguarding provision.

A 12-month trial and evaluation period is a short time in which to build, deliver and evaluate a new and complex service for children, particularly given the then low levels of trafficking knowledge and awareness across some of the local authority areas. In the early months, there was concern that the throughput of numbers of children who would be involved in the trial and evaluation would be too low to draw meaningful conclusions but, ultimately, this early concern became redundant as numbers increased. Despite these anticipated limitations, the evaluation sought to answer three key questions, relating both to process and impact:

- 1) How was the advocacy scheme implemented?
- 2) How did the role of the Advocate work in practice?
- 3) What was the impact of the advocacy scheme for trafficked children compared to existing provision?

To respond to each of these questions, a mixed methods approach and range of qualitative and quantitative methods were used, allowing triangulation of sources (see [Table 10.1](#)).

**Table 10.1** Summary of methods

Method	Data
Alternative allocation process via local authority	Core demographic information from 158 children referred into trial from all participating local authorities
Case file analysis	158 case files examined (17 with limited information)
Interviews with children	30 (21 in 'advocacy' group and 9 in 'comparator' group)
Interviews with ICTAs	6 (full number of ICTAs employed in trial)
Interviews with external stakeholders	18 (12 with operational and 6 with strategic stakeholders)
Focus groups with ICTAs, Barnardo's operational and strategic managers	9 (completed at 3 separate intervals during the 12-month timeframe)
Stakeholder online surveys	2 (at separate intervals – total 116 respondents)
Examination of records of ICTA training, supervision and use of volunteers	All records available prior to 31 July 2015 cutoff point

Questions 1 and 2 – the *how* questions – required provision of rich information and an understanding of the context in which the advocacy scheme was implemented and worked in practice, across participating local authorities. To answer these questions, in-depth interviews with ICTAs, stakeholders with operational or strategic roles and children, plus focus groups with ICTAs and Barnardo's managers were carried out. Analysis of secondary data such as records of trainings was also completed where available.

Question 3 – on the *impact* of Advocates compared to existing provision – required a more quantitative approach. This also included a randomisation process, as prescribed by the Home Office, with facets of experimental designs to engender confidence in its robustness and trustworthiness of its findings. The evaluation used an alternate allocation process as a basis for comparing children supported by ICTAs relative to existing provision. As per standard practice, all children identified as potentially having been trafficked were referred by a broad range of statutory and third sector stakeholders to the local authority for assessment. Following referral, a designated Single Point of Contact (SPoC) recorded core demographic information about each child and then allocated the child alternatively into one of two groups for this trial on a strictly chronological basis:<sup>9</sup>

- 1) An 'advocacy' group
- 2) A 'comparator' group

The 'advocacy' group children were then referred (with a target of doing so within two hours where possible) to the ICTA service for the allocation of an ICTA, in addition to receiving existing statutory services. The 'comparator' group children continued to receive child protection and safeguarding services as usual, based on the particular local authority's policies, practices and human trafficking awareness levels (for further details of this allocation process see the final report of the evaluation, Kohli et al., 2015). This type of randomised allocation and use of a 'control' group is often difficult to justify ethically if it means services are being withheld in any way. However, in this evaluation all children continued to receive child protection and safeguarding services, with no child subject to 'waitlist' types of 'control' groups. In other words, concerns about the use of a 'control group' in this instance were overcome, as children continued to receive the benefits of mature and existing child protection and safeguarding services, and were not in a worse position than if the evaluation had not taken place or kept waiting for service provision. Around half of the children were allocated ICTAs as well as existing provision.

Data from the ICTA services were fully available to the research team throughout. Access to data from existing service provision was mainly through local authority case files, following negotiation of access, ethical approvals and having DSAs signed. Interviews with children (n=30) were conducted with those in the 'comparator' group (n=9) being interviewed about standard child protection services and the more accessible children in the 'advocacy' group (n=21) interviewed about their ICTAs plus other services made available to them.

A case file data extraction spreadsheet was designed to obtain data from existing local authority service provision, developed with further scrutiny from members of an Expert Reference Group, comprising of legal and third sector experts. This data extraction spreadsheet contained space to record basic demographic information about each child, their involvement in social care, health and education services, criminal justice involvement, immigration status, exploitation type, the number of 'missing' episodes held on file and a range of other key information. Activities related to the child were also detailed such as whether there had been prompt initial contact between the allocated worker and the child, whether the child was accompanied to assessments and other meetings, and if the child had been helped to prepare a statement or give evidence. A key set of questions related to the frequency of contact (at 0–3, 4–6, 7–9 and 10+ months) with children (face to face or by telephone, skype or email) and with which type of professional. Evaluation team members travelled to local authority offices to extract data with details of children anonymised at the point of data extraction. Data analysis then involved the research team using *t* tests of statistical significance at 3, 6 and 9 months, although data for 9 months were limited as many cases had not matured to that point.

Of the 158 children allocated to the trial, 86 were randomly assigned to the 'advocacy' group and 72 to the 'comparator' group. There was a varied pattern of allocation across the 23 local authorities, with no allocation from six local authorities who confirmed they had no known cases of children being trafficked during the period of the trial. Ultimately, 158 case files of children were examined, with a balanced gender split (f=79/m=78, plus one unborn child), with restricted information on 17 cases. In term of age, 59% were between 13 and 16 years old, 29% between 17–18 years old and 31 had been age assessed (23 were disputed) and proposed in a further 11 cases, but this data was missing in a number of files.

All children were seen as having *social care* needs. Just under half (n=78) of the children had been referred into the NRM,<sup>10</sup> mainly those

in the 'advocacy' group allocation. From these 78 referrals, 43 received a positive Reasonable Grounds decision (59% in the 'advocacy' group and 42% in the 'comparator' group) with the remainder either pending or having received a negative outcome. Ultimately, 11 of the 43 who had received a positive Reasonable Grounds decision received a positive Conclusive Grounds decision and 6 received a negative Conclusive Grounds decision during the evaluation. Most EU and non-EU children were 'looked after' by local authorities (n=72%) and accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (n=66%) with placements in foster or residential care or living with parents.

The types of exploitation they had encountered were sexual (30%), unknown (25%), criminal (16%), labour (13%) and domestic servitude (2%). Multiple forms of exploitation were recorded in 21 cases (13%), which aligns with child maltreatment more broadly wherein abuse can occur in multiple forms. Of the UK-born children included, sexual exploitation was the primary exploitation type in 20 out of 28 cases.

*Immigration status:* Most of the 158 children were from non-EU countries (n=110), mainly from Vietnam (n=45) and Albania (n=28). UK children (n=28) were included at that time in the EU countries total (n=47). The non-EU group saw 73 of the 110 children claiming asylum or having immigration claims being clarified.

In terms of their involvement with the *criminal justice* process, 44 children out of the overall sample were involved in proceedings as a 'victim' of trafficking (34 in the 'advocacy' group and 10 in the 'comparator' group). There were 8 cases where children were involved in the criminal justice process as an 'offender' (6 in the 'advocacy' group and 2 in the 'comparator' group) where they had been compelled to be involved in crime, and a further 6 where children were involved both as a 'victim' and 'offender' (4 in the 'advocacy' group and 2 in the 'comparator' group). There were further cases where there was either no involvement or no mention of their involvement in criminal justice processes.

## Key evaluation findings

The final report, published in December 2015, found that the role of ICTAs was seen positively by most professionals as well as by the children involved (Kohli et al., 2015). The evidence generated and presented in the evaluation led to the conclusion that the ICTA service had 'been

successful as measured in relation to several beneficial outcomes for trafficked children' (Kohli et al., 2015, p.39). These outcomes included keeping children visible to support services, making relationships based on trust with children and other stakeholders, sharing expertise in human trafficking, supporting children through complex situations and speaking up for children when necessary. It was also found that ICTAs were able to maintain momentum in the cases allocated to them while also having a positive impact on the quality of child protection and safeguarding decision-making around the child. Overall, the available evidence clearly 'added value' to existing services with children being kept 'safely visible', forming 'relationships of trust and credibility' and children being helped to 'orientate to and navigate their ways through complex circumstances' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 39). ICTAs also spoke up for children when necessary.

The final report also broke down findings in relation to the three questions the evaluation had sought to answer. The first question, on how the advocacy scheme had been implemented, reflected the presence, good reputation and operational strengths of Barnardo's when working with this population of children and young people. The original intention to refer children to the ICTA service within two hours, or as soon as practically possible, did not tend to occur in practice. Reasons for this included unfamiliarity with the trial in its early stages and the logistics of a distributed referral hub across 23 local authorities. The lack of additional resources for local authorities was also considered to be a potential part of the reason for this lack of timely referrals. The ICTA service chased referrals and sought clarifications where necessary throughout. As outlined in the evaluation, over time 'a feature of the service became the capacity to seek and find information in a robust, determined and sometimes challenging way when delays occurred' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 17).

Question 2 on the way the roles of the ICTAs worked in practice revealed workload and training issues. Caseloads were variable but averaged 14 cases per ICTA, lower than those of social workers who at the time held an average of 23 cases each. This variance potentially explained how the frequency of contact by Advocates over telephone, Skype and email was found to be statistically significantly higher than contact by social workers at 3 and 6 months. A 'hub and spoke' model to provide services and reach across ICTA services ensured these cases remained visible. This resulted in Advocates working long hours and spending considerable time travelling long distances.

With the development of a new service addressing the multiple and varying needs of children affected by human trafficking, ICTAs came from diverse backgrounds, some of whom had social work or youth work qualifications. Training by Barnardo's included national and international standards of care such as the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's guidance on training for those working with trafficked children (FRA, 2015). ICTAs were also able to undertake the UK's Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) Level 2 training to become regulated providers of legal advice. Other trainings included child protection law, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, advocacy skills, child development in cross-cultural contexts and acting as an 'appropriate adult' in UK child protection cases across social care, immigration and criminal justice contexts.

ICTAs worked with social care, immigration and criminal justice systems and processes. All children and young people had social care needs, non-EU children were also assisted with immigration matters and both EU and non-EU children supported within criminal justice processes. ICTAs were found to be working across these processes, with independence from each and therefore able to hold a holistic view of the child, their life and their needs. For children this meant they were able to have one person who could explain all processes to them in a clear way. While work with social care and immigration took up much of their time in the initial phases of working with individual children, as time went by ICTAs were able to introduce 'a sense of normality into the children's lives, as a way of glimpsing a possible future outside the "trafficking" world' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 23).

Children within the ICTAs' caseloads came from the UK, the EU and from across non-EU borders. The evaluation found that there were some variations in the ways the ICTA service worked with these children, with those trafficked across borders appearing to be more isolated from protective networks, unfamiliar with their rights and to have immigration questions. UK-born children were embedded within networks of protection, and it was found that they initially had difficulties in trusting and understanding the role of an ICTA in their lives. For example, in CSE cases, a range of other professionals were involved in their lives, some of whom questioned the additional need for an ICTA. This is reflective of the siloed nature of provision around exploitation in the UK more broadly, with historical services developed specifically for CSE and other forms of harm. In the words of one stakeholder:

We had such a turnover of issues in [the organisation], at the moment it's CSE. Next month it will be FGM [female genital

mutilation]. Next month it will be the latest fallout from the serious case review. ... I think by having the CTA [Child Trafficking Advocate] based in the organisation, it keeps trafficking in people's minds. (interview with strategic stakeholder)

The evaluation also found that ICTAs were able to help orient other professionals by piecing together information about children and holding specialist knowledge that benefitted their practice.

The final question on the impact of the advocacy scheme for children compared to existing provision revealed how children in the 'advocacy' group were very positive about their Advocates, and stakeholders from social care, immigration and criminal justice contexts were largely positive about the service. Children in the 'advocacy' group saw the value of their ICTAs and the time they invested in their lives:

**Interviewer:** And what is it that made you learn to trust him? What was it about [the Advocate]?

**Child:** He came two or three times and I wasn't speaking to him, but he continued coming.

(interview with child)

Several 'comparator' group children spoke of the way their social workers constantly changed whereas 'advocacy' group children remained allocated to the same ICTA over the course of the trial. Stakeholders also suggested that ICTAs retained a focus on the child: 'In strategy meetings between several government agencies, the advocate remained the voice of the child at all times, and often pulled lengthy discussions back to the basic principle of the child's views and interests' (lawyer, stakeholder survey).

A small minority of stakeholders felt that the service overlapped with existing service provision and 'any additional resource would be better spent on social work services' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 6). One local authority was clear that they would not refer CSE cases of UK-born children to the ICTA service, or to the NRM at that time, as it already had established provision for these children.

Although not a specific aim at the commencement of the evaluation, children going missing from care became a clear question and cause for concern. In this trial and evaluation, there was 'no evidence that having an Advocate led to the reduction in the number of children going missing' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 29). Chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the 'advocacy' and 'comparator' groups relating to whether a child went missing or not. However, it was also the case that in some instances children went missing before

they were referred by the local authority into the advocacy service. When children went missing before referral, Advocates had alerted local authorities about the risks of children disappearing from placements the ICTA service considered unsuitable. ICTAs were, however, unable to easily influence decisions about accommodation provision. There was, however, 'substantial evidence that ... advocates continued to coordinate formal networks of protection to ensure that the child's absence did not result in cases being forgotten or closed' (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 30). One Advocate interviewed suggested a role for a specialist Advocate to focus entirely on missing children:

We need an Advocate for the missing to make sure that somebody is constantly going, 'Why aren't you following this case up? Where is this person? What are the police doing?' That could be a job for one person because I'm finding with some of mine that I'm the only person who's interested. (focus group with Advocates)

Going missing is a key indicator used to identify human trafficking in Statutory Guidance (Home Office, 2025) and Practice Guidance (HM Government, 2011) and other lists of trafficking indicators developed internationally and nationally. Some 46% of children (72 of the 158 children) had at least one 'missing episode' recorded during this evaluation. Of these 72 children, 27 remained missing at the end of the evaluation period, and of these 27 children, 23 were Vietnamese nationals. The evaluation recommended further research on missing children, particularly Vietnamese children, and how an advocacy service could become part of a coordinated response to missing children.

A 12-month evaluation is a short time to evaluate a complex trial and a number of operational issues were flagged as requiring further work, including the issue of children going missing. While social care was initially a key focus for ICTAs, as the trial progressed this widened to immigration and criminal justice services (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 39). In all, 44 children were involved in criminal justice proceedings as a victim of trafficking (34 in the 'advocacy' group, 10 in the 'comparator' group), eight cases as an offender where the child had been compelled to undertake criminal activity by traffickers (six in the 'advocacy' group, two in the 'comparator' group) and in a further six cases, the child was involved both as a victim and an offender. While ICTAs' involvement in the criminal justice area was less than in social care and immigration, this involvement emerged from two to nine months after allocation to an Advocate. ICTAs' work meant that children understood what

being part of an investigation could mean, were accompanied to court proceedings, and court processes and outcomes were explained to them in ways that children could absorb. ICTAs also advised the courts through expert witness statements and through giving oral testimony amongst other actions.

## Ethical underpinning

The ethics of conducting evaluations or research with children who have themselves experienced human trafficking are intricate and difficult to navigate. The complexity, sensitivity and high-profile nature of this evaluation demanded clear and ethical principles, not least to ensure the involvement of children in the evaluation was ethically sound. In response, an Ethical Protocol was developed by the research team to elaborate on children's participation and a named contact was provided within the University for any issues relating to the conduct of the research team that a child or other person may have. A range of ethical frameworks informed the Protocol and attention was paid to the global movement to improve the ethical treatment of children during research (Graham et al., 2013). Drawing on an NSPCC Ethical Protocol for work in contexts of child abuse and neglect (Radford et al., 2011) the evaluation Protocol elaborated on key ethical issues of conducting research with children:

- Minimising 'harm' or potential distress to children involved in the evaluation of the trial and maximising benefits.
- Negotiating 'informed consent' with children involved at different stages of the evaluation.
- Data protection, confidentiality and limits to confidentiality if any threat of imminent or immediate harm was disclosed.
- Child protection responsibilities if abuse, the threat or potential threat of significant harm or abuse was disclosed, and reporting mechanisms to Local Authority and Barnardo's services in such instances.
- Ensuring distress to evaluation team members was minimised and their safety assured.

Throughout, the focus of the evaluation remained on services experienced rather than the child's experiences of abuse and exploitation. Research tools developed included interview guides, focus

group schedules, information sheets and informed consent forms for adults and children, Qualtrics surveys and a data extraction tool for case files (14 research tools in total). Age- and language-appropriate information sheets and informed consent forms were used for children and young people. Draft DSAs were devised as well as a random allocation spreadsheet and a letter to local authorities with instructions for the SPoCs allocation process.

Ethical considerations were guided throughout by the safety and best interests of children and in line with the principle of 'beneficence', which refers to the obligation to improve the status, rights and/or wellbeing of children in research (Israel & Hay, 2006, pp. 95–111). Limitations of a one-year evaluation were known at the outset, and became part of ethical discussions, particularly how realistic an original aim to evaluate the longer-term impacts of the advocacy service was in the space of 12 months. It was also pointed out by the practitioners that some of the processes that the children were going through were unlikely to be resolved within one year. This included the asylum process and any criminal justice proceedings which, at that time, were known to take months if not years to be resolved.

Obtaining REC approvals proved to be particularly challenging. The review process involved 27 RECs – two from within the University of Bedfordshire, Barnardo's, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), and one each from the 23 local authorities involved in the trial and evaluation. Ultimately 25 applications were submitted, with two local authorities not engaging in the ethical application process and consequently not involved in the trial. As can be seen in [Table 10.2](#), across the 23 of the anonymised local authorities, most submissions for ethical approval occurred in the first month of the evaluation and a number were approved in a matter of weeks thereafter. However, others took longer to gain approval – from three to ten months – and up to 12 months in one instance.

The need for DSAs was a further challenge which in some cases was met within the early months, but in others delayed data collection until the final months of the evaluation. Data collection during these later months highlighted differences in practice across the local authorities, particularly in relation to trafficking-adjacent and pre-existing services such as CSE services for UK-born children which, as noted earlier, were resourced separately from human trafficking services.

**Table 10.2** Local authority research ethics approvals and data sharing agreements: anonymised timescale (monthly)

Local authority	Months to gain approval											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	S			A D								
2	S	A			D							
3	S	A				D						
4	S				D	A						
5		S			A D							
6	S	A					D					
7		S			A	D						
8	S	A										
9	S	A										
10	S	A										
11	S	A										
12	S	A										
13			S		A							
14				S	D*							
14		S				A D						
16		S					A D					
17					S		A D**					
18	S								A D			
19	S								A D			
20	S	A							D			
21	S										A D	
22												
23												

S REC papers submitted

A REC approved

D DSA approved

D\* Alternative to DSA approved

D\*\* no requirement from local authority for DSA

## Government response to evaluation findings

At the time that the above evaluation was published, HM Government simultaneously published a report in response to the evaluation, with both presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 48(7) of the Modern Slavery Act. The government report described the overall evidence about the impact of ICTAs during the trial as ‘equivocal’, with aspects of the trial showing promise but not delivering on ‘some key outcomes that trafficked children are entitled to expect’ (HM Government, 2015, p. 3). Two key issues were brought forward. Firstly, that there was ‘no evidence that advocates led to a reduction in the number of children going missing’, and secondly, that there was ‘limited evidence of benefits in terms of involvement with the immigration and criminal justice systems’ (HM Government, 2015, p. 2).

As outlined above, although not a specific aim, children going missing from care was a clear cause for concern during the lifetime of the evaluation. There has been a consistent presentation of evidence relating to children going missing both prior and subsequent to the 2015 evaluation (ECPAT UK, 2007, 2016; Setter, 2017). Sharp-Jeffs (2017) has also outlined the links between CSE and ‘going missing’ or ‘running away’. Links between human trafficking and going missing are also apparent for adults, with going missing also often regarded as a key indicator of trafficking of adults (Hynes, 2017). From July 2021, separated children who arrived alone in the UK had been placed in unregulated hotel accommodation by the Home Office, removing essential oversight and safeguarding of these children, with many since having gone missing (Hynes, 2023). A court case brought by ECPAT UK<sup>11</sup> on the use of hotels to accommodate unaccompanied children has now resulted in a June 2024 final ruling by the High Court that Kent County Council cannot derogate from its duties under the Children Act 1989 and that the Home Office and the council should take all necessary steps to ensure that this unlawful situation does not arise again.

The government report responding to the 2015 evaluation outlined how the ‘equivocal’ nature of evidence included meant that they did not therefore ‘propose to commence the provisions within the Modern Slavery Act 2015 at this point’, that they needed ‘to get this right’ and ‘develop and test revisions and alternatives to the current model’ (HM Government, 2015, p. 3). The evaluation report, based on evidence and rigorous collection of data across 23 local authorities, concludes that Advocates’ ‘added value’ was not, in this instance, considered enough for

Home Office Ministers to recommend that the ICTA services should go ahead at that point. In the 2015 evaluation, the focus on limited evidence of benefits for the immigration and criminal justice systems also relates to the short timescale of the trial and evaluation. At the time the evaluation took place, asylum cases and criminal justice proceedings were routinely taking considerably longer than 12 months to be decided or held.

The path to influencing policy is rarely linear but being evidence-based or at least evidence-informed is a stated aspect of UK government approaches. Carrying out applied research and evaluation to high standards of knowledge production that also has policy relevance is key to enabling such an approach. The incremental approach adopted around the introduction of ICTAs and subsequently Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) has included the independent and rigorous evaluation of 2015, furthered in that of 2017–2019, plus subsequent evaluations. However, there is such a non-linear path towards influencing policy in increasingly politicised arenas such as trafficking and ‘modern slavery’ (see also Quirk, [Chapter 7](#), this volume). Vertovec (2020) has outlined how, in relation to migration studies more broadly, there has been a low level of impact from research in relation to public understanding or government policy in this area, although good research continues to be done. Vertovec (2020) also recognises how good research may have little impact on policy, findings may be used selectively or, in worst cases, even disregarded as part of this process. Ultimately, the 2015 evaluation did become a first step towards a staged approach to the subsequent rollout of ICTGs in England and Wales, however slowly, as detailed below.

## **Subsequent rollout of Independent Child Trafficking Guardians in England and Wales**

The subsequent rollout and evaluations of the guardianship model in England and Wales has occurred in stages.<sup>12</sup> From January 2017, three Early Adopter (EA) sites<sup>13</sup> were selected for the guardianship service meaning the service covered one-third of local authorities in England and Wales. At this stage a further two-year trial and evaluation was commissioned, encompassing the change in the title of the service from ICTAs to ICTGs. Between 2017 and 2019 this evaluation of the guardianship service was again carried out by the University of Bedfordshire, evaluating a revised ICTG model. The interim findings of the 2017–2019 evaluation had found that there were differing needs for UK-born and

‘unaccompanied (usually foreign national) trafficked children’ (Field et al., 2018, p. 47; see also Keeble et al., 2018).

From May 2021, a revised ICTG model was developed providing one-to-one support for children where there was no one with parental responsibility in the UK (ICTG Direct Workers), and for those with parental responsibility, a regional coordinator (ICTG Regional Practice Coordinators) to work with professionals already supporting the child.<sup>14</sup> Three further EA sites transitioned to this revised model of provision.<sup>15</sup> An *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act* noted that this revised model ‘undoubtedly ensures a more financially sustainable ICTA service in response to increasing numbers of UK children being referred for cases of county lines and CSE’ (Field et al., 2018, p. 49).

The 2017–2019 evaluation had also detailed how children went missing (Kohli et al., 2019). This evaluation found that nearly a quarter (23%) of children referred to the service went missing at some point. Male children were more likely to go missing than female, and those without a figure of parental responsibility in the UK were more likely to go missing on referral and for longer periods. Again, these were most likely to be Vietnamese nationals, primarily exploited for their labour: 44% of all Vietnamese children in the service went missing at least once and a third were missing in the longer term. Children who went temporarily missing were mainly UK-born nationals who had experienced criminal exploitation. ICTGs continued working with other agencies for a period of six months after the child went missing, at which point cases were closed. In other words, the issue of children going missing is a broader social issue which remains as yet unresolved. Practitioners often referred to the first 24, 48 or 72 hours as being a crucial period for ensuring children received the safeguarding they needed in such cases.

A Home Office and Ipsos MORI qualitative and quantitative assessment of the ICTG Regional Practice Coordinators role was published in October 2020 (Shrimpton et al., 2020). This found that around three-quarters of children supported by Regional Practice Coordinators were referred for child criminal exploitation (CCE) cases and the rest for CSE. Most were UK nationals (90%), male (70%) and between 15 and 17 years. Most of the children referred for CSE were female (80%). The assessment found that the Regional Practice Coordinators’ role to raise awareness around indicators of exploitation and referral mechanisms was welcomed by a range of stakeholders. It was also found that awareness of a Section 45 defence, that provides a statutory defence for children who are accused of committing a criminal act as a direct consequence of being a victim of trafficking, could be improved across Crown

Prosecution Service teams and courts (for more on tensions around the Section 45 defence, see Heys, 2023).

In May 2021, a further change to the ICTG service following the *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act* was the introduction of a Post-18 Worker to support young people through what is often referred to as a ‘cliff edge’ or ‘drop-off’ of support available between child and adult services (Field et al., 2018). This Post-18 Worker role was established to support children following their 18th birthday, with additional short-term support in cases where there was exceptional need to ensure smooth transitions across services.<sup>16</sup> An evaluation conducted jointly by the Home Office analysis and insight team and Ipsos UK was conducted between May 2021 and April 2022 related to the Post-18 services and the Regional Practice Coordinator roles (Shrimpton et al., 2024).<sup>17</sup> It found that Barnardo’s and external stakeholders perceived the introduction of these two roles as positive – both because of the flexibility they added to the ICTG service and the quality of support provided to children and young people.

In March 2024, a procurement notice was published by the Home Office seeking preliminary information from potential suppliers on the establishment of a national ICTG service to cover all local authorities in England and Wales through a three-year contract, to run from October 2025 to September 2028. The intended ICTG service for England and Wales continues to remain limited to potential victims of human trafficking, unlike provision in both Scotland and Northern Ireland which provide Guardians for all separated children.

## Conclusion

While progress has been made in rolling-out the guardianship service, to date this has only reached two-thirds of local authorities across England and Wales almost a decade after the legislative powers were put in place. Children arriving into the UK have continued to lack an advocacy or guardianship service for several years during this staggered rollout and continue to lack this service in one-third of local authority areas. In parallel, increasing numbers of UK-born children are being referred into the UK’s NRM for CSE and CCE (Cockbain et al., 2025). It is highly likely that children affected by human trafficking continue to go missing from care.

An increasing and overarching environment of hostility towards migrants and refugees prevails in the UK. The recent introduction of two key pieces of legislation – the Nationalities and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023 – has resulted in an increased need for good quality legal services and guardianship services for children. Both pieces

of legislation roll back progress made on identifying and protecting adult or child victims of human trafficking or modern slavery. The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 has also spread considerable fear amongst children and young people (Hynes et al., 2022).<sup>18</sup> A decade on, it is arguably now even more essential for children and young people arriving into the UK to have someone able to undertake the role of informing them of their rights and entitlements, ensuring they receive good quality social care, helping them to access legal services and ensuring they understand criminal justice processes. Whether decisions made by the new Labour Government, elected in July 2024, changes this environment for the better remains to be seen.

The 2015 evaluation findings included how the role of ICTAs was seen positively by professionals and children, adding value to existing services. The government response, that the evidence was ‘equivocal’ (HM Government, 2015, p. 3), suggested ambiguity and provided a rationale for not introducing ICTAs at that time. The UK had been heralded internationally as a world leader on ‘modern slavery’, and it is therefore surprising that actual provision of support to children affected by human trafficking, ‘modern slavery’ and/or exploitation has been so slow. As explored by Hodkinson et al. (2021) and Hynes (2022), two policy trajectories – one publicly denouncing ‘modern slavery’ and the other intensifying a hostile environment that creates conditions wherein exploitation can thrive – are inherently contradictory. It may be the case that staggered evaluations, that have sought to refine the English and Welsh guardianship services being provided, have potentially increased the quality of such provision in a way that ongoing reflective practice of services provided would not have achieved. However, this has also meant that for nearly a decade an unspecified number of children and young people have been unrepresented, without an Independent Advocate or Guardian by their side, something which should be urgently and fully addressed within the new contract now being advertised.

## Key messages

- This case study shows paths to influencing policy trajectories are rarely linear, with evidence, rigorous evaluations and/or good research alone not always enough to influence policy. It also emphasises the challenges of short timeframes for evaluation in securing ethics approvals and data sharing provisions: key considerations when researching sensitive topics.

- The Modern Slavery Act 2015 created a role for Independent Child Trafficking Advocates (ICTAs) across England and Wales. A trial of an ICTA service and a commissioned evaluation was carried out across 23 local authority areas between September 2014 and August 2015.
- The evaluation set out to look at implementation of the service, how the ICTA role worked in practice and the impact for children. It used a mixed method approach, including a randomised allocation process to compare children supported by ICTAs relative to existing provision.
- The evaluation found that ICTAs were beneficial for children and were also seen positively by professionals, adding value to existing services. However, a government response laid before Parliament outlined the independent evaluation as 'equivocal' leading to delayed development of ICTA provision at that time.
- ICTAs were renamed Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) following an *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act*. Almost a decade after legislative powers were passed, ICTGs have only reached two-thirds of local authorities across England and Wales. There is now a call for a national service to be in place by October 2025.

## Notes

1. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 received Royal Assent in March 2015.
2. Following an *Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act* 2015, ICTAs were renamed Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) across England and Wales in July 2019.
3. A local authority is a local government organisation that is responsible for all public services, facilities, social care, education, housing and clean water in particular areas of the UK. There are 317 local authorities in England, 32 in Scotland, 22 in Wales and 11 local government districts in Northern Ireland. They are run by elected councillors.
4. Scotland had developed a non-statutory guardianship model in 2009 and prior to legislation for all separated and unaccompanied children. The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 provided for the introduction of statutory guardianships for unaccompanied children. The Scottish Guardianship Service was replaced by Guardianship Scotland in April 2023 as a statutory service, allowing any local authority or agency in Scotland to make referrals (Grant et al., 2023). Children in Northern Ireland also have Independent Guardians when those with parental responsibility are not in regular contact with the children or are outside the UK. The 2015 Northern Ireland Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) is in place. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, provision at that time was for Guardians rather than Advocates.
5. The 23 areas were: Croydon, Derbyshire, Kent, Lancashire, Oxford, West Sussex, with Manchester City, Stockport, Tameside, Oldham, Rochdale, Bury, Bolton, Wigan, Salford and Trafford from Greater Manchester and Birmingham, and Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton from the West Midlands.
6. This contribution necessarily draws heavily from the final report of the evaluation, including quotes used therein (Kohli et al., 2015).
7. Originally published in March 2015 by HM Government as *Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers*. This has since been updated (Department for Education, 2024).
8. The National Referral Mechanism was introduced in 2009 to fulfil the UK's obligations under the Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and to

provide a framework for proactive identification and referral of potential victims of human trafficking to support services.

9. With the exception of sibling groups who were allocated together.
10. The NRM involves 'first responders' from a range of agencies referring potential 'victims' to a 'Single Competent Authority' for assessment as to whether there is sufficient evidence to identify that person as a victim of the crime of human trafficking, or, since 2015, 'modern slavery'. Following referral, the NRM involves a two-stage decision-making process. The first stage is a Reasonable Grounds decision, set out as being made within 5 working days of referral. This is based on whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that a person could be a 'victim' based on available evidence that may fall short of conclusive proof. The second stage is a Conclusive Grounds decision, to be made no sooner than after 45 days following the Reasonable Grounds decision. A positive decision entitles a 'victim' to a reflection period of at least 45 days, during which time they receive specialist support and assistance through service providers contracted by the UK Home Office.
11. For details of this legal case, see ECPAT UK, 2024.
12. For details of locations of rollout, see HM Government, 2024.
13. Initial EA sites were Greater Manchester, Hampshire and Wales (from January 2017).
14. Additional sites were Greater London (excluding London Borough of Croydon), Surrey, Essex, West Yorkshire, Merseyside, Kent, Warwickshire, North Yorkshire, Gloucestershire and Bristol, Lancashire, and Bedfordshire (see ECPAT UK, 2021).
15. West Midlands (from October 2018), East Midlands and London Borough of Croydon (from April 2019).
16. This was piloted in ICTG sites in London (Croydon), the North of England (Merseyside, North Yorkshire and West Yorkshire) and the Midlands (Warwickshire and West Midlands).
17. The evaluation was completed in March 2023 and published in May 2024.
18. The incoming Labour Government have since announced a decision to not continue with the policy to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda.

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