THE ANTI-SLAVERY COLLECTIVE

SOCIAL CHANGE

Fair Work Futures: From Awareness to Action

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1. Introduction

Forced labour and labour exploitation remain significant global and national issues, affecting an estimated 50 million people worldwide (ILO, Walk Free & IOM, 2022). While these topics are often discussed in policy, media and international development spaces, they can feel distant or difficult for young people to understand. Yet young people in the UK are growing up in contexts where insecure work, zero-hour contracts, and rising youth unemployment can make individuals more vulnerable to unfair or exploitative working conditions. Helping young people recognise what fair and safe work looks like, and understand the realities of exploitation, is becoming increasingly important.

The Anti-Slavery Collective is launching *Fair Work Futures*, a new pilot programme designed to raise awareness of forced labour and labour exploitation among young people aged 11-14. The programme aims to make these complex issues relatable and accessible through age-appropriate teaching materials, real-world examples and opportunities for social action. It will also equip educators with the confidence and tools they need to deliver lessons on a sensitive topic in a safe and supportive way.

To shape this programme, The Anti-Slavery Collective commissioned Social Change to conduct behavioural insight research with young people (aged 11-14) and educators. This research will play a central role in ensuring that the programme is informed by the needs, values, and experiences of those it is designed for.

The aim of this research is to build a detailed understanding of how young people think and feel about forced labour, what helps them engage with the topic, and what barriers get in the way. It also explores what educators need to deliver the lessons effectively, and how narratives and stories from lived experience can be communicated in an empowering and age-appropriate way.

Research Objectives

- Understand young people's awareness, assumptions, and perceptions of forced labour and exploitation
- Explore what helps or hinders young people from engaging with the topic, and what motivates them to take social action
- Identify the narratives, language, and examples that feel accessible and meaningful to young people
- Understand educators' needs, preferences, and confidence levels when teaching sensitive or complex subjects
- Use behavioural science to shape effective, inclusive, and engaging learning materials

The programme primarily targets **young people aged 11–14** in mainstream schools, pupil referral units, and alternative provision settings. A secondary focus is on **educators**, including teachers, and school leadership teams.

Research Questions

To guide the research, the following research questions were developed:

1. What assumptions, misconceptions, or gaps in knowledge do young people hold about forced labour and exploitation?
2. What motivates or prevents young people from engaging with this topic or taking positive action?
3. What narratives, language, and tone make forced labour accessible and engaging for young people aged 11–14?
4. How can insights from lived experience be communicated safely, sensitively, and meaningfully for young audiences?
5. What types of learning activities, formats, and channels resonate most with this age group?
6. What support and resources do educators need to feel confident delivering lessons on forced labour?

Insights gathered from the research aim to build a deeper understanding of how young people learn, engage, and respond to this topic, grounding the programme in behavioural science and lived experience.

Use of Findings

The findings will directly inform the development of the *Fair Work Futures* programme (previously titled *Empathy through Education*) and its pilot delivery. Insights will shape the tone, structure, and content of lesson plans and guide the development of supporting documentation that accompanies them. The research will also inform the social action elements that support pupils to take meaningful action. Overall, it will help ensure that all materials are accessible, safe, relevant, and engaging for diverse learning contexts, supporting The Anti-Slavery Collective's long-term ambition to scale the programme nationally.

A behavioural science approach

Behavioural science means to utilise expertise from across a range of disciplines to capture an enhanced understanding of human behaviour and action. It seeks to explore why humans engage in behaviours, and help researchers understand the attitudes, behaviours and experiences of different audience groups. Such disciplines it pulls upon include (but isn't necessarily limited to) psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, behavioural aspects of biology, economics, geography, law, psychiatry and political science.

As experts in the behavioural science space, we embed behavioural science frameworks and principles throughout our work to uncover in-depth insights about our target audience and understand the best ways to enact positive change. Such frameworks include the COM-B model of behaviour, Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW), MINDSPACE and EAST – an overview of those embedded in this work is included within the appendices.

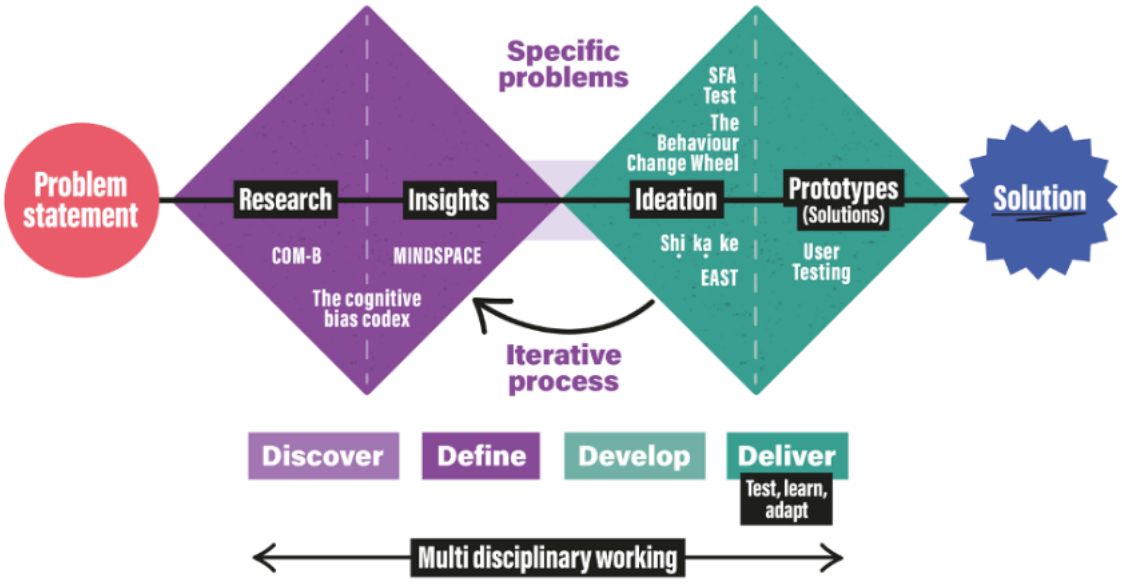
These principles and frameworks were used to inform our research approach and questioning, ensuring we were able to not only capture the current picture around modern slavery and labour

exploitation being taught in secondary schools, but also **why** this is the case and barriers and motivators to change, these are called 'behavioural insights'. Using these, we are able to develop, design and deliver recommendations for interventions to achieve positive change.

Methodology

The methodology selected for this brief followed the double diamond approach, which is an established approach to defining and exploring your topic area in-depth, identifying methods through which to enact change, and taking a test-learn-adapt approach to intervention delivery.

Fig 1: Double diamond diagram



Initial scoping was employed to further DISCOVER the scope of the research and current knowledge around modern slavery and labour exploitation education within secondary school settings. This included reviewing existing lesson materials, policy context, curriculum requirements and safeguarding considerations, as well as drawing on sector knowledge relating to youth engagement and exploitation awareness.

To further explore these themes and DEFINE young people's and educators' attitudes, behaviours, experiences and challenges in relation to modern slavery and labour exploitation education, we employed a combination of quantitative insight surveys (with young people and educators) and qualitative focus groups and interviews.

This research then supported the development of practical, behaviourally informed recommendations to guide and inform future lesson design and delivery, ensuring strategies not

only raise awareness, but also encourage and facilitate positive change within school settings (DEVELOP and DELIVER).

Scoping

Beginning with secondary research, we reviewed existing knowledge, data and information around modern slavery and labour exploitation being taught in secondary schools; both available in the public domain and provided to us by The Anti-Slavery Collective. This was in relation to attitudes, behaviours, experiences, service provision, previous interventions and any previous related research and/or evaluations. This scoping is an essential part of all projects in order to establish what is currently known about the area and identify gaps in this knowledge that the primary research can address. Without this scoping, there is risk of duplicating insight and not adding new knowledge to the area. The secondary research supports and informs the focus of the primary research to ensure that it builds on and adds value to our knowledge, offering new or enhanced insights that were not available previously.

From this scoping activity, we identified that while labour exploitation is the most common form of modern slavery identified in the UK, awareness and understanding of the issue remains uneven, particularly among young people. National data shows increasing referrals into the National Referral Mechanism, with both UK and non-UK nationals identified as potential victims. However, public narratives often focus on extreme trafficking cases, reinforcing the misconception that exploitation is rare, dramatic or only happens overseas. Everyday forms of labour abuse, including in sectors such as hospitality, agriculture, care, beauty services and logistics, are far less visible, which contributes to a sense of psychological distance from the issue (UK Home Office, 2024).

Among 11-14-year-olds specifically, the literature suggests that baseline awareness of labour exploitation is low and misconceptions are common. Exploitation is often perceived as something that affects “other” people, in “other” countries. At the same time, this age group is at a critical developmental stage for shaping empathy, social norms and moral reasoning. Behavioural research highlights the strong influence of peer norms and identity formation during adolescence, meaning that how issues are framed socially can significantly shape engagement (Dolan et al., 2010). Young people are also highly active in digital spaces, creating both exposure to risk and opportunity for awareness-building through relatable, youth-led narratives.

The scoping also highlighted behavioural drivers connected to consumer culture. Demand for low-cost goods and convenience services contributes to exploitative supply chains, yet the link between everyday consumption (e.g., fast fashion) and labour exploitation is rarely made explicit. Present bias means immediate affordability and accessibility are prioritised over distant ethical considerations (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), reinforcing disengagement from systemic issues.

Within the education system, curriculum space does exist for this topic. Subjects such as Citizenship provide opportunities to explore themes of rights, fairness and justice, and safeguarding guidance places responsibility on schools to raise awareness of exploitation-related risks. However, delivery is inconsistent. Existing educational resources and programmes on labour exploitation, including those developed by organisations such as NSPCC, Anti-Slavery International and The Clewer

Initiative show that materials are available, but uptake and depth of delivery may vary across schools. This is likely due to challenges arising from curriculums allocating limited time to these subjects and the topics being frequently delivered by non-specialists. As a result, confidence in teaching sensitive topics such as exploitation can be low, further limiting depth of delivery. From a behavioural perspective, capability (knowledge and confidence), opportunity (time and structured resources) and motivation (competing priorities and fear of "getting it wrong") all influence whether modern slavery education is prioritised and delivered effectively (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011).

Finally, we identified that awareness approaches which rely heavily on shocking or fear-based messaging may unintentionally lead to disengagement if they are not accompanied by a clear sense of efficacy and agency. Behavioural research suggests that highlighting risks or harms alone is unlikely to motivate constructive action unless individuals also feel capable of responding and understand what actions they can realistically take (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011). For young people in particular, issues framed as overwhelming or abstract may create emotional distancing rather than engagement.

These findings were valuable in strengthening our understanding of the broader landscape in which modern slavery education sits, and in highlighting where primary research could add meaningful value, particularly in exploring young people's lived interpretations of exploitation, educator confidence and delivery realities, and how lessons can balance awareness with empowerment.

Engagement with Young People

Quantitative Insight Survey
We conducted a quantitative insight survey with young people to explore and capture high-level information about their awareness, understanding and attitudes towards modern slavery and labour exploitation.

A quantitative insights survey was selected for this brief to reach and obtain feedback from a larger group of young people, specifically secondary school students aged 11-14. At this stage of adolescence, understanding of complex social issues is still developing, and perspectives can vary widely depending on age, exposure and school environment. Using a survey allowed us to capture a broader cross-section of views across this age range in a way that was structured, anonymous and accessible.

The survey complemented the qualitative work by adding scale and comparability. While workshops and discussions provided depth, the survey enabled us to see which themes were widely shared, where misunderstandings were most common, and how awareness and confidence varied across year groups. It also helped us explore how relevant young people perceive modern slavery to be in their own lives, how confident they feel recognising signs of exploitation, and whether they see a role for themselves in taking action, either individually or within their school and community.

The survey explored:

- Awareness and understanding of modern slavery and labour exploitation
- Perceived relevance of the issue to young people's lives
- Confidence in recognising signs of exploitation
- Where young people currently receive information
- Attitudes towards taking action at individual, school and community levels

The survey was shared through:

- Secondary schools
- Youth networks and partner organisations
- Education contacts engaged through the project

The survey achieved 382 total responses. The age breakdown of respondents is presented below.

Table 1: Age breakdown of Young People survey responses

Age	Percentage
11 years	35%
12 years	48%
13 years	17%

Survey uptake through schools was lower than anticipated. This may have been influenced by the timing of fieldwork, which took place close to the Christmas period, as well as the requirement for parental consent prior to participation. While engagement across multiple schools was limited, one school in the London Borough of Sutton did participate. However, responses from this setting were drawn from an all-boys cohort, which may have influenced the overall gender balance within the sample.

Qualitative Focus Groups

We held two qualitative focus groups with young people aged 11-14, bringing together secondary school students to explore the topic in more depth. The sessions were conducted with two secondary schools in Rotherham and Manchester and were delivered in-person within school settings. This helped create a familiar and comfortable environment for participants, while also ensuring appropriate safeguarding measures were in place. Running the groups during the school day also made participation more accessible and inclusive.

The aim of these focus groups was to move beyond top-level awareness and understand how young people actually think and talk about modern slavery and labour exploitation. While the survey helped us identify patterns and common themes, the focus groups allowed us to explore where understanding felt strong, where confusion emerged, and how young people related the issue to things in their everyday lives, such as fast fashion, online shopping, social media and part-time work.

Crucially, the sessions also provided space to test and refine elements of the proposed lesson content. Young people gave direct feedback on draft case studies, discussed which examples felt realistic or relatable, and shared preferences around teaching approaches, formats and activities. This included views on discussion-based learning, visual content, interactive tasks and the balance between information and reflection. These insights directly shaped the structure, tone and activity design within the final lesson plans.

The discussions also gave space to explore emotional reactions, perceived responsibility, and confidence in taking action. In a group setting, we were able to observe how ideas developed collectively, where peers influenced each other, where misconceptions were corrected, and where uncertainty or discomfort surfaced. This social dynamic was particularly valuable given the age group.

Participants were secondary school students aged 11-14, spanning lower secondary year groups. Across the two schools, we spoke with a balanced mix of students, including 7 boys and 7 girls in total. Below is a table that shows the gender and age breakdown from both schools.

Table 2: Demographic breakdown of Young People qualitative sessions

	Rotherham	**Manchester**
Age	1x12 years old 4x 13 years old 1x 14 years old	2x 12 years old 4x 13 years old 2x 14 years old
Gender	3 Female 3 Male	4 Female 4 Male

Engagement with Educators

Quantitative Insight Survey

We undertook a short quantitative insights survey with educators to capture high-level perspectives on teaching modern slavery and labour exploitation within secondary school settings.
The survey was designed to provide structured feedback from teachers and school staff working directly with young people aged 11-14. While the young people survey focused on student awareness and confidence, the educator survey aimed to understand delivery realities, including curriculum fit, time constraints, safeguarding considerations, and confidence in addressing potentially sensitive content.

The survey explored:

- Educators' confidence in teaching topics related to modern slavery and exploitation
- Perceived relevance within Citizenship and related subjects
- Practical constraints (e.g. lesson length, curriculum pressures)
- Safeguarding considerations
- Support and resource needs

The survey was distributed through participating schools and education contacts engaged in the project.

In total, nine educators completed the survey. Respondents included teaching staff working with secondary school-aged students.

Qualitative Focus Groups
We held one qualitative focus group with four educators to explore their perspectives on teaching modern slavery and labour exploitation within secondary school settings. The group included three female educators and one male educator, all working directly with students in the 11-14 age range. The session provided space for educators to speak openly about the practical realities of delivering this topic in the classroom. While the survey offered structured, high-level feedback, the focus group allowed us to explore nuance, including how confident educators feel teaching sensitive content, how the topic fits within Citizenship subjects, and what pressures or constraints shape lesson delivery.

We also explored safeguarding considerations, the emotional weight of the subject matter, and how to strike the right balance between raising awareness and avoiding distress. Educators reflected on lesson length, structure, classroom dynamics and the types of activities that feel manageable within a typical 50-minute session. They provided feedback on draft case studies, including which examples felt age-appropriate, realistic and accessible for their students. In addition, educators shared perspectives on teaching approaches most likely to engage young people, highlighting the value of interactive discussion, structured group tasks, visual content and opportunities for reflection, rather than heavily didactic or text-heavy formats.

Qualitative Virtual Interview
In addition to the focus group, we conducted one virtual qualitative interview with a female educator working with secondary school-aged students. This one-to-one conversation provided space for more detailed reflection on classroom practice, safeguarding considerations and confidence in delivering sensitive content. The interview allowed us to explore individual experiences in greater depth, particularly around lesson structure, student engagement and the practical realities of embedding modern slavery content within existing curriculum time.

Behavioural insights analysis

An overarching thematic analysis was undertaken with the key findings and insights gathered from the young people survey, educator survey, qualitative focus groups and educator interviews to provide a holistic understanding of young people's and educators' behaviours, attitudes, understanding, motivators, challenges and potential solutions in relation to modern slavery and labour exploitation education.

Following this overall analysis, we used our behavioural science expertise to go one step further to identify behavioural insights that go beyond **what** the current picture is to communicate **why**. In essence, these behavioural insights demonstrate the cognitive biases, facilitators, and challenges maintaining current behaviour and preventing positive change. This in-depth understanding and

further use of established frameworks then supported the development of recommendations for the future, detailing not only what needs to happen to support positive change but also how.

Programme Development & Refinement Process

The methodology extended beyond data collection to include an iterative development phase. Following the scoping, survey and qualitative research, findings were synthesised and used to inform the development and refinement of the *Fair Work Futures l*esson plans.
This included a review of relevant Citizenship curriculum requirements and accreditation frameworks to ensure alignment with Key Stage 3 expectations. This step helped ensure that the lessons were grounded in statutory learning outcomes while remaining realistic for delivery within a 50-minute session.

Draft lesson plans were then refined in response to the research. Insights from young people shaped case study selection, tone and activity design, while educator feedback informed structure, pacing and safeguarding considerations. In parallel, the social action component was developed and refined to ensure that actions felt achievable, age-appropriate and clearly connected to the learning objectives.

Together, this process ensured that the final *Fair Work Futures* materials were evidence-informed, curriculum-aligned and practical for pilot delivery.

Key findings

Research question 1: What assumptions, misconceptions, or gaps in knowledge do young people hold about forced labour and exploitation?

Young people show strong moral instincts around fairness and harm, but their understanding of forced labour is shaped by simplified narratives, partial knowledge, and powerful social assumptions. While extreme exploitation is widely recognised, less visible and more everyday forms of unfair work are harder for young people to identify. These gaps shape how young people judge seriousness, responsibility, and whether action feels possible or worthwhile. Educator insights closely mirrored these patterns, suggesting these misconceptions are not just "youth gaps" but reflect wider adult assumptions and the dominant narratives young people are most exposed to. This indicates that these knowledge gaps are culturally reinforced rather than individually formed (Psychological Capability - COM-B).

Forced labour is imagined as distant, extreme and happening to "other people"
A dominant assumption among young people is that forced labour primarily affects people in low-income countries, particularly those experiencing poverty, conflict, or weak labour protections. Early in discussions, exploitation was frequently associated with factories overseas, child labour, or conditions far removed from young people's own lives.

"Poor people, poorer people, younger people that don't have any support in life. I thought it would be those kinds of countries"
Young Person, Rotherham School

This framing positions forced labour as something that happens to other people, reinforcing a sense of distance and reducing perceived relevance. It creates a psychological boundary between "us" and "them," which subtly reduces urgency and personal connection**.** Quantitative findings reflect this uncertainty: although 61% of young people were aware that unfair work affects some young people in the UK, nearly four in ten were either unsure or believed it does not happen here.

Educators described the same starting point in their own thinking, often associating forced labour mainly with overseas sweatshops or "servitude," and not immediately considering it as a UK issue. This is important because adult mental models shape how topics are introduced, which examples are chosen, and how strongly links are made to students' lives, directly affecting students' learning. (Psychological Capability - COM-B).

When students were presented with UK-based examples, their responses often shifted noticeably. Surprise, disbelief, and discomfort were common, suggesting that lack of awareness, rather than denial, underpins this assumption.

"I really thought it would be more in countries without laws… but now I feel like it's happening everywhere."
Young Person, Manchester School

This indicates a key gap in understanding around how exploitation can exist within countries that are assumed to be 'safe' or well-regulated. Without explicit counter-examples, young people default to associating exploitation with visible poverty rather than hidden power imbalances, limiting their ability to recognise unfair work closer to home (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Exploitation is recognised at the extremes, but everyday unfairness is harder to place
Young people showed near-universal agreement that situations involving clear harm or loss of freedom, such as being forced to work, being physically hurt, or being unable to leave a workplace, constitute unfair work or exploitation. This mirrors survey findings, where over 90% identified coercion, unsafe conditions, and restricted movement as unfair work.

However, confidence dropped significantly when discussions moved into grey areas, such as unpaid overtime, lack of breaks, or verbal abuse at work. In some cases, young people also mentioned issues such as copying designs or unfair competition, suggesting some uncertainty about where labour exploitation ends and other types of unfair practice begin.

"I didn't think stealing designs counted as exploitation… but it actually happens a lot."
Young Person, Manchester School

This suggests that young people often rely on severity thresholds to judge exploitation. If harm is not dramatic, physical, or visibly coercive, it risks being minimised or normalised. Exploitation is therefore conceptualised as something extreme, rather than something that can accumulate gradually through everyday practices (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Educators independently surfaced this same challenge, describing a need to help students explore the "line" between fair work, unfair work, and exploitation. Teachers felt that overly simple framings can obscure nuance (e.g., a job might feel enjoyable but still be unfair), and suggested tools like quadrants or structured comparison grids to strengthen young people's abilities to assess ambiguous scenarios rather than defaulting to extreme definitions only (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Exploitation is explained through individual desperation, not systems or power
Young people frequently framed forced labour as the result of personal desperation, people accepting poor treatment because they have no other options. This narrative was often empathetic and emotionally grounded, but tended to overlook the systemic forces that enable exploitation, such as corporate practices, supply chains, profit incentives, and weak enforcement.

"They know that's the only way they can eat, live, survive."
Young Person, Manchester School

While survey data shows that young people do recognise broader responsibility, with 87% identifying governments and 81% identifying companies as responsible for stopping unfair work, this understanding was less clearly articulated in conversation. Responsibility was often discussed abstractly, rather than connected back to real-world systems or decisions.

This gap matters because it shapes how young people assign blame and imagine solutions. When exploitation is framed primarily as an individual problem, it can obscure accountability and reduce confidence that change is possible (Reflective Motivation – COM-B). If harm is seen as inevitable survival behaviour rather than preventable systemic design, motivation to challenge it weakens.

Educators reinforced the importance of explicitly teaching systems and accountability, noting that students will often connect exploitation to "cheap prices" (e.g., Temu/Shein) without necessarily understanding who benefits, who enables it, or why it continues. Educators also flagged that economic constraints shape choices (e.g., families buying what they can afford), meaning content needs to avoid simplistic blame and instead build a clearer understanding of how systems, incentives, and enforcement shape exploitation (Reflective Motivation - COM-B).

Research question 2: What motivates or prevents young people from engaging with this topic or taking action?

Young people show strong emotional engagement with issues of unfair work and exploitation, but this does not always translate into sustained engagement or action. Motivation is shaped by a combination of emotional response, perceived relevance, social influence, and confidence that actions will make a difference. While many young people care deeply about fairness, engagement is often fragile and easily undermined by feelings of powerlessness, peer norms, and uncertainty about what meaningful action looks like. Educators reinforced that this gap between concern and action is common across many social issues taught in schools. They explained that students are more likely to stay engaged when actions feel realistic, supported within the school environment, and achievable within their everyday lives.

Emotional engagement is high, but does not automatically translate into action

Young people consistently expressed strong emotional reactions to unfair work, including anger, sadness and empathy. This is reflected clearly in the survey findings, where 73% reported feeling anger, 67% sadness and 63% empathy when thinking about people treated unfairly at work. The issue resonates morally and emotionally, and can initially draw young people in.

However, qualitative discussions revealed that emotional awareness alone does not necessarily sustain engagement or lead to action. Some students described becoming overwhelmed or desensitised when exposed to repeated messages about injustice without clear pathways for change.

"You see it all the time… after a while people just switch off."
Young Person, Rotherham School

Others questioned whether knowing about exploitation makes a practical difference, particularly when social norms, trends and convenience pull in the opposite direction.

"People know about it but they don't really do anything… they just go along with it."
Young Person, Manchester School

This pattern is reflected behaviourally. While over half of respondents had thought about who made an item, far fewer had taken visible action such as sharing content online about unfair treatment. More than a quarter admitted buying something because friends had it or they saw it on social media. These findings highlight how peer influence and normalisation can undermine ethical intentions, even when awareness is high (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators observed a similar gap between classroom engagement and sustained action. Teachers noted that students may debate passionately in lessons, but only a smaller group are likely to follow through independently. They recommended embedding social action within structured, timetabled settings to reduce reliance on individual motivation alone and increase opportunity for participation.

Together, these findings suggest that while emotional engagement is strong (Automatic Motivation – COM-B), it does not automatically translate into agency. Young people are not indifferent, but many are uncertain whether their individual actions matter, particularly when exploitation feels embedded within wider systems (Reflective Motivation – COM-B).

Relevance to everyday life increases motivation

Engagement increased when young people could clearly see how unfair work connects to their own lives, particularly through shopping habits, trends, and part-time work. Discussions around fast fashion, cheap prices, and social media trends prompted reflection on personal choices and responsibility.

> "People care more when it's something they actually use or see every day."
> *Young Person, Manchester School*

Quantitative data supports this link between relevance and engagement. While only 5% said they always think about who made a product, 44% said they sometimes do, suggesting a level of openness that can be built on. When forced labour is framed as something abstract or distant, motivation drops; when it feels personal, engagement increases (Reflective Motivation – COM-B). Educators reinforced this strongly, noting that students are far more motivated when examples involve familiar brands, everyday jobs, or scenarios they could realistically imagine themselves in. Teachers explained that relevance helps move students from passive concern to active reflection, increasing willingness to engage in discussion and learning (Reflective Motivation – COM-B).

Social norms and peer influence can both motivate and block action

Peers play a powerful role in shaping whether young people feel able to engage or act. On the one hand, young people said they are more motivated to take part in activities when friends are also involved, and survey findings show that 81% are motivated by friends taking part, and 51% by working in a group. Social participation can therefore act as a strong motivator (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

At the same time, peer norms around trends, popularity, and fitting in can actively discourage ethical action. Several young people described how knowing about exploitation does not necessarily change behaviour when social pressure and convenience dominate.

"People know about it, but they don't really do anything… they just go along with it."
Young Person, Manchester School

This is reflected in behaviour: 27% reported buying something new because friends had it or they saw it on social media, while far fewer had shared information online about unfair treatment. These findings highlight how social norms can override values, particularly when ethical choices risk social exclusion (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators added that peer influence cuts both ways: while social pressure can block action, collective participation can also legitimise engagement. Teachers noted that when activities are framed as group-based, school-endorsed, or normalised within lessons or enrichment, students feel safer participating without fear of standing out (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Feeling powerless limits engagement and action
A key barrier to engagement was the belief that individual actions do not make a meaningful difference, particularly when exploitation is seen as widespread or driven by large systems. Young people questioned whether changing personal behaviour or raising awareness would have any real impact.

"Even if you stop buying it, loads of other people still will."
Young Person, Manchester School

This sense of limited agency was reinforced by uncertainty about what actions are realistic or effective. While survey data shows that many young people believe responsibility lies with governments (87%) and companies (81%), far fewer identified young people themselves as responsible (27%). This suggests that responsibility is often externalised to institutions rather than located at a personal level. Without clear, achievable routes for action, motivation can stall despite strong concern (Reflective Motivation – COM-B).

Educators also spoke about this, observing that students often care deeply but struggle to see how their actions fit into larger systems of change. Teachers warned that without explicit links between individual actions and collective impact, students may disengage out of frustration rather than apathy (Reflective Motivation – COM-B).

Clear, supported action pathways increase confidence
Where young people did feel motivated, it was often linked to clear, supported actions that felt achievable and socially acceptable. Survey findings show that young people are most likely to take action through school-based campaigns (54%), fundraising (35%), or local community activities (34%), rather than individual or public-facing actions such as writing to companies or posting on social media.

This preference suggests that young people are more comfortable acting when:

- The action is shared with others
- It is endorsed or supported by adults or institutions
- The impact feels visible and collective

"It's easier when you're doing it with other people, not on your own."
Young Person, Rotherham School

Educators strongly supported this, emphasising that embedding action within timetabled lessons, enrichment, house systems, or school-led projects significantly increases participation. Teachers explained that supported, in-school actions reduce social risk, lower effort barriers, and help students see action as realistic rather than symbolic (Physical Opportunity – COM-B).
Collective and supported actions therefore play a critical role in translating concern into sustained engagement, increasing confidence that action is worthwhile and achievable (Reflective Motivation & Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Research question 3: What narratives, language, and tone make forced labour accessible and engaging for young people aged 11-14?

Forced labour becomes meaningful and engaging for young people when it is framed as a real, current issue that connects directly to their everyday lives, rather than as a distant or abstract problem. Both qualitative and quantitative findings show that young people already hold strong moral instincts and emotional reactions to unfair work. However, engagement deepens significantly when narratives are specific, relatable, and grounded in recognisable examples. Language choice, tone, and delivery style do not simply influence understanding, they shape whether young people take the topic seriously, reflect on their own behaviours, and feel motivated to think critically about it.

Educators echoed this strongly. Teachers repeatedly emphasised that students respond best when content feels "real-world" and credible, rather than symbolic or fictional. The way forced labour is framed can either anchor the topic in students' lived realities or push it into the category of abstract moral issues that feel disconnected from everyday life. This distinction proved critical in determining whether engagement was thoughtful and sustained, or superficial and short-lived.

Forced labour as lived reality, not abstract injustice
Young people consistently understood unfair work through concrete experiences: being forced to work, having no choice, unsafe conditions, and extremely low pay. This aligns closely with the survey findings, where the most common definitions of unfair work included low or no pay (65%), forced or non-consensual work (55%), unfair treatment or disrespect (43%), and unsafe or poor working conditions (30%).
In discussions, students described exploitation as something that happens when people are desperate, lack power, or have no alternatives. It was frequently framed as a survival issue rather than a moral failing.

"They don't have a choice, they just have to put up with whatever is going on."
Young Person, Rotherham School

This framing positioned exploitation as something rooted in circumstance and vulnerability, rather than individual wrongdoing. As a result, young people engaged most strongly when examples reflected realistic, everyday working situations. When exploitation was discussed through familiar contexts, such as first jobs, warehouse work or fast-food roles, students were better able to analyse what felt unfair and why (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Educators reinforced this, noting that realism enables students to see exploitation as something that could plausibly affect people "like them," rather than distant others. When scenarios feel grounded in everyday life, students engage analytically and reflectively. When examples feel abstract or remote, engagement tends to remain observational. Grounding the issue in lived scenarios therefore strengthened young people's ability to recognise unfair work when it occurs (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Language needs to feel serious, not vague
While young people broadly understood the term "unfair work," many felt it was too vague and open to interpretation. It was seen as something that could be debated or minimised. In contrast, although fewer students were initially familiar with the term "labour exploitation," it was perceived as more serious and credible once explained. The language signalled that something systemic and harmful was occurring, rather than simply "bad treatment."

This contrast is reflected in the quantitative findings. Awareness was far higher for everyday terms such as unfair pay (91%) and poor working conditions (90%), whereas only 29% recognised the term "labour exploitation." However, familiarity did not equate to perceived strength. "Unfair work" was more widely recognised, but "labour exploitation" carried greater weight and legitimacy once meaning was established.

Together, this suggests that young people respond best when learning begins with accessible language and then introduces more formal terminology once understanding has been built. "Labour exploitation" may be too unfamiliar to lead with, but it becomes meaningful once grounded in real examples. Clear definitions and scaffolding help prevent minimisation of harm and support understanding of where unfairness crosses into exploitation (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

"Labour exploitation sounds more interesting, it is a fancier word and at first we won't understand it but if we learn about it then we would."
Young Person, Manchester School

Familiar Brands and products create relevance and emotional impact
Young people were most engaged when forced labour was discussed in relation to brands and products they already use, particularly fast fashion. Students frequently referenced companies such as Shein, Primark, and H&M, linking cheap prices, trend culture, and exploitation without prompting.

"People just blindside the fact that what they do is wrong. They are the ones buying cheap clothing from these shops."
Young Person, Manchester School

This mirrors the survey finding that while only 5% always think about who made a product, 44% think about it sometimes, and 40% hardly ever do. Qualitative discussions suggest that brand-based stories help shift this from a passive awareness to something more emotionally resonant and reflective.

By anchoring forced labour in everyday consumption, narratives reduce psychological distance and encourage young people to reflect on their own role within broader systems of exploitation. Rather than positioning exploitation as something external, this framing gently introduces complexity around consumer responsibility, affordability, and trends. (Reflective Motivation & Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators strongly validated this approach, consistently emphasising that named, recognisable brands make the issue feel immediate and credible. Teachers noted that students are far more likely to engage when examples involve companies they encounter daily, compared to generic or anonymised case studies that feel hypothetical.

What doesn't work: fictional or symbolic examples
Educator insights highlighted a clear boundary around what undermines engagement. Fictional or symbolic examples, such as the Oompa Loompas from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory or literary metaphors, were widely seen as ineffective and, in some cases, actively damaging to engagement. Teachers explained that students perceive these examples as "just stories," often responding with humour or detachment rather than seriousness. Rather than helping students grasp exploitation, such narratives risk trivialising the issue and reducing its credibility.

For this topic, realism matters more than creativity. Fictionalised examples introduce emotional distance at the very moment when psychological closeness is needed.

Challenging the idea that exploitation happens "elsewhere"
Many young people initially associated forced labour with low-income countries or places perceived to have fewer protections, reflecting common global narratives. Countries such as China, India and parts of Africa were frequently mentioned.

However, when presented with UK-linked case studies, students often expressed surprise that exploitation could occur within countries associated with strong labour laws.

"I really thought it would be more in countries without laws… but now I feel like it's happening everywhere." Young Person, Manchester School

Survey findings reflect a similar pattern. While 61% were aware that some young people in the UK experience unfair work, 23% were unsure and 16% believed it did not happen (Psychological

Capability - COM-B). Including UK-based examples appears to help broaden understanding and make the issue feel less distant.

Specific details make exploitation easier to recognise and judge
Young people responded particularly strongly to concrete details, such as hourly pay, working hours, lack of sick pay, and unsafe conditions. These details allowed them to compare situations against what they know to be fair or legal. This mirrors the quantitative finding that almost all respondents identified overwork (94%), unsafe conditions (97%), and being forced to work (96%) as unfair (Psychological Capability - COM-B).

"She was getting paid three to five pounds an hour… when you work in a factory you get paid minimum £11 to £15." Young Person, Manchester School

Specific facts enabled young people to move beyond emotional reactions toward clearer judgements about exploitation. Without this specificity, exploitation risks being interpreted as subjective or exaggerated (Psychological Capability - COM-B).

Educators strongly supported this, noting that numerical details such as pay rates, hours worked, and contract types help students "sense-check" scenarios and engage in more informed discussion. These specifics reduce the risk of dismissal and increase analytical engagement.

Tone: Serious, respectful and non-preachy
Young people disengaged from messaging that felt repetitive, moralising, or overly emotive without clear explanation. Some described being less responsive to awareness-style campaigns that rely primarily on shock or emotional appeal. Instead, students valued a tone that acknowledged complexity, allowed for discussion, and avoided blaming individuals for structural issues. This approach helped sustain attention and reduced defensiveness (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

"People see it all the time, after a while they start to ignore it and not care anymore" Young Person, Rotherham School

Educators reinforced this need for a measured tone, warning that overly moralistic or simplistic messaging risks disengagement. Teachers emphasised the importance of allowing students to explore dilemmas, such as affordability versus ethics, without feeling judged, which they felt was essential for maintaining trust and openness in the classroom.

Engagement depends on interaction, not passive learning
Finally, how forced labour is taught mattered as much as what was taught. Young people consistently described writing-heavy lessons and passive delivery as disengaging, while discussions, videos, and activities were seen as more effective.
This strongly aligns with the survey findings, where videos or films (85%), games or activities (73%), and group discussions (59%) were the most appealing learning formats, compared with only 21% who wanted the topic taught as a normal lesson.

Interactive approaches created space for discussion, peer learning, and confidence-building, particularly for students who may struggle to engage in traditional classroom formats (Social Opportunity & Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Educators echoed this, highlighting that discussion-based activities, visual content, and structured interaction are far more effective than writing-heavy tasks. Teachers stressed that interaction is particularly important for mixed-ability groups and for maintaining engagement in citizenship-style lessons.

Research question 4: How can insights from lived experiences be communicated safely, sensitively and meaningfully to young audiences?

Young people expressed strong interest in hearing from people with lived experience of unfair work, viewing personal stories as a powerful way to understand the human impact of exploitation. However, they were equally clear that how these stories are shared is critical to whether they feel meaningful, engaging, or overwhelming. Lived experience resonates most when it feels authentic, relatable, and grounded in real-life contexts, rather than delivered as a one-directional or emotionally intense performance. Educators strongly reinforced this, emphasising that lived experience can be highly impactful but also carries risks if not carefully framed and facilitated (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Short, structured and interactive formats support engagement
Young people consistently highlighted the importance of introducing sensitive content in a way that feels supported and manageable. While lived experience was seen as powerful and important, students preferred it to be shared in formats that allow time to process, ask questions and reflect. Long talks or large assemblies were described as harder to engage with, particularly when there was no opportunity to respond or discuss what had been heard.
Short, structured inputs with space for guided discussion helped reduce emotional overload and created a sense of shared processing (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators strongly echoed this preference, explaining that lived experience works best when carefully embedded within a lesson rather than delivered as a stand-alone talk. Teachers emphasised the value of:

- Brief video clips or testimonies rather than extended narratives
- Guided discussion questions to help students process content
- Opportunities for reflection immediately after hearing the story

This structure supported emotional safety, helped prevent distress, and ensured that sensitive material felt meaningful rather than overwhelming (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Emotional safety must be prioritised alongside authenticity
Young people wanted honest accounts of exploitation but were clear that stories should not be overly graphic or distressing. Several noted that content which felt too intense could cause people

to disengage, shut down, or stop listening altogether. Emotional safety was therefore seen as a prerequisite for meaningful engagement, not a barrier to honesty (Automatic Motivation – COM-B) Educators were particularly attuned to this risk, highlighting the importance of:

- Clear framing before sharing lived experience
- Trigger warnings and age-appropriate content choices
- Explicit reassurance about support and help-seeking

Having these safeguards in place helped educators feel confident that lived experience could be shared responsibly and reduced anxiety about unintended harm (Psychological Capability – COM-B)

Facilitation and framing shape how stories are received
Both young people and educators stressed that lived experience should not be presented in isolation. Instead, stories were most effective when paired with facilitation that helped young audiences understand why the story was being shared and what they should take from it. Clear framing helped prevent sensationalism and supported reflection on broader patterns, rather than focusing only on individual suffering (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Educators emphasised that structured prompts, such as "What stood out to you?" or "What felt unfair here?" helped students engage critically and empathetically without feeling pressured to share personal experiences. This approach supported thoughtful engagement while maintaining boundaries (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Lived experience works best as conversation, not performance
Overall, lived experience resonated most when it was presented as a shared conversation rather than a performance or emotional appeal. Young people valued being able to ask questions, clarify details, and discuss what they had heard with peers and trusted adults. This dialogic approach helped transform emotional reactions into understanding rather than overwhelm (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators reinforced that when lived experience is embedded within a supportive classroom environment, with clear structure, safeguarding, and reflection, it can build empathy, deepen understanding, and sustain engagement over time. When these conditions are met, lived experience supports learning without placing emotional or facilitation burdens on young people or teachers (Automatic Motivation & Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Research question 5: What types of learning activities, formats and channels resonate most with young people aged 11-14?

Young people are clear that how they learn about forced labour is just as important as what they learn. Engagement is strongest when learning feels interactive, visual, and socially shared, and weakest when it feels passive, repetitive, or writing-heavy. Both qualitative and quantitative findings show a consistent preference for formats that allow students to see, discuss, and actively take part, rather than absorb information for extended periods.

Educators reinforced that format is particularly important for sensitive topics like exploitation. The structure of the lesson influences emotional safety, attention, and cognitive engagement (Automatic Motivation – COM-B). Format, in this context, is not cosmetic, it shapes whether learning feels manageable or overwhelming.

Visual and interactive formats drive interest and understanding
Young people consistently described videos, short films, and visual storytelling as the most engaging way to learn about unfair work. Survey data reinforces this preference, with 85% selecting videos or films as interesting, the most popular format overall.

"Watching videos makes it more real than just reading about it."
Young Person, Manchester School

Visual content supports understanding in two keyways. First, it reduces cognitive load by showing rather than describing complex scenarios. Second, it enables emotional processing at a distance, students can observe and reflect before evaluating. This is particularly important when dealing with sensitive subject matter. Educators strongly supported the use of visual material, explaining that clips, dramatisations, and short films help ground complex ideas without relying on dense explanation. Teachers noted that visual formats are especially helpful in mixed-ability groups, ensuring accessibility without oversimplifying the issue (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Games and structured activities were also highly appealing (73%), particularly when they involved decision-making, role play, ranking tasks, or problem-solving. These formats allow young people to explore consequences and competing viewpoints in a low-risk environment, helping them engage without feeling overwhelmed. Educators observed that structured interactive tasks, such as mapping scenarios, comparing job conditions, or ranking examples of fairness, help students navigate grey areas between fair work and exploitation. These activities strengthen judgement and analytical thinking when clearly scaffolded (Psychological Capability & Physical Opportunity – COM-B)

Discussion and peer interaction deepen engagement
In the survey, 59% of young people said they prefer group discussion. This also emerged as a central engagement mechanism in the qualitative sessions.

"It's better when you can talk about it and hear what other people think."
Young Person, Rotherham School

Discussion allows young people to test ideas, process emotional reactions, and refine their thinking collectively. It reduces isolation when engaging with sensitive topics and helps normalise uncertainty or disagreement. Learning alongside peers makes complex issues feel more manageable (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators reinforced that structured discussion, guided questions, short debates and paired reflection builds confidence without exposing students. Teachers also noted that discussion aligns

with existing oracy and critical thinking priorities within schools, making it both engaging and institutionally appropriate (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Creative activities support expression and reflection

Over half of young people (53%) said they would find creative projects such as art, drama, music, or writing engaging. Creative approaches were described as helpful for expressing thoughts or emotions that may be difficult to articulate directly. Unlike traditional formats focused on "right answers," creative tasks allow exploration, interpretation, and perspective-taking.

From a behavioural perspective, creative activities reduce performance anxiety and lower the fear of saying the "wrong" thing. They allow emotional engagement while maintaining a safe level of distance (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Educators echoed this benefit. Creative outputs, when clearly framed, were seen as particularly valuable in sensitive lessons because they shift focus from factual recall to reflection. Teachers emphasised that clear structure and boundaries are essential to maintain comfort and focus (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Lived experience is powerful when paired with interaction

Hearing from people who have experienced unfair work appealed to 61% of young people. Lived experience was seen as meaningful when authentic, recent, and contextualised.

"I want to hear what actually happened, but also be able to ask questions."
Young Person, Manchester School

Young people were notably less enthusiastic about large assemblies or extended talks without interaction. The preference was for shorter testimonies followed by discussion or reflection activities.

This suggests that lived experience is most effective when embedded within a structured lesson rather than delivered as a stand-alone performance. Integrating testimony into guided activities helps students process emotional content safely and thoughtfully (Social Opportunity & Physical Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators strongly supported this, noting that interactive formats allow students to contextualise stories, ask questions, and avoid emotional overload. Without facilitation, lived experience can feel intense but lack analytical depth (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Traditional classroom delivery is less engaging

Only 21% of young people said they would find learning about unfair work interesting if it was delivered as a normal lesson within the usual timetable.

"Just sitting and writing makes it boring."
Young Person, Rotherham School

This does not indicate rejection of school-based learning itself, but rather frustration with passive formats, extended writing, or long explanations without variation. Sensitive topics require pacing and structured variation to sustain attention and reduce fatigue (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Educators reinforced this pattern. Citizenship-style lessons are particularly vulnerable to disengagement if they mirror more academic delivery models. Teachers emphasised the importance of breaking up content, limiting extended writing tasks, and alternating between input and interaction to maintain attention and engagement (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Social media plays a limited but specific role

Despite social media being a common information source, only 23% of young people selected it as an interesting way to learn about unfair work.

Qualitative insights suggest that while social media can raise awareness, it is not always trusted or taken seriously as a primary learning tool for complex or sensitive issues. Young people appeared more interested in structured, guided content when engaging deeply with exploitation. This suggests social media may be more effective as a supporting or reinforcement channel rather than a core teaching mechanism.

Educators supported this view, cautioning that unmoderated or algorithm-driven content can oversimplify issues or reduce credibility. School-based learning provides the structure and safeguarding needed for thoughtful engagement (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

Research question 6: What support and resources do educators need to feel confident delivering lessons on forced labour?

Educators' confidence is a critical enabler of effective learning on forced labour. From young people's perspective, how a lesson is delivered strongly shapes whether the topic feels serious, trustworthy, and worth engaging with. Young people were quick to notice when delivery felt uncomfortable, rushed, or under-prepared, which could undermine engagement and lead to disengagement or minimisation of the issue. In contrast, confident delivery, where educators appeared informed, comfortable with the subject matter, and open to discussion, helped establish credibility and encouraged participation (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Educator interviews suggest that confidence is not driven by personal interest alone, but by whether teachers feel adequately supported with the right resources, structure, and flexibility to deliver sensitive content safely and effectively (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Clear, ready-to-use resources reduce uncertainty and build confidence

A consistent message from educators was the need for fully prepared, ready to use materials that minimise preparation time and reduce uncertainty about "getting it right."

Teachers emphasised that while they are willing to teach the topic, many lack the time or specialist knowledge to design lessons from scratch, particularly in Citizenship or personal development contexts where content is often delivered by non-specialists (Physical Opportunity – COM-B).

Educators strongly favoured:

- Pre-built PowerPoint slides
- Clear teacher notes with key messages
- Guidance on expected discussion points and learning outcomes
- Structured activities that can be delivered immediately

This level of support helped educators feel confident that they were sharing accurate information and framing the topic appropriately, reducing anxiety about misinformation or misinterpretation (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Young people reinforced this indirectly, noting that lessons felt more engaging and trustworthy when explanations were clear and structured, and when teachers appeared confident in their knowledge (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Clear definitions and "correct information" are essential for sensitive topics
Educators highlighted that forced labour and exploitation are complex concepts that can be misunderstood or oversimplified without clear framing. Teachers expressed concern about using vague or subjective language, which could lead to debates becoming opinion-based rather than grounded in facts (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

To address this, educators emphasised the importance of:

- Clear definitions of key terms (e.g., forced labour, exploitation, living wage)
- Glossaries to support non-specialist delivery
- Explicit clarification of where unfair work becomes exploitation

These resources helped educators feel more secure when facilitating discussions and responding to challenging questions, particularly where students raised moral dilemmas or conflicting viewpoints (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

From young people's perspective, clarity in language and explanation increased trust in the lesson and reduced confusion, supporting deeper understanding and engagement (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Real-world, credible examples increase delivery confidence
Educators consistently reported feeling more confident delivering lessons when examples were real, current, and recognisable. UK-based case studies, familiar brands, and everyday job scenarios helped teachers anchor discussions in reality and reduced the risk of students dismissing the topic as irrelevant or exaggerated (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Conversely, educators were clear that fictional or symbolic examples (e.g., literary metaphors) undermined confidence and credibility, as students often treated these lightly or as jokes. Avoiding these examples helped educators maintain a serious tone and ensured discussions stayed grounded (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Young people echoed this preference, engaging more when examples felt realistic and relatable, which reinforced educators' confidence that their delivery was landing effectively (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Flexible formats help educators manage time and curriculum pressures
Time pressure was a major barrier to confident delivery. Educators described competing curriculum demands, exam pressures, and limited space within timetables, particularly in schools without dedicated life skills or enrichment periods (Physical Opportunity – COM-B).
To address this, educators valued resources that offered:

- Multiple delivery lengths (e.g., 15-minute, 30-minute, full lesson)
- Options for assemblies, tutor time, or enrichment sessions
- Modular activities that could be adapted or shortened

This flexibility reduced stress around "fitting it in" and increased confidence that the topic could be delivered in a way that suited different school contexts (Physical Opportunity – COM-B). Young people benefited from this flexibility when lessons felt well-paced rather than rushed, which supported sustained engagement and discussion (Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Structured, supported delivery builds educator confidence
Educators expressed greater confidence when lessons combined clearly structured interactive elements with explicit safeguarding guidance, allowing them to facilitate sensitive discussions without feeling exposed or underprepared. Activities such as guided discussions, ranking exercises, and scenario-based tasks reduced the burden on teachers to "fill space" with talk and provided a clear framework for managing complexity and emotional responses in the classroom (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

Teachers particularly valued activities that prompted discussion without requiring personal disclosure, allowed students to explore different viewpoints, and included clear instructions and outcomes. Embedding safeguarding features, such as trigger warnings, guidance on managing disclosures, and clear signposting to support services, further reduced anxiety and helped educators feel prepared to respond appropriately if issues arose (Psychological Capability – COM-B).

This combination of structure and protection contributed to calmer, safer classroom environments. Young people responded positively to these formats, reporting that discussion-based and interactive lessons felt more engaging and less intimidating than writing-heavy or passive approaches, and that feeling safe supported more open discussion (Social Opportunity & Automatic Motivation – COM-B).

Confidence comes from institutional support
Educator confidence did not depend on being a subject expert, but on feeling supported, legitimised, and protected. Teachers reported feeling more confident delivering lessons when content was clearly aligned with statutory SMSC, or personal development requirements, as this

reduced concerns about scrutiny and prioritisation within busy curricula (Reflective Motivation – COM-B)

External endorsement, such as involvement from a recognised organisation or the option of an external speaker further strengthened confidence by sharing responsibility for delivery, signalling credibility, and making lessons feel distinct from routine teaching. These signals helped normalise the topic within schools and reduced perceived personal risk for educators (Social Opportunity – COM-B).

When resources reduced effort, clarified content, and offered flexibility, educators felt more willing and able to engage fully with the topic. From young people's perspective, this confidence translated directly into lessons that felt structured, credible, and worth engaging with, creating the conditions for meaningful learning and reflection on forced labour (Psychological Capability, Physical Opportunity & Automatic Motivation – COM-B)

Behavioural insights

Behavioural insights go beyond the **what** of behaviours to understand the **why**, and subsequently how positive change can best be achieved. Established behavioural science frameworks used to identify these include the COM-B model and the Behaviour Change Wheel.

For this brief, the following behavioural insights were identified.

Insight 1: It's not for me to act, it's someone else's responsibility

Forced labour often feels psychologically distant to young people: it is associated with faraway places, unfamiliar people, or extreme situations. This distance makes it easier to see the issue as belonging to governments, companies, or adults, rather than as something that requires personal engagement. When responsibility feels external, action feels optional.
Behaviourally, **psychological distance** and **othering** reduce personal accountability, while **diffusion of responsibility** pushes action outward. This is reinforced by **in-group norms**: if peers are not visibly acting, inaction becomes the default. Closing this distance requires making roles clearer and showing that people "like me" are expected to care and engage.

Insight 2: I care, but I don't feel able to make a difference

Young people often feel strong emotional reactions to exploitation, but struggle to see how their actions could meaningfully change such a large, systemic problem. When harm feels widespread and entrenched, individual action feels insignificant, leading to disengagement rather than motivation.
This reflects **low self-efficacy** and **low perceived control**. Psychological distance amplifies this effect by making outcomes feel abstract and unchangeable. Without clear, achievable ways to contribute, concern turns into passivity. Confidence grows when action feels realistic, shared, and visibly connected to outcomes.

Insight 3: It's important, but I don't have time or headspace to make it work

Educators largely agree that forced labour is an important topic, but delivery competes with intense workload pressures, limited time, and competing priorities. When content feels complex, sensitive, or disconnected from core responsibilities, it is more likely to be deprioritised, even when educators are personally motivated.
This reflects **cognitive overload** and **effort avoidance**. Under pressure, people default to familiar routines and avoid tasks that require extra preparation or decision-making. Psychological distance also plays a role: when an issue feels outside statutory requirements or everyday teaching practice, it is easier to push aside. Reducing effort and increasing perceived relevance enables action.

Insight 4: If it's not extreme, I'm not sure it really counts

Young people tend to define exploitation through extreme examples, such as physical harm or forced confinement. More everyday forms of unfair work are often minimised or normalised, especially when they appear common or legal. This narrows understanding and limits recognition of harm in familiar contexts.

This reflects **severity bias** and **normalisation**. Harm is taken seriously only when it crosses a visible threshold, while routine unfairness is filtered out. Psychological distance reinforces this by making everyday exploitation feel less real than extreme cases elsewhere. Clear reference points help recalibrate judgements and expand what "counts" as exploitation.

Insight 5: I want to care, but I need to be guided

Both young people and educators want support in understanding forced labour, talking about it confidently, and knowing what to do with that knowledge. Without guidance, the topic feels overwhelming, risky, or vague. Young people are unsure how to turn concern into action, while educators are unsure how to deliver content safely and effectively.

This reflects **low self-efficacy** and **ambiguity aversion**. When roles, expectations, or actions are unclear, people default to inaction. Clear guidance, on understanding, lesson delivery, and realistic actions, reduces uncertainty and gives people permission to engage meaningfully.

Insight to action

Following identification of the behavioural insights detailed in the previous section, we consulted frameworks such as the Behaviour Change Wheel to determine what interventions would be best suited to promote positive change. These recommendations take into account key findings and behavioural insights from across the research, in addition to learnings around what other initiatives have been effective or less so. Frameworks such as MINDSPACE and EAST have been further employed to help shape not only what the intervention should be, but also what this could look like and how it could be delivered. We have divided these into short-, medium-, and long-term goals to support wider planning and strategy development.

These recommendations have been made based on available knowledge gained through the secondary and primary research, and may in some cases benefit from further research to refine these more. In particular, a Suitability, Feasibility, Acceptability (SFA) test of the recommendations would help inform your implementation strategy by highlighting those which are ready to be implemented now, and those which may require further work prior to this (e.g., to gain sufficient resource or interest). This is something Social Change always advocate, and can be achieved through various methods (e.g., internal review or external consultation).

Action 1: Make it feel real and close, not distant or abstract

Young people engage most with forced labour when it is framed as a real, present-day issue that could affect people like them, including within the UK. Using familiar industries, everyday working conditions, and UK-based examples reduces psychological distance and makes the issue feel more relevant and serious (psychological distance; salience). This framing also helps young people recognise exploitation beyond extreme cases, strengthening their ability to identify unfair work in real-life contexts (psychological capability). When forced labour is presented as rare, historic, or something that happens "elsewhere," it becomes abstract and easier to dismiss, limiting engagement and relevance.

Lesson Plan:

- Use contemporary, UK-relevant scenarios alongside global examples
- Show how exploitation can exist within regulated systems, not just in extreme contexts
- Avoid framing exploitation as rare or exceptional
- Support reflection on how unfair conditions can escalate over time

Social Action Plan:

- Focus on locally relevant actions (school, community, online)
- Position action as normal and achievable, not specialist activism
- Emphasise shared awareness and discussion as meaningful forms of engagement

Action 2: Ground narratives in familiar products and everyday life (without blame)

Familiar products and brands, particularly in areas like fast fashion, make forced labour feel immediate and personally relevant for young people, shifting the issue from abstract awareness to emotional reflection. When students recognise their own consumption habits within these

narratives, engagement increases because the topic feels connected to everyday life rather than distant systems (reflective motivation). However, this connection only works when examples are framed carefully. Young people and educators were clear that blame-driven or moralising narratives trigger defensiveness and shut down discussion (reduced reactance), especially where affordability, trends, and social pressure shape choices (social norms). Creating space to explore these trade-offs without judgement supports more open reflection and sustained engagement.

Lesson Plan:

- Use recognisable brands and everyday products with clear framing and context
- Build in discussion prompts that explore complexity and trade-offs (e.g. cost, trends, choice)
- Avoid moral binaries and focus on systems, incentives, and contexts

Social Action Plan:

- Include collective awareness actions linked to everyday consumption
- Avoid guilt-driven or individual "purity" actions
- Emphasise shared learning and discussion over personal blame

Action 3: Use clear language; start accessible, then introduce formal terms

Young people are comfortable with everyday ideas like "unfair work" but often find the term too vague to signal seriousness on its own. More formal language, such as "labour exploitation," initially feels unfamiliar but becomes more credible and meaningful once clearly explained. Engagement increases when learning starts with accessible, familiar language and then gradually introduces formal terminology with clear definitions, helping young people understand where unfairness crosses into exploitation (cognitive clarity; psychological capability). For both students and educators, this clarity strengthens trust in the content and supports more confident discussion, as the issue feels factual and grounded rather than opinion-based (credibility).

Lesson Plan:

- Use plain, familiar language to establish understanding first
- Layer in formal terms with clear explanations of why they matter
- Define the threshold between unfair work and exploitation

Social Action Plan:

- Use consistent, clearly explained terminology throughout
- Keep the tone serious but accessible, avoiding overload or jargon

Action 4: Help young people judge grey areas, not just "extreme" exploitation

Young people are confident in identifying exploitation when harm is extreme or obvious, such as physical coercion or unsafe conditions, but struggle to judge more everyday forms of exploitation, including unpaid overtime, verbal abuse, or withheld breaks. In the absence of clear guidance, they rely on informal "severity thresholds," which can lead to less visible harms being minimised or normalised (ambiguity reduction; categorisation). Supporting young people to assess these grey

areas strengthens their ability to recognise exploitation in real-life contexts, building clearer understanding and confidence in judgement rather than reliance on extreme definitions alone (psychological capability).

Lesson Plan:

- Teach a clear continuum from fair work to unfair work to exploitation
- Use structured tools (e.g. ranking tasks, quadrants, scenario grids) to practise judgement
- Include concrete details (pay, hours, conditions) to support sense-checking

Social Action Plan:

- Encourage actions that help peers recognise less visible exploitation
- Emphasise noticing and naming everyday unfairness as valid, meaningful action

Action 5: Don't preach or shock: a respectful, non-judgemental tone sustains engagement

Young people disengage from forced labour content when it feels repetitive, moralising, or emotionally intense without offering a sense of agency. Charity-style messaging and shock-first narratives can trigger defensiveness or emotional fatigue, leading students to switch off rather than engage (reactance; emotional fatigue). In contrast, a serious but non-judgemental tone that allows space for discussion and dilemmas helps sustain attention and supports deeper reflection, particularly when young people feel trusted to think critically rather than told what to think (automatic motivation).

Lesson Plan:

- Avoid shock-based or lecture-style delivery
- Build space for discussion and ethical dilemmas without judgement
- Pair emotional content with clear learning outcomes and next steps

Social Action Plan:

- Frame action as constructive and hopeful, not reactive
- Avoid guilt-based calls to action
- Emphasise supported, collective participation rather than individual pressure

Action 6: Engagement depends on interaction: visual and activity-based learning works best

Young people are far more engaged when learning about forced labour is visual, interactive, and participatory, and consistently disengage from writing-heavy or passive delivery. Formats such as short videos, games, and structured activities help maintain attention, make complex ideas easier to grasp, and keep sensitive topics emotionally manageable (automatic motivation; attention and pacing). Interaction also supports understanding across mixed-ability groups by making abstract concepts more concrete and reducing reliance on long explanations (psychological capability).

Lesson Plan:

- Use short visual inputs and structured activities as the backbone of lessons
- Break up delivery and minimise extended writing tasks
- Keep activities guided and purposeful, rather than overly open-ended

Social Action Plan:

- Design actions that involve doing, creating, or discussing, not just consuming information
- Provide clear steps and structure to reduce uncertainty and effort

Action 7: Peer norms can block or enable action: make participation collective and safe

Peer influence plays a powerful role in shaping whether young people feel able to engage or take action on forced labour. Young people are more motivated when friends are involved, but often avoid ethical action if it risks standing out or going against group norms (fear of exclusion). Normalising engagement through collective, school-endorsed activities reduces social risk and helps reposition participation as something expected and acceptable, rather than exceptional or isolating (descriptive norms; social opportunity).

Lesson Plan:

- Build group-based tasks and structured discussion to normalise participation
- Avoid putting individuals on the spot or requiring personal disclosure
- Position engagement as "what we do together", not individual moral action

Social Action Plan:

- Prioritise collective, school-supported action formats
- Offer team-based or house-based options where appropriate

Action 8: Young people care, but feel powerless: action must be scaffolded and show collective impact

While young people care deeply about forced labour, many question whether individual actions can make a meaningful difference against large, systemic issues. This sense of powerlessness can stall motivation, even when concern is high (reflective motivation). Engagement increases when actions feel achievable, are supported by adults or institutions, and are clearly linked to collective effort and visible impact, helping young people feel their contribution matters (self-efficacy; opportunity constraints). Making pathways to action explicit helps translate concern into confidence and participation rather than frustration or disengagement.

Lesson Plan:

- Explain how change happens through systems, accountability, and collective action
- Link personal choices to wider influence without placing responsibility on individuals
- End lessons with clear, realistic next steps to support agency

Social Action Plan:

- Offer a menu of action levels, from low effort to deeper engagement
- Embed action within timetabled, supported settings (e.g. tutor time, enrichment)
- Include ways to see progress and shared impact

Action 9: Educator confidence is the delivery engine: reduce effort, increase structure, protect safety

Educator confidence plays a decisive role in how seriously forced labour is taken by students and how effectively lessons are delivered. Teachers do not need to be subject experts; they need clear, ready-to-use resources that reduce preparation time and uncertainty, including clear definitions, credible real-world examples, flexible formats, and explicit safeguarding guidance (physical opportunity; psychological capability). Confidence is further strengthened when materials are clearly aligned with Citizenship or SMSC requirements and supported by external endorsement, which helps legitimise delivery and reduce perceived personal or professional risk (social opportunity). When educators feel prepared, supported, and protected, lessons are calmer, more credible, and more engaging for young people.

Lesson Plan:

- Provide complete, ready-to-run packs (slides, notes, timings, activity guides)
- Offer modular lesson lengths (e.g. 15, 30, full lesson)
- Include safeguarding guidance (trigger warnings, managing disclosures, signposting)
- Use UK and real-world examples to maintain credibility

Social Action Plan:

- Make actions easy to deliver with templates, scripts, and checklists
- Avoid placing safeguarding responsibility solely on teachers
- Keep actions institutionally safe and aligned with school structures

Conclusion

This research shows that young people already have strong instincts about fairness at work, but their understanding of labour exploitation is uneven and often shaped by familiarity, relevance and perceived ability to act. The most significant insight is that awareness and emotional engagement are high, but confidence about what meaningful action looks like is much lower. While many young people care deeply about unfair work, they are often unsure what role they themselves can realistically play.

From a behavioural perspective, engagement is strongest when learning goes beyond awareness and provides clear, achievable pathways for action. When exploitation is explained through realistic scenarios and supported by discussion and reflection, young people are better able to recognise unfair work and feel more confident responding to it. Without this sense of agency, strong emotional reactions can quickly turn into disengagement.

The key implication for the Fair Work Futures programme is therefore the need to prioritise agency alongside awareness. Lessons should help young people understand not only what exploitation looks like, but also what practical actions are possible within their everyday environments.
The next step is to pilot the refined lesson plans in school settings to understand how students and educators respond in practice, and to further refine the materials ahead of wider rollout. Through continued testing and development, Fair Work Futures has strong potential to support young people to recognise exploitation and engage constructively with the issue.

Appendices

Appendix A: The COM-B Model of Behaviour

Michie et al., 2014

The COM-B model proposes that there are three components to any behaviour (B): Capability (C), Opportunity (O) and Motivation (M).

Fig 2: The COM-B Model of Behaviour

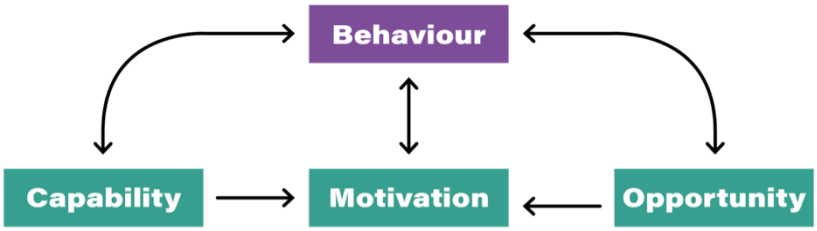


Table 3: The Components and Sub-components of the COM-B Model of Behaviour

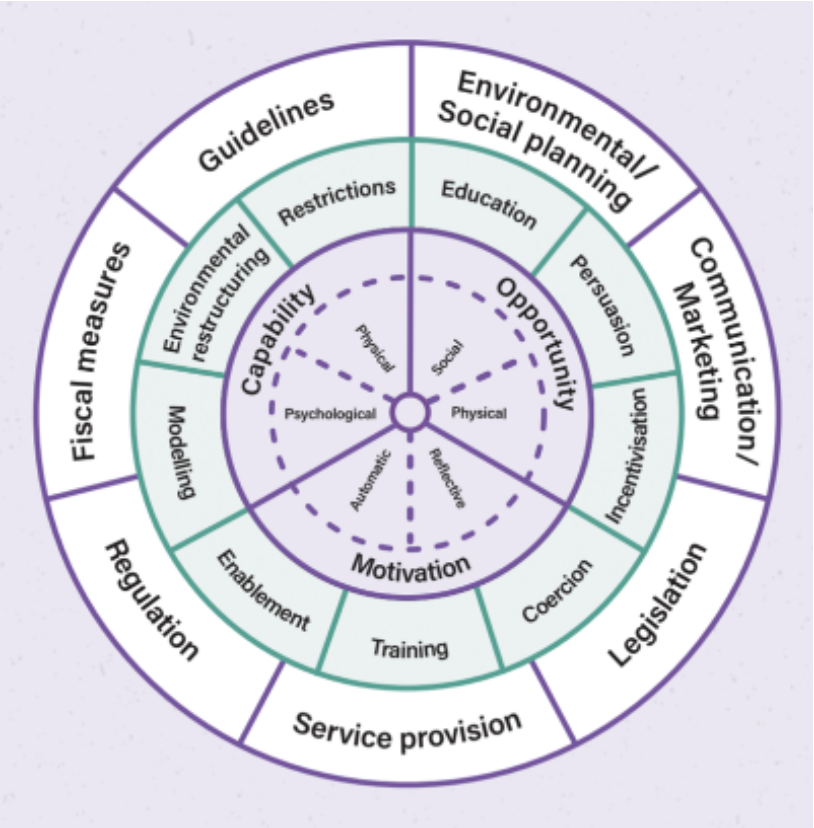
Component	Sub-component	Description
Capability	Physical	Our physical strength, skills or stamina
	Psychological	Our knowledge / psychological strength, skills or stamina
Opportunity	Physical	Opportunities provided by the environment, such as time, location and resources
	Social	Opportunities as a result of social factors, such as social norms and social cues
Motivation	Automatic	Automatic processes, such as our desires, impulses and inhibitions
	Reflective	Reflective processes, such as making plans and evaluating things that have already happened

Appendix B: The Behaviour Change Wheel

Michie et al., 2014

Once behaviour has been understood through research, the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) is an invaluable tool to help design and develop interventions that work. With COM-B components at its centre (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation), the middle and outer circles of the BCW highlight a number of different interventions and delivery methods. For example, if a lack of information (psychological capability) is identified as a key issue, this can be solved through **education** via **communications and marketing**.

Fig. 3: The Behaviour Change Wheel



Appendix C: MINDSPACE

Dolan et al., 2010

A mnemonic for nine influences on behaviour, the MINDSPACE framework aims to communicate the ways in which behaviour can be influenced and changed. Using it alongside the development of interventions for change will help to consider how it could best be framed and its opportunity for success maximised.

Table 4: Components of MINDSPACE

Principle	Description
Messenger	We are heavily influenced by who communicates information
Incentive	Our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts such as strongly avoiding losses
Norms	We are strongly influenced by what others do
Default	We 'go with the flow' or pre-set options
Salience	Our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us
Priming	Our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues
Affect	Our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions
Commitment	We seek to be consistent with our public promises, and we reciprocate acts
Ego	We act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves

Appendix D: EAST

The Behavioural Insights Team, 2014

This framework is a shorter alternative to MINDSPACE, equally communicating how behaviour should be presented in order to encourage and enable people to engage in it. Considering how behaviour can be framed as easy, attractive, social and timely should be embedded in intervention development so that people are not only being enabled to engage in the behaviour, but also receive motivation to do so.

Table 5: Components of EAST

Principle	Description
Easy	Make the desired behaviour easy to implement
Attractive	Grab people's attention to the behaviour and make it desirable to engage in
Social	People are influenced by others and are more likely to engage in a behaviour if many others are too or if they've made a public commitment
Timely	People are influenced by the timing of prompts and are more likely to change their habits if costs and benefits are felt immediately rather than later

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