March 2026

Promoting Victim Engagement in Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Police Operations

Author: Dr Laura Pajon

Project funded by the British Academy (IF2324\240132)

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY
School of Law and Justice Studies

JUSTICE & CARE

Authorship and acknowledgement:

Authorship and funding:

This report is authored by Dr Laura Pajon (Liverpool John Moores University).

The project is funded by the British Academy's Innovation Fellowship Scheme (IF2324\240132).

Acknowledgement:

The project was conducted in collaboration with **Justice & Care**. We thank the Justice & Care team for their support throughout the project.

Justice and Care is a British nongovernmental organisation. It has worked in South Asia for over a decade, helping the state and law enforcement agencies rescue men, women and children from slavery, trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Justice and Care works to join forces to prevent human trafficking in the most at-risk communities, to protect victims and help them recover, and, where appropriate, support the state's efforts to bring criminals and their wider networks to justice

The **Victim Navigator programme** was codesigned with lived experience and police leaders to fill a specific and important gap in existing service provision by forming a trusted bridge between the police and victims of modern slavery; and by flexibly and independently brokering support from external specialist services according to individual victims' needs. The aim was to improve victim care and, subsequently, victim engagement with police to ensure a greater likelihood of successful investigations, the identification of perpetrators, prosecutions, and convictions.

This piece of work was supported by the Modern Slavery & Organised Immigration Crime Unit (MSOIC) as part of **Project Turnstone** - their response to the Government's Modern Slavery Action Plan. Project Turnstone consists of 3 pillars, one of which focuses on Victim Engagement. With thanks to representatives of the Project Turnstone team for their valuable support in delivering the project and disseminating its outputs.

Special thanks to the two organisations that supported the interviewing of victims of trafficking and exploitation (and who remain anonymous for participants' anonymity and confidentiality purposes) and to all professionals and individuals who participated in the study for their valuable time and insight.

Terminology

Modern Slavey and Human Trafficking (MSHT)

"Modern Slavery" serves as an umbrella term encompassing the offences of human trafficking, slavery, servitude, and forced or compulsory labour. For the purpose of the report, the term Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) will be used throughout.

Victim and Potential Victim

The terms 'Survivors' or 'People with lived experiences' are often the preferred terminology for organisations working with victims of MSHT offences. Yet, the terms 'victim' and 'potential victim' are used within policing and legislative contexts to refer to those who have been subject to MSHT criminality. As this report concerns victim engagement in policing operations, the terms 'victim' and 'potential victim' will be used throughout.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aim:

The project sought to empirically establish which practices result in victim engagement outcomes and why.

Methodology:

The research employed a qualitative approach, interviewing (i) professionals from law enforcement agencies; (ii) professionals from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that collaborate closely with police forces during MSHT operations; and (iii) MSHT victims who have engaged with the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

Recommendations have been produced in consultation with professionals and members from a lived-experience consultancy panel.

Key findings:

1. The empirical evidence gathered through analysis of victims' narratives highlights that the consequences resulting from the victimisation experience affect victims at a physical, psychological, social and economic level. Such consequences hinder victim engagement in the short term and the long term.

2. Victims often described interactions with professionals as overwhelming. Key identified barriers to short- and long-term engagement included:

- Fear for their safety and for the potential consequences of engaging with the police and the CJS.
- Uncertainty about what would happen after their engagement, whether they would be safe (or not), the repercussions it might have for their future (e.g., deportation or criminalisation), and what the next procedural steps would be.
- Limited trust and confidence in the police (and the system's) capacity to keep them safe.

- Feelings of loneliness and isolation because of exiting the exploitation (which for many meant losing or limiting contact with their relatives and integrating into a location and lifestyle completely unfamiliar to them).

3. The above barriers were exacerbated by several factors, leading many of those interviewed to describe the engagement with the professionals and the criminal justice system as mentally and emotionally demanding. Exacerbators identified from data analysis include:

- Unfamiliarity with the criminal justice system procedures, their professionals, and limited awareness of what to expect and what is expected of them.
- Poor professional judgement regarding timings and locations in which interactions take place.
- Providing a statement in formal settings (e.g. investigative interview).
- Navigating formal and legal procedures (e.g., NRM and asylum-seeking process).

4. Victims' feelings associated with engagement and cooperation with police included:

- Safety, calmness and comfort
- Trust towards the officers/professionals directly interacting with them and reassurance that professionals cared for their safety and well-being
- Hope for a better future and self-confidence

5. Data analysis reveals that the determinants of impact for successful victim engagement are:

1. Securing safety and well-being
2. Rapport building and trust building
3. Restoring victims' sense of control

6. Core attributes of victim engagement, which, together, promote the above determinants of impact, are:

- **Genuine attentiveness:** achieved by showing genuine interest in the individual and their wellbeing, active listening to their needs and concerns, and fast responsiveness to their fears, concerns and needs.

- **Approachability**: achieved by addressing power imbalance, adopting a communication style that fosters a sense of calmness, showing respect and kindness towards the victims, being empathetic and non-judgmental.
- **Trustworthiness:** achieved through consistency and continuity, honesty and commitment to promises, and by demonstrating professional competency to ensure their safety and well-being.
- **Predictability and reassurance:** achieved by providing victims with accessible information and explanations, with timely and regular updates, and by helping the victim manage expectations and reassuring them about procedures and safety.
- **Empowerment:** achieved by offering the victim choice and encouragement to make decisions and take ownership of their recovery and safety, and by promoting self-confidence and hope for a better future.
- **Personalisation and adaptation:** achieved by putting the victim at the centre of the investigation and the decision-making process, respecting victims' timings and decisions, acknowledging different cultural backgrounds, and considering the impact trauma and culture can have on the dynamics of victim-police interactions.

7. Data analysis revealed the need for strong support services and for police investigations to run in parallel and in coordination with a comprehensive safeguarding strategy. It was noted that to secure both short- and long-term engagement, safeguarding and victims' recovery need to be at the centre of the response.

8. The figure of the victim navigator was considered a key resource to success for victim engagement, acting as a bridge between victims and the criminal justice system. Victim navigators help officers maintain a consistent relationship with the victim throughout the investigation, preventing victim disengagement and reducing instances of secondary victimisation.

9. Criminal justice competency was found to be critical for effective engagement. That is, the need for all practitioners interacting with victims (from first responders to members of the judiciary) to have the right knowledge, skills and attitude to engage with MSHT victims and adequate access to resources.

10. Systemic and institutional limitations that undermine victim engagement efforts include:

a. Challenges related to NRM and housing provision, poor communication between police and support services and a lack of social support provision for victims.
b. Poor understanding of the nuances of the victimisation consequences and a lack of skills to engage with victims among those professionals who interact with (and are involved in the response to) victims of trafficking
c. Limited access to adequate non-threatening locations, to interpreters and to resources to help victims understand the procedures and manage expectations

Recommendations

Policy

1. Development of accredited tier-based training curriculum (including NRM-specialised training) and opportunities for joint training with partner agencies.
2. Development of standardised victim-centred best practice guidance, including the empirical evidence presented in this report, to stimulate victim engagement and prevent failures in victim safeguarding.
3. Development of clear protocols and guidance for support provision and revision of the current NRM support provision.
4. Creation of victim-sensitive resources to prepare the victim for the criminal justice system.
5. Dedicated funding for specialised roles and units within police forces and for the deployment of victim navigators.

Practice

6. Professionals should use and maximise available resources and expertise within their force: victim liaison officers, tactical advisors, and victim navigators.
7. When possible, the victim should have access to a victim navigator and a point of contact within the police investigation team to ensure clear communication.

8. Practitioners should follow the evidence-based principles and attributes for successful victim engagement identified in this report. See the 2-page guide/advice on Engaging and Communicating with Victims of Modern Slavery.
9. Forces should ensure that victim-sensitive spaces are in place so that interactions with vulnerable populations can take place in these locations.
10. Forces should strengthen strategic connections with PCC (Police and Crime Commissioner) networks for more efficient safeguarding and expenditure of public funds, and to establish a formalised connection nationally and internationally (with other agencies and police forces).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0 FOREWORD

Modern Slavery and Human trafficking remain amongst the most complex and harmful threats faced by policing and our safeguarding partners. These crimes are sustained through exploitation, control, and fear, often leaving victims unable or unwilling to engage with those seeking to protect them.

This research and, most importantly, its findings exploring how we must respond to that reality - and how effectively we engage victims – directly determine whether we safeguard the vulnerable, disrupt organised criminality and secure justice through the courts. This research places **victim engagement** at the centre of modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) operations and argues that how police and partners collaborate with victims fundamentally shapes case outcomes, long-term safety, and wider confidence in the system.

The research begins from the premise that victim engagement is simultaneously a justice goal and a safeguarding imperative. When victims are supported to engage with confidence and consistency, policing and partners gain critical insight into exploitation, risk is better managed, and opportunities to prevent further harm increase significantly. When engagement fails, victims can disengage, investigations weaken, and offenders remain free to exploit others. This research shows that disengagement is rarely about "non-cooperation" in a simplistic sense; rather, it reflects rational responses to uncertainty, past trauma, poor communication, and institutional practices that may unintentionally replicate patterns of control.

This research brings independent academic rigour alongside operational insight, strengthening our understanding of the barriers. The author identifies concrete points in the victim journey where procedures, language and decision-making either support or undermine trust: initial identification and recovery, early investigative contact, management of expectations around the criminal process, handovers between agencies, and longer-term safeguarding planning.

The research highlights how inconsistent updates, fragmented responsibilities, and an overemphasis on evidential opportunities can erode confidence, whereas clear

explanations, continuity of personnel, and collaborative safeguarding can help victims remain engaged on their own terms.

The message is clear: the findings from this report must now translate into action, embedding findings into current policies, strengthening training and supporting frontline decision-making. As it argues, evidence-based changes—such as structured communication plans, dedicated engagement roles, trauma-informed interviewing approaches, and co-designed safeguarding pathways—need to be normalised within force policies, multi-agency guidance, and performance frameworks; essential if we are to remain operationally effective and manage systemic change through informed leadership.

Within this landscape, Project Turnstone provides an important strategic and operational vehicle for embedding a victim-centred approach to MSHT investigations as one of its three pillars. The victim engagement pillar signals a shift from viewing engagement as a desirable by-product to recognising it as a core design principle of investigations. This research demonstrates the importance of identifying the gaps between safeguarding and investigative priorities—while also evidencing the benefits of more coherent, victim-focused models.

This report makes the case for closer integration between police, specialist NGOs, statutory services, and independent advocates so that victims encounter a joined-up response rather than a series of disconnected resources. What emerges overall is a compelling argument that improving victim engagement in MSHT policing is both an ethical responsibility and a strategic necessity.

We hope this research is used by law enforcement and frontline agencies across sectors and serves as a catalyst for consistent national improvement, underpinning the most effective engagement principles and thereby encouraging fully comprehensive support for victims and the best possible investigative outcomes.

Sue BRADSHAW

Strategic National Delivery Manager

Modern Slavery & Organised Immigration Crime Unit

2.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 RESEARCH PURPOSE

The research project sought to empirically establish which practices lead to victim engagement outcomes in MSHT police operations and why. The focus of the project was centred on all forms of adult exploitation.

The **objectives** that guided the project were:

- To better understand, through victims' experiences, the challenges and barriers encountered when engaging with the police and, more broadly, the criminal justice system.
- The impact that professionals' practices and actions have on easing those barriers and encouraging engagement.
- To empirically examine practices and factors associated with successful victim engagement in MSHT police operations.
- To identify and explore structures and means for implementation, and blockages (actual and perceived) for effective implementation.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

To achieve the project's aim, the research employed a qualitative approach, gathering and analysing data from interviews with

i. professionals from law enforcement agencies
ii. professionals from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that collaborate closely with police forces during MSHT operations
iii. MSHT victims who have engaged with the Criminal Justice System (CJS)

2.2.1 Data collection: interviews

Professionals from law enforcement agencies and NGOs: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers from a representative range of police forces and

Regional Organised Crime Units, and with professionals from NGOs with experience collaborating with police forces during MSHT operations. Participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling. A total of 35 practitioners were interviewed, including 22 law enforcement representatives from 12 forces (holding diverse ranks: Detective Constables, Detective Sergeants, and Detective Inspectors) and 13 practitioners from three NGOs that operate at a national level. All interviews were conducted in person (lasting 60-100 minutes), except for nine interviews, which were conducted online to accommodate workload demands and travel distance. The years of experience in the post ranged from 20 months to 11 years.

Interviews explored topics related to victim identification, engagement, and safeguarding, gathering professionals' views on a) current MSHT investigative practices and victim-centred approaches, b) their impact on promoting engagement, and c) the perceived blockers/challenges in their implementation.

Adults with lived experience of MSHT: 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with adults who were victims of MSHT crimes. As the study did not aim for representation but instead insight and understanding of MSHT victims' experiences when engaging with the police and navigating the CJS, participants were identified and recruited through a convenience sample with the support of two NGOs. All interviews were conducted in person, except for two conducted online at the interviewee's preference (with the case worker's prior agreement). Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes each.

2.2.1 Qualitative analysis

Consistent with a grounded theory approach, codes, themes, and categories were developed during the analysis of anonymised interview transcripts. Themes and categories were developed through an iterative process, both by reviewing existing literature (deductive) and by analysing the interview data itself (inductive). It is important to note that the categories, themes, and sub-themes identified in interviews with victims and practitioners should not be interpreted in isolation. Instead, they are related and mutually dependent. To facilitate readability, findings are presented in chapters aligned with the research questions that guided the analysis.

2.2.3 Ethics and safeguarding

Throughout the project and its related activities, LJMU and J&C have complied with the ethical and safeguarding policies of both organisations. Ethical approval for all research activities conducted throughout the project was obtained from Liverpool John Moores University (Ethics reference numbers: 24/LCP/020, 24/LCP/006, 25/LCP/008).

Victims of trafficking and exploitation have engaged with the project through two NGOs, which themselves have ethics and safeguarding obligations and procedures. The service providers individually approached clients who met the inclusion criteria and whose risk of being traumatised or emotionally distressed by the interview was low. The NGOs informed participants of the voluntary nature of their participation, the study's purpose, and what it would entail. Well-being checks were conducted by the NGOs after the interviews. Upon completion of the interview, participants received a £20 voucher as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

2.3 REPORT OUTLINE

The report is organised into chapters, each addressing a research question.

Chapter 3 explores victims' narratives, providing a qualitative analysis of the challenges and barriers victims of MSHT encounter and face when engaging with the police and, more broadly, the criminal justice system.

Chapter 4 examines professionals' practices and actions that promote successful victim engagement in MSHT operations and their impact on easing victims' barriers for engagement and disclosure of victimisation experiences.

Chapter 5 explores the means and mechanisms needed to promote successful victim engagement and discusses current barriers and limitations.

Chapter 6 presents key recommendations for policy and practice.

3.0 VICTIMS' EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

This chapter explores the key challenges and barriers MSHT victims face when engaging with the police and the CJS. The empirical evidence gathered through analysis of victims' narratives highlights that the consequences resulting from the victimisation experience affect victims at a physical, psychological, social and economic level. Such consequences hinder victim engagement in the short term and the long term.

Victims often described interactions with professionals as overwhelming; during interactions with the police (and other authorities), victims are likely to be scared for their safety, uncertain about the potential repercussions and consequences of engaging with the police, and with limited (or no) expectations and hopes for a better future. Long-term, victims expressed a constant state of hypervigilance, a limited capacity to trust again and a feeling of loneliness and isolation that, if not addressed, could lead to disengagement.

The section below provides an overview of the core barriers to short and long-term engagement that result from their victimisation experiences. Section 3.2 highlights the factors and elements that exacerbate these barriers, making engagement and interaction with authorities more emotionally and mentally demanding.

3.1 BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

3.1.1 Fear and uncertainty

Victims often feared for their safety and for the potential consequences of engaging with the police. Such fear was often coupled with a high level of uncertainty about what would happen after their engagement, whether they would be safe (or not), the repercussions it might have for their future (e.g., deportation or criminalisation), and the next steps in the process. As revealed by some, such fear originates from witnessing and/or experiencing violence and threats during their victimisation experiences, from offenders' claims of omnipotence (e.g. constant reference to being well-connected with the police) and from

preconceptions about policing roles and their (in)capability to ensure their safety and protection.

> *"I was afraid because of what the lady kept saying [...] she would say she works alongside the police, her circle is professionals. She gave the impression that she was a big deal"* **(Victim #8)**
>
> *"We feared this family because we got to know what they were really like. They've got two sons in jail for murder. They were very, very rough people"* **(Victim #9)**

Such fear and uncertainty often created a state of anxiety and emotional arousal that inhibited victims' decision and capacity to seek help. Some of those interviewed feared being seen entering the police station and engaging with the police.

> *"Someone walking into a police station, that's the last thing I wanted to do because I felt that if anyone saw me walking there, what would they think? [...] the thing is that you can have a hand reaching out to you, but you're afraid that someone else is going to see you touch it or see you holding it [...]. The police, who are the ones who are going to help you the most, you can't go into that police station. How ironic is that?* **(Victim #2)**

Victims reported that, even when protected and safeguarded by the police, the fear was persistent over time, keeping them in a constant state of alarm. That is, while fear (and stress resulting from it) were particularly acute at tipping points in the CJS process, for instance, at initial interactions or when disclosing their victimisation experience in formal settings (e.g. video-recording interviews), victims reported the persistence of those feelings over time, some of them acknowledging that such feelings would never go away. Some of the victims interviewed admitted having second thoughts about continuing to cooperate with the police after such constant anxiety and fear. They felt that neither the distance (if, and when, relocated) nor the system (and its safeguarding measures) were sufficient to provide adequate protection for them and/or their loved ones.

> *"There's still fear, there have been times I'm driving around, like, why is that car driving more than one mile behind me? Those things are not going to leave me, as in constantly, I'll be like it"* ***(Victim #2)***

3.1.2 Limited trust and confidence in the police (and the system's) capacity to keep them safe

Alongside fear, some victims expressed a lack of trust and confidence in the police and in the system's capacity to keep them safe. According to the victims' narratives, such mistrust originates from erroneous misconceptions of policing. Some victims were unaware that the police had safeguarding duties and were sceptical about the police's willingness to protect them. Others thought officers were easily corrupted. The distrust was reinforced by offenders' claims of being well-connected with authorities and by concerns about (and a lack of understanding of) the procedures in place and the decisions made to ensure their safety.

> *[after being taken to a safe house] "I was just scared. I'm alone. I need to be protected. If protection is this, why are they leaving me alone? [...] What if somebody comes, and what if they were following us? And what if they know where I live?* **(Victim #5)**
>
> *"At that time, it was still terrifying because again, I'm just like, do I trust them? If they make a mistake, it will have massive consequences for us [...] I was thinking, how do I get out of this? What have I done? Shit, I've just put myself in a worse situation [...], just say they've got police officers working for them or just say they give someone £30,000 or £20,000 because people change for money"* **(Victim #2)**

Similarly to the constant state of hypervigilance, many of the victims highlighted that a detrimental consequence of their victimisation was them losing 'faith in humans' and being unable to trust people again. Such limited capacity to trust further obstructed their engagement with other professionals within the criminal justice system and their capacity to rebuild their social networks.

> *"The most difficult part was... fearing, not trusting so many people, because after that, it makes you trust nobody. Even if someone comes, tries to come closer to you, you are like, 'no'"* **(Victim #6)**

3.1.3 Loneliness and isolation

Linked with limited capacity to trust (and its impact on rebuilding social networks) was the commonly expressed feeling of loneliness and isolation. For all those interviewed,

exiting the exploitation meant the need to relocate and to adapt to a new location and lifestyle, having also to renegotiate their space and surroundings to avoid encountering their perpetrator or other dangerous situations. For some, relocating meant leaving their hometown and losing or limiting contact with their relatives. For others (mainly non-UK nationals), relocation meant adapting to and integrating into a system/society and lifestyle completely unfamiliar to them. As a result, victims commonly mentioned feelings of loneliness and isolation and a sense that no one was able to understand what they were going through fully. As some disclosed, the lack of peer support groups and MSHT victims' networks with whom they could disclose their experiences and concerns worsened those feelings of loneliness.

> *"Leaving everything... changing the way we live. Not environment, because we're in the same country, but I mean... I think we had to change the way we thought, [...] I had to cut off everyone; I don't think I spoke to anyone for nearly 9/10/11/12 months"* **(Victim #3)**

3.2 EXACERBATORS OF BARRIERS FOR ENGAGEMENT

The above barriers were exacerbated by several factors, leading many of those interviewed to describe the engagement with the professionals and the criminal justice system as overwhelming and mentally and emotionally demanding.

3.2.1 Unfamiliarity with the Criminal Justice System

Victims' unfamiliarity with the system, the professionals and the procedure (and its length/steps), promoted feelings of uncertainty, exacerbated fear, and a sense of helplessness. As demonstrated in the quotes below, uncertainty about what would come next and the implications for their own safety and future led many to regret engaging with the police or disclosing information to them.

> *"For me, in the beginning, it was terrifying because I didn't know what was going to happen next. Were they going just to let me go? And now I'm in the hands of someone that I've... I've just said this; I've put myself in the target. Because I've just potentially put their operation in danger, their money-making machine, the illegalities that make them the life that they live [...]* **(Victim #7)**

"But I didn't know, I didn't know what was going to happen, what was the next step [...] what's he going to do next now? Is he going to keep me away from him? Those were all the questions in my mind; I just want to be safe" **(Victim #2)**

Limited understanding of criminal and legal procedures and erroneous assumptions and expectations led to instances where victims felt disappointed about the system and defeated. For example, the lack of arrests or prosecutions reinforced their belief that the offender was untouchable, and the absence of updates or the perception that no meaningful action or investigative progress was being made undermined the system and professionals' credibility.

"I felt defeated. I felt like I didn't have any avenue of help" **(Victim #8)**

"It all seemed as though everything was just dragging on forever. And I know that they've got an awful lot to deal with, but I just felt, to be honest, that I wasn't taken that seriously, because I didn't fit the stereotype" **(Victim #7)**

Furthermore, limited knowledge/understanding and a lack of victim-centred explanations caused frustration among some victims due to uncertainty about what to expect and what was expected of them.

"They just told me you're going to [location]. That's a safe house. That's where you're going to live. But who are they? Who is the Black Woman Aid? Who is the Salvation Army? I don't know them. [...]. They didn't explain. [Referring to when she was in the safe house], they could have told me, 'OK, you are allowed to go out', I didn't know if and how far I could go from the house." **(Victim #5)**

3.2.2 Timings and locations

Some of the victims particularly referred to situations in which the timings and locations contravened the victims' needs and emotional state. Examples were given of situations in which professionals provided victims (completely new) information at a time when the victims felt overwhelmed. As victims explained, because of the anxiety and stress they were experiencing at those moments, they had difficulties comprehending the information and making decisions, which then exacerbated their feelings of stress and discomfort. As some recognised, it was not a matter of what information they were given

or how it was explained, but a matter of timings and locations, noting that if they had waited until they were less stressed and done it in a "more welcoming" setting, they would have been able to understand and provide more detailed information.

> *"Start talking and talking and talking, and Oh my God. To be honest, it was overwhelming [...] I think it took a long time because she was trying to explain every detail to me so I could understand. Everything that she said, to be honest, I didn't even grasp one thing. Because I was very, very tired [...], but I'm sure if they could allow somebody to sleep over it and come in the morning when somebody's a little bit fresh and then sit down and talk about it, it could have been very, very helpful because you could understand everything that they say"* **(Victim #5)**

Physical locations were also found to be important in promoting (or otherwise) feelings of stress and fear, given the connotations certain locations have or the inputs within them. That is well exemplified by Victim #2 when referring to police stations:

> *"A person can sit there and say it's okay, it's okay, but when you've got sirens, when you see other criminals, when you see people getting arrested, handcuffs, uniforms, lights, this, that, you're like, no, I'm not doing this, because that's how I felt. I felt no, I'm letting this go, I'm out of here"* **(Victim #2)**

Similarly, some participants described the settings and conditions in which the interactions took place as particularly unpleasant. The quote below describes the interaction between a victim and medical staff after she disclosed her victimisation at a hospital.

> *"And I didn't feel comfortable. I was just crying, they gave me a room with a bed to stay, but I didn't want to sleep. I just sat there at the corner of it, on the chair, and they were coming one by one. One by one, they were coming to check nothing, just to see. I felt really, really sad, to be honest"* **(Victim #5)**

3.2.3 Investigative interview

Most victims described the disclosure of their victimisation experience in a formal setting as one of the most challenging parts of engaging with the police. For many, having to disclose (and re-live) specific details of their victimisation experience was mentally and emotionally demanding. As Victim #1 described, "*all my trauma came back again*". As

others recognised, the trauma experienced impacted their capacity to recall information, mainly when a considerable amount of time had passed, making it even more challenging and emotionally demanding when the setting was not appropriate.

> *"Because the video one, I was so anxious at that time. It was like I was so stressed mentally; I started to get headaches from answering certain personal questions. Yes, I know I had to do it because it's something that I decided to do, but it really had a mental toll on me"* **(Victim #1)**
>
> *"Being asked by men over and over, some of the things which are very embarrassing to say. Like if you have been sexually harassed, you don't expect to be asked by men"* **(Victim #6)**

References to fear of repercussions and to the potential consequences of disclosing specific details, such as deportation, criminalisation or judgment, were particularly prevalent during interviews. Such fears were exacerbated when, from the victims' perspective, they were asked the same questions repeatedly, or when questions centred more on what they did, where they were, and the decisions they made (rather than on the offender's whereabouts). In those instances, victims were under the impression that they were not being believed or were being investigated (a belief reinforced if they received no updates shortly after being interviewed).

> *"My main fear was, like, if I say the wrong thing, maybe they might detain me. So, I was scared because I didn't want to be sent back home. I didn't want to face the abuse again"* **(Victim #4)**
>
> *"Because some of the questions that they asked were all about me. I don't know policing; I'm not a police officer, so at that point, I felt like the questions they were asking were irrelevant to the investigation of this individual. [..]. [When referring to later updates] The communication factor was not there. Had me in limbo, had me thinking I'm going to get arrested. I honestly thought I was in trouble"* **(Victim #8)**

3.2.4 Navigating legal and official procedures

Many of those interviewed highlighted counselling and mental health support as essential for recovery. Yet a few of those interviewed reported that navigating the asylum-

seeking and NRM procedures was particularly challenging, in some cases leading to instances of secondary victimisation. Re-telling their story to multiple professionals, negative decisions, limited access to (or interruptions in) counselling, and the length of time before receiving a decision were all aspects that exacerbated feelings of uncertainty, stress and lack of closure, which prevented them from moving forward.

> *"But when I got the NRM decision, no positive. They had to stop [counselling sessions] because they didn't support them anymore. [...] I just, you know, I want all of this [i.e., asylum-seeking process] to finish and to leave a quiet life. I'm really tired. You know my mind is always there, thinking about what's going to happen. What's going to happen, and will my kids be safe?"* **(Victim #1)**

4.0 PROMOTING VICTIM ENGAGEMENT

This section examines the identified promising practices and responses to promote victim engagement, drawing on data gathered from professionals and victims.

4.1. DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESSFUL VICTIM ENGAGEMENT

Three superordinate (and interconnected) themes were found to be determinants of impact for successful victim engagement outcomes. They are: 1) Securing safety and well-being, 2) Rapport building and trust building and 3) Restoring victims' sense of control.

4.1.1 Securing safety and well-being

There was agreement among professionals on the need for victims to be and feel safe and secure, noting that a response focused on securing safety and well-being throughout the entire investigation process promoted victim engagement. Participants emphasised the importance of prioritising safeguarding over evidence-gathering and prosecution during initial interactions. During early/initial interactions, the focus should be on immediate support and safeguarding, as well as on understanding victims' vulnerabilities/risks. Such an approach was also found to help break potential fears, prejudices and stereotypes the victim might have about the police and preconceptions about how they will be treated.

> *"It leaves a bit of a more positive kind of impression on a potential victim that the cops are here to help, and that's a good outcome because you might just plant that seed of hope in that victim's mind that there are other options"* **(Police #4)**

According to participants, approaching initial interactions with a safeguarding and welfare mindset and allowing time and space to develop a relationship with victims facilitates later victim engagement with the police and promotes the disclosure of victimisation experiences.

"My approach is to focus less on the investigation on day one and focus more on immediate support for your victim. I think it's important that when you approach an individual, you don't go there with a police-agenda mindset of "right, this is what I want out of this". Instead, go more with a mindset of 'We're just having a chat, I'm going to find out a little bit about you. I'm going to check that you're OK. Check that you're safe and see if you'll agree to see me another time." **(Police #5)**

4.1.2 Rapport and trust building

Participants emphasised the cornerstone role of rapport and trust building in securing and maintaining victim engagement. For the victim to engage, they need to trust the professionals and the system and feel reassured of the professionals' capacity and competence to ensure their safety and recovery. It is important to note that while rapport and trust-building were commonly identified as critical to securing initial victim engagement and collaboration with the investigation, building trust takes time and is fragile. Therefore, there is a need for ongoing demonstrations of care and interest in victims' well-being throughout the investigation.

"People don't care about the police investigation. People don't care about the prosecution or what's going on behind the scenes. All they want to feel is, you know, I felt listened to, I felt heard. This person's taking me out of that awful situation. Put me in a better state, and I've got somebody who I trust, who I know I can go back to time and time again if I need that support, and because of that, I'm going to continue to engage with them" **(Police #5)**

4.1.3 Restoring victims' sense of control

Participants noted the need for victims to develop a sense of certainty and predictability about their safety and future. To ensure long-term engagement, it is necessary to support the victim in taking ownership of their recovery and to give them a voice in the investigation. As some practitioners have recognised, restoring victims' sense of control requires both acknowledging and considering the victim's willingness, hopes, and expectations, and ensuring they have access to comprehensive support that helps them recover from victimisation and prevent future victimisation (i.e. through minimising existing vulnerabilities and helping them become independent).

"You need to mitigate the risk of people being trafficked again by changing their circumstances. [....] To make sure that they can financially manage, by helping them to engage with the support the CJS offers and helping them find employment and get into education, you have to treat this as a protection case from the outset and deal with it as you would with a child abuse case, you have to spend time with people, to nurture them, help them through a long process" **(NGO #1)**

"Whereas if you've got the NGO supporting them in rebuilding their lives, they're much more likely to stay engaged in the criminal justice process because they might be seeing outcomes. They will want some form of justice. And that is not stopping them from rebuilding their lives." **(Police #4)**

4.2 FEELINGS ASSOCIATED WITH VICTIM ENGAGEMENT

The analysis of victims' narratives revealed that, while feelings of stress, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty were prevalent during interactions with the police, feelings associated with victims' collaboration and disclosure of victimisation experience included 1) feelings of safety, calmness and comfort, 2) feelings of trust and reassurance, and 3) feelings of hope and empowerment.

Despite initial fear of the potential consequences of engaging with the police, the officers' reassurance about their safety and their proactive demonstration of care and concern for their well-being replaced that apprehension with feelings of **safety, calmness, and comfort**. As some participants described, it made them feel "at ease".

"They made you feel really, really safe. They made sure you were okay before they even started asking anything. They made sure you were alright first. And that's what I appreciated the most" **(Victim #10)**

"Even though they're not saying it's going to be alright, you feel you will be ok by the way they were dealing with me at that time, I felt that." **(Victim #5)**

As many participants reported, the prompt response to their concerns, fears, or doubts as the investigation progressed, along with the evident dedication of resources, effort, and time to ensure their safety and well-being, fostered **trust and reassurance**. Those feelings of trust and reassurance were nourished by clear explanations and the certainty

of having a clear line of communication through which they could voice their needs and concerns.

> *"They knew what to say and what not to say. Even when I had loads of questions, they just gave me the time to calm down. They were just there every step of the way. So, there wasn't a time when I couldn't message them or call them. It was something I wasn't expecting because I got it all off my shoulders to someone I've never seen in my life"* **(Victim #2)**
>
> *"They were in contact with us all the time, phoning us, coming to see us [...] got in touch with the police, told him about my concerns, and they came to see me straight away."* **(Victim #10)**

Participants often described feelings of **hope and self-belief** as important drivers that kept them engaged despite the challenges. Professionals played an important role in helping victims regain hope and self-belief, and some explicitly cited their engagement with the CJS as a primary driver of empowerment and positive changes in their lives.

> *"It's really changed our lives. It really has, and not just mine, it's changed a lot of my family's lives [...] It's a shame that it had to start from a bad place. But at the end of the day, we're here now, and a lot of positive has come out of it. And yeah, it's spread like it's got tentacles. It's spread. The positivity has spread through the whole family."* **(Victim #9)**

4.3 PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

It is important to note that the following attributes and practices, together, promote and secure the three superordinate themes: 1) securing safety and wellbeing, 2) rapport building and trust building and 3) restoring victims' sense of control. Thus, they should not be interpreted independently, but instead, considered (and applied) collectively as promoters of victim engagement.

4.3.1 Genuine attentiveness

Participants disclosed the need for victims to perceive practitioners' care and interest for their safety and well-being beyond (and regardless of) their collaboration in the criminal

investigation. As practitioners emphasised, it is about ensuring that the victim feels listened to and heard by professionals, and that there is genuine interest in their individual concerns, emotions, and needs.

Active listening: Core to demonstrating attentiveness is ensuring the victim feels truly heard, creating an environment where they feel comfortable disclosing information. Some participants emphasised the importance of listening to and understanding victims' needs, concerns, and fears throughout the process (rather than assuming what those might be), so they can be addressed on an individual basis.

> *"Have an initial conversation with people. Find out what their wants and needs are [...] I tend to go through 'What are your fears about this?' Because fears are often far worse than reality. Rather than letting people be overwhelmed by the whole thing, break it down into small, manageable chunks and say, 'That's your fear about that. This is how we're going to deal with it"* **(NGO #1)**

Genuine interest: As many noted, attentiveness is shown through consistent actions that reflect a genuine interest in the person. Regular checks and updates, face-to-face interactions, and remembering personal details and/or important dates and events for the individual were found to be cornerstones of building rapport and trust and keeping the victim engaged in the process.

> *"I think, yeah, having regular check-ins, meeting people in person, not just over the phone. Sitting down with someone for coffee, taking that time, and showing them you are dedicating it to them. Yeah, not for any specific reason other than to check in and see how they are"* **(Police #8)**

Understanding and (fast) responsiveness to victims' needs and concerns: As some noted, active listening, continuous checks, and interest in victims' personal lives and recovery help create a safe relationship in which victims feel comfortable raising and disclosing concerns. Yet, it is important to respond promptly to those concerns, needs, and fears, both to demonstrate that they are recognised (in turn encouraging that future concerns and fears are also raised) and to prevent disengagement. Participant (police) #15 provides an example of a couple who were moved into a safe house in another county

after exiting exploitation, and while they were walking on the street, they saw (or thought they saw) their exploiters.

> *"Obviously, they panicked, and they were going to withdraw. But we went to see them. My Sergeant and I all went to see them. Spend a bit of time with them and explain, 'OK, look, here are things we can do to try to protect you more.' And I think because we've been explaining that to them and reassured them, yeah, they changed their minds and said, yeah, 'we're in'".* **(Police #15)**

4.3.2 Approachability

Participants pointed to the victims' vulnerability and the power imbalance between police and victims. Because of that, professionals commonly recognised the need to create a non-coercive, non-threatening atmosphere. Great emphasis was given to the 'soft skills' and 'small gestures' as critical (rather than the grand gestures).

Addressing power imbalance: All participants recognised the need to address power imbalance between the victim and a figure of authority. Many participants acknowledged the negative impact of a police officer's presence on victim engagement and disclosure, noting that being an officer, per se, is a barrier that other organisations (e.g., NGOs) don't face. As such, respondents often discussed the need to address power imbalances by removing signs of 'authority' (e.g., uniforms) and by considering the physical environments in which interactions take place.

> *"First impressions go 1,000,000 miles. So, I would always tell cops, 'Go down to that person's level, don't stand above them. Take off your vest. Take off your camera. Take off your radio. Take off your badge. Sit down.' You should strip yourself down to something similar to what they're like and then just listen".* **(Police #6)**

Communication style and tone: Some of the participants interviewed emphasised the need to adapt the communication style to the victim and their needs, and the importance of this in fostering a sense of calmness and approachability. Reference was made to the need to avoid jargon and to consider matters such as the use of an interpreter and cultural differences in vocabulary and style. Importance was also placed on non-verbal

communication, such as eye contact and using a calm and slow pace, mainly when the victim presents signs of stress and arousal.

> *"To speak calmly, in a calm tone. How you say things and what you say are very different things. And so, I could say the nicest thing, but if my tone is slightly off, then someone may react badly to that. So, just remember that it is a human individual in front of you"* **(NGO #2)**

Respectful approach (courtesy and kindness): Participants noted the degrading and inhumane treatment that most victims have endured for long periods and the need to demonstrate respect, kindness, and courtesy. Showing professional courtesy and kindness not only breaks stereotypes and previous prejudices about how they would be treated by police and other professionals in the criminal justice system but also promotes rapport-building.

> *"Be nice. It really is as simple. I know it sounds ridiculous cause you think everyone could do that, but it is really as simple as that. Don't walk into a place with an attitude"* **(NGO #9)**

Cognitive empathy: Core to that approachability is the understanding and recognition of factors that might affect the individual emotionally. Practitioners mentioned the need to be proactive in identifying situations that might be difficult for victims and to make them "easier" to navigate. A few of the participants interviewed noted that being empathetic and open-minded can be challenging at times, but it is essential to be patient and not get frustrated with some victims' decisions and reluctance to engage; instead, giving victims time and space was described as an example of empathy.

> *"Stay open-minded, you need to have empathy, which you should do for any job, really. But I think it's difficult to put yourself in someone else's shoes when, you know, you're getting paid every month, you've got a car. [...] Some men who have been abused by men will not speak to us."* **(Police #3)**

Non-judgment: A core aspect of approachability was being non-judgmental toward victims' choices, decisions, and past actions. Along with demonstrating empathy, not

judging was seen as a core aspect for promoting an interaction in which the victim feels comfortable disclosing their experiences.

> *"I don't have any judgment. I don't care what choices they've made. It's very much having that attitude of 'I don't care what choice you've made. It doesn't bother me whether you choose to do this or not. I'll treat you the same. I think that really helps bring walls down."* **(NGO #13)**

4.3.3 Trustworthiness

All participants emphasised the critical role of trust in securing and maintaining engagement, noting that it takes time and effort to build, while it is easily lost if not maintained.

Continuity and consistency: both were deemed essential to promote and maintain trust and engagement. Reference was made to both a) consistency and continuity in terms of responses and actions, and b) the professionals interacting with the victim. As Participant (police) #15 noted, *"There's nothing worse than. 'Oh, my God. I've seen 10 different police officers over the last three weeks."* To promote such consistency and continuity (and a clear line of communication), many named 'best practice' the allocation of an officer as the point of contact for the victim. Furthermore, a few participants mentioned the need to introduce the victim to any new member or professional who would interact with them. It was found that introducing a new professional through someone the victim already trusts facilitates rapport-building.

> *"If I weren't on duty, I'd make sure I took my colleague with me to go and see them. So, I would say 'I'm not on duty tomorrow, but this is my colleague. If you want anything, here's his number. He'll look after you.' So just try to keep that continuity and consistency for people"* **(Police #14)**

Competency: Respondents also emphasised the need to demonstrate to the victim their competence to secure the victim's safety and address their concerns. As participant (NGO) #4 recognised, "actions speak louder than words". Reference was made to small, continuous actions that help progressively demonstrate their competency.

"Sometimes there's just nothing I can do to help someone sort out their immigration [...] However, what's the little win that I can achieve in a short amount of time to show that I am doing something, like helping them access private counselling [..] it is like little wins and big wins." ***(NGO #8)***

Honesty, straightforwardness and commitment to promises: Honesty and straightforwardness were recognised as cornerstones of demonstrating trustworthiness. Practitioners highlighted the need to ensure victims are fully aware of what the process entails and of the difficulties and challenges they might encounter throughout it. That involved being realistic about the procedures, timescales, and potential outcomes, and being honest and transparent about the investigation's development. A strong emphasis was placed on avoiding overpromising and on keeping promises. As respondents pointed out, while honesty and commitment to a promise help build trust, not delivering on, or not acting on what you've promised, inevitably erodes the victim's trust and faith in the professionals and the systems.

"There are times when we do have to leave victims behind because they're not ready, they're not ready to move away from it. But every time you meet them and do what you say you'll do, it will give you a clearer picture next time. There are lots of people I've met multiple times over the years. That final time they do come because they go 'oh, you promised me this last time, and that happened. And you didn't go against it. And I haven't had police knocking on my door, arresting me for immigration and all of this sort of stuff." **(NGO #13)**

4.3.4 Predictability and reassurance

Respondents acknowledged the victims' unfamiliarity with the criminal justice system, including its procedures, professionals involved, and investigative steps. It was highlighted that it is important to address victims' uncertainties and doubts about procedures and next steps to create predictability and reassurance that "they are not in trouble".

Accessible information/explanations: For many, the key was to provide the individual with information and explanations in a way they could understand and process, striking

the right balance between overloading them and providing enough information to help them understand what is happening and why certain actions and decisions are taken.

> *"At the start, just say, look, this is going to be a long process, and then we'll just explain that this process could be a 12-month, two-year process [...] explaining how the interview's going to work, what we expect of them, what they should expect of us. And just try to keep them as relaxed as possible. [...] Explain the court procedures. And tell them everything step by step. And I would normally say to people, 'Don't worry about this now, when the next bit is coming up, I will let you know in plenty of time, and I'll explain that bit to you then'. So, you're not overwhelmed with a lot of information at the beginning. We must be mindful not to overload them with too much information."* ***(Police #16)***

Reassurance about safety and procedures: Core to promoting reassurance and predictability were explanations of police procedures and actions, mainly in relation to the actions and procedures that are (or can be put in place) to ensure their safety. Examples were also given to illustrate the need to be aware of which actions or procedures might cause discomfort or exacerbate fear in the victim, and so to dedicate time reassuring victims about their safety, free will, and that 'they are not in trouble'.

> *"Just give reassurance. Like, look, you're not going to be in trouble. Yes, we are the police. But we're not here to criminalise you. [...] And I think it's quite a big deal for people to just suddenly be in a situation where they literally have nothing, and then they've got to put their trust into a complete and utter stranger that's telling them a lot of information".* **(Police #7)**

Managing expectations and setting boundaries: It was acknowledged that delays in the investigation and CJS-related procedures, negative NRM decisions, or the length of the investigation can frustrate victims. Thus, the need to set clear expectations from an early stage and ensure victims understand which aspects are outside the police's scope and control (especially when outcomes are disappointing). A strategy often deemed effective for managing expectations and empowering victims to voice their preferences and make decisions was to understand victims' communication preferences and reach an agreement.

> *"That longer-term relationship has got to be based around what they want from you because it's very easy to start to annoy your victims by not doing what they want from you. Some victims want to be updated every other day, in detail. Others want the exact opposite; they find repeated contact with the police stressful. So, for me, it's about establishing that. [...] Who would you want to contact you? What kind of information? What kind of detail do you want? Having that sort of service level agreement. I think that helps in managing expectations"* **(Police #5)**

Regular, timely and transparent updates. Participants highlighted the importance of providing timely and regular updates to keep victims engaged and prevent them from losing faith in the police or in potential outcomes. As some pointed out, no updates are still updates. Such updates were seen as an opportunity to keep the line of communication open and demonstrate that, despite the length of the investigation, investigators are still thinking about victims.

> *"I've checked in with the officer. No updates at the moment; that shows you're thinking about the case. It's not an update, but it is an update to them, and it shows they're still working on it. It's just a bit of information."* **(NGO #1)**

4.3.5 Empowerment

Due to the exploitative experience and the situation of control under which victims have been, participants recognised the importance of empowering the victims to give them back a sense of autonomy. That was considered core not only for their recovery but also for their engagement.

> *"You've been told and manipulated to think that this is your only option, and there isn't. There's another option there for you, and so explaining that straight away, I think, is one of the most important [...] just getting that across to them straight away that they aren't stuck in this situation, they aren't trapped. They can get out and lean on others to help them get out of that situation. So, I think, yeah, just showing what that might be"* **(NGO #7)**

Choice: Some respondents voiced concerns that victims might become "people pleasers" after becoming accustomed to situations in which they had no autonomy to

make decisions. Providing victims with options and encouraging them to choose was considered essential to restoring their sense of control.

> *"It's about giving them options. Explain to them straight away, like this is the situation we're in, and these are the options. What do you want to do? It's generally like, 'What do you want to do?' rather than 'This is what we're going to do.' It's like, 'How do you feel?' 'Where do you want to go with this?' 'This is what we can do to help you. How do you feel about doing X, Y, Z?'* **(Police #10)**

Layers of protection: As noted by many, core to offering choices was respecting those choices and decisions (despite professional disagreement). Some practitioners argued that it was important to give victims 'layers of protection' (such as information and advice) so they can take ownership of their safety. That was deemed necessary when victims do not want to engage. As some noted, such safety advice/information not only helps minimise risks and threats but also demonstrates that 'professionals care for their wellbeing'.

> *"If they don't want to engage, then fine. But we will still leave a number, or these are the people who can help you. [...] I will say to them, "Are you aware of these platforms that can help you?" [...]. Just phone 999. Some people don't even know that [...] so you're just trying to offer them layers of protection"* **(Police #6)**

Self-confidence and hope: Promoting self-confidence and hope was considered key to victims' recovery and long-term engagement. Many mentioned the 'dependency' that victims can develop towards the professionals working with them, and therefore the importance of not 'overprotecting' them but instead encouraging them to make decisions and act.

> ***"****This person is a victim, and they've been through a really traumatic experience, but that doesn't make them incapable, and so it is important not to make decisions for people, but to work with someone to make a decision. And so, giving someone the power back. [...] You've got to work with that individual to help them rebuild their lives. And I'm not saying that they don't need support because they do, but not taking control of that person's life, making sure they're empowered"* ***(NGO #3)***

4.3.6 Personalisation and adaptation

It was noted that the response should feel personal to each individual (rather than standardised). Given the length of the investigation, interactions should be viewed as an evolving process that adapts to the victim's needs and the investigation's stage. Participants commonly agreed that the response needs to be culturally sensitive, victim-centred and trauma-informed

Culturally sensitive: There was an emphasis on recognising diverse cultural backgrounds and their potential impact on engagement and interactions, ensuring that victims do not perceive professional interactions as dismissive or disrespectful.

> *"You need to understand where they're coming from, not as in geographically, but as in their life and their culture. You're not going to get anywhere with engagement until you understand the culture a bit better"* **(Police #20)**

Victim-centred and trauma-informed: Core to ensuring a personalised response is to respect and prioritise victims' needs, safety, and preferences throughout the investigation, and to acknowledge the impact of trauma on victims' interactions and cooperation. Putting the victim at the centre of the investigation and decision-making process, respecting victims' timing and decisions, and acknowledging the impact trauma can have were seen as core factors in promoting engagement and information disclosure, as well as in minimising the risk of secondary victimisation. See below an example of a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach to preparing the victim for an interview.

> *"Before the interview, they came by to introduce themselves. They took the mobile ABE (Achieve Best Evidence) kit with them and showed them the cameras that would be in the room. And so, when they went into that ABE, they had already seen the cameras and the microphone; it had all been explained to them. And so, it wasn't this overwhelming, scary process because it had all been broken down step by step in advance. And that, for me, was the perfect example of the way it should be. [...]. And the victim can see that those officers cared about".* **(NGO #8)**

5.0 MEANS FOR PROMOTING VICTIM ENGAMENT

This chapter examines the means and the institutional and systemic changes needed to overcome current challenges and maximise opportunities for engagement.

5.1. STRENGTHENING SUPPORT PROVISION AND COORDINATION WITH POLICING INVESTIGATIONS

Data analysis revealed the need for strong support services and for police investigations to run in parallel and in coordination with a comprehensive safeguarding strategy. It was noted that to secure both short- and long-term engagement, safeguarding and the victim's recovery needed to be at the centre of the response.

5.1.1 Evolving support provision

Responders noted the importance of initial victim protection, including housing, subsistence (e.g., food, hygiene, clothing), and medical care. Yet, despite the emphasis on that initial response, equally important was the provision of more tailored, proactive support that fosters growth, stability, well-being, and resilience. That is, while initial responses should centre on addressing immediate risks and threats, long-term support should proactively address the vulnerabilities and the psychological, socio-economic, and physical consequences of victimisation.

NRM and housing: A common challenge was securing NRM support and adequate housing for victims. Participants highlighted the need to rely on connections, favours and goodwill to safeguard victims of trafficking effectively.

> *"Because the NRM took so long to make a decision, we had to house them in hotels for two weeks [...] Unfortunately, in this area of work, I think one of the big issues is that it's not governed [...] whatever's done is done on goodwill or through proving good practice rather than people being tied to it "* **(NGO #1)**

Concerns were also raised about the lack of "uniformity" of support provided to victims:

> *"You have ones that are down here, level-wise, and others that are up here. So, if you're allowed to go into one of these [referring to the top ones], you're going to get therapy and help with the English language. Help to integrate back in the community, but it is all about the organisation that is running it"* **(NGO #6)**

Social network support: As referred to in Chapter 3, victims often express a sense of loneliness and isolation that can lead to instances of heavy reliance on professionals to fulfil social needs.

> *"I never felt that attachment to someone I barely knew [...] I used to be like, when are they coming back? Is he going to come in the morning? I remember constantly messaging [officer]. I was like, constantly, "Are you coming?" [...] I don't have my family; I don't have friends"* **(Victim #3)**

Because of feelings of loneliness and limited social support victims have when exiting the situation of exploitation, some victims referred to the need for some form of support network/platform involving people with lived experiences of exploitation, where they can share their experience, thus preventing them from becoming isolated.

> *"I would love it if there could have been a platform. Where victims of human trafficking can open up and speak without fear, to tell their experience, you know, like groups where they can be themselves and share their experience"* **(Victim #5)**

5.1.2 Coordinated approach

Emphasis was placed on the police's "inability" to provide comprehensive, long-term support and on the need to engage and rely on wider services to help victims recover and build resilience.

> *"An investigation isn't a one-person job. No one, not one agency, should be doing anything on their own. We need to find other people to do things we can't do. It's about looking at that victim and going: 'What's best for you?' Not what's best for me as an agency, but what's best for you as a victim"* **(NGO #6)**

Yet, despite the need for a coordinated approach, the professionals interviewed acknowledged a disconnect between the criminal investigation and victims' recovery journey. The primary problem was noted to be in the lack of communication between support-service agencies and police officers, resulting in a disconnection between the victims' recovery journey and the criminal investigation. Such disconnection was acknowledged as problematic for two main reasons. First, the recognition that specific investigative stages (e.g., investigative interviews, court hearings) or decisions and news (e.g., related to offenders) might have an emotional impact on victims, thereby affecting their recovery and well-being. The limited support provision at those tipping points could result in secondary victimisation.

> *"Go straight to the victim and give them bad news. So, then, the fallout ends up massively. Whereas what we try to say to the police at the very beginning is, if you let us know when there's going to be these sorts of things happening, we can be there to pick up the pieces."* **(NGO #13)**

Second, it can prevent effective long-term engagement with the investigation if the police lose track of the victim and their direct line of contact.

> *"Because the [agency] is a brilliant service, we must arrange for our victim to be taken to a safe house. And that's where communication breaks down. They often deal directly with the victim and won't tell us what's going on. So, we've had officers and victim navigators going to see a victim, and they're already halfway across two or three counties in a car on the way to a safe house. Nobody's told us about this. That's where the communication breaks down a little bit. And then it makes us look like we don't know what we're doing"* **(Police #18)**

5.1.3 Victim navigator

Both officers and victims highly regarded the role of victim navigators, who serve as a bridge between professionals within the CJS and victims. Victim navigators were considered a cornerstone in promoting victim engagement and recovery through a consistent victim-centred approach. Yet not all forces have a victim navigator. Neither are there enough victim navigators deployed within the force to deal with all MSHT cases and victims.

Promoting engagement: From an investigative perspective, victim navigators help officers maintain a consistent relationship with the victim throughout the investigation, allowing officers to focus more on building a case for prosecution and freeing up time that would otherwise be spent on maintaining engagement. Most importantly, victim navigators and their ability to maintain consistent engagement enable the early identification of potential disengagement and, in turn, an efficient response to prevent it.

> *"They [Victim navigators] can identify when the victim is starting to lose trust or engagement. And if they are, why is that person losing trust? Why are they losing the engagement? and obviously having the capability to come back to speak to the officers in the case"* **(Police #6)**

As victims themselves recognised, it was the victim navigator and the trust towards that navigator that promoted their long-term engagement in the investigation when second doubts emerged:

> *"[Victim navigator] kept us together, kept reassuring us when we needed reassurance. There were a few times when I've called [Victim Navigator], when I've just needed a voice of reason to talk to. And because I know that he knows a lot about the law, which is helpful"* **(Victim #9)**

Ensuring a victim-centred approach: The victim navigator acts as a point of contact and a 'person of trust' to help victims navigate the CJS, access support services, and, most importantly, prevent secondary victimisation. As some victims pointed out, the victim navigator was not only helpful in accessing and navigating the support provision, but also in preventing them from disclosing their victimisation story multiple times.

> *"It's just that person that keeps track and refers you to organisations, so it's not you having to repeat the story, but when the person calls, they have an idea of what you are going through"* **(Victim #8)**

The close working relationship of the victim navigator with officers in the case and their independent role (from the police) promotes a core opportunity to both a) ensure the victim receives support in all investigative stages (minimising instances of secondary victimisation); and b) ensure victims (and their needs) are at the centre of investigative

decisions. Among the victims interviewed, those with a victim navigator reported feeling cared for and reassured that they had someone advocating for them, which, in turn, fostered hope and empowerment.

> *"She [victim navigator] made me feel like someone really wants me to win. Wants me to really succeed"* ***(Victim #8)***

5.2 ENHANCING CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM COMPETENCY

5.2.1 Knowledge, skills and attitudes

A recurring factor preventing effective identification and engagement was the limited knowledge and skills (and victim-centred attitudes) among CJS practitioners. Such limited understanding was also referred to as a lack of cultural competency and skills to engage with victims from different backgrounds. Limited knowledge among front-line responders was identified as a current cause of missed opportunities to identify victims.

> *"Uniformed officers... I think they're just so overworked and have so many cases that it's hard to maintain proper focus on victims in every case they handle. I think people who are trained specifically have a lot better engagement because again they understand it more, they understand the nuances of trafficking, how it works."* **(NGO #2)**
>
> *"Some places might tell them, 'Go report it at the local police station, or report it online.' I mean, you've lost them straight away"* **(Police #6)**

First responders: As some have noted, first responders (including police officers) lack the appropriate training to respond effectively to victims. In a worst-case scenario, a bad interaction with a victim can reinforce misconceptions and stereotypes about policing, preventing any future engagement. Professionals highlighted the pressing need to provide better training/information for first responders on engagement and NRM forms completion.

> *How do I approach them? What is the victim-centric approach? What is the NRM? What support do they have access to? How can I fill out this NRM to the best of my ability to give that victim the best chance of getting a positive grounds decision?*

So, I think that should be part of a basic training package that is mandatory for every police officer to take, because at the end of the day, how you fill out that NRM depends on whether they get that positive decision and that will impact the support that they have access to" **(NGO #10)**

Judiciary: Participants often referred to the limited knowledge and poor understanding of the crime and the victims among members of the judiciary. It was emphasised that limited knowledge among the judiciary led to some cases not proceeding to prosecution and to unrealistic expectations for victims and their testimony. Concerns were raised around the inadequate victim-centred approach employed within the CJS.

I had two clients who needed to go to court, and I wanted to arrange a pre-trial visit for them. So, I called up. They said, "Oh, you need to submit this form." I submitted the forms. Then I put on the forms. Please can you come through me? These girls are vulnerable. They don't talk to people they don't know. Please come through me, and I'll help you with engagement. They didn't. They tried to ring them several times using a private number, and then we received an email saying they're closing it now because they couldn't reach them. When I contacted them again, they said I would have to resubmit the forms, and I was like, "This is not a good service." **(NGO #13)**

5.2.2 Timescales and investigative pressures

All participants highlighted the time and effort required to both engage with the victim and conduct criminal investigations of MSHT crimes. Investigative pressures, case workload, and operational demands were found by many to be key causes of losing focus on victims.

"You've got to secure the evidence, take it to CPS, and have the arguments with CPS. And then I must try and juggle that with the fact that I'm rehousing this victim, or this victim doesn't want to stay in the NRM accommodation because they want to find some longer-term housing. Or we need to get them moved, who's going to physically move them? [...] I need them to stay on board with the investigation. I want them to feel safe and secure, and to stay engaged. [...] medical appointments, getting medication ... They just want to rebuild their life. They want to get back to work. They want to know whether they have the right to work in the UK. Are they able to do so? What will happen to them? Will they be able to pay the housing? I want to keep that victim on board, but I've got no time to look at all that [...] as an investigator, you're not able to do both, to go and secure that evidence that corroborates what the victim's telling you, because you're so caught up in

trying to support that victim with all these other things. So, you're either losing that evidence, or it's coming at the victim's expense" **(Police #4)**

Police officers felt under-resourced to juggle the misalignment between victim-engagement timelines and investigative timelines, pointing out the unrealistic expectations and pressures often received from higher policing ranks and CPS to secure victims' testimony to build a case for prosecution. As some noted, such pressure could well compromise victim-centred practices and, in turn, prevent victim engagement.

"Quite often, bosses will be like, just get it done [i.e. interview] today. And sometimes it's been like, 'No, let's take a foot off the gas a little bit.' Let's nurture this relationship over the next couple of days, and please give me the space and time to do so. Let me build up a relationship with this individual" **(Police #5)**

5.2.3 Adequate resources

Many of the professionals interviewed highlighted the value of having ready-to-use resources to respond promptly and protect victims, such as safeguarding kits, safe places, and adapted interview suits. Similarly, resources related to access to specialised roles (e.g., tactical advisors, Victim Liaison officers, and/or victim navigators) were highly regarded as effective in better responding to victims. Nonetheless, a few mentioned limited access to safe places for victims after being rescued, limited access to specialised roles and a lack of adequate "non-threatening" environments within their police stations.

Similarly, Interpreters were commonly referred to as core when engaging with victims of trafficking. Yet challenges were identified both in accessing interpreters in a timely manner and ensuring consistency with the interpreters the victim interacts with. A few also noted the lack of adequate victim-centred resources and information to help victims understand the procedure and manage their expectations.

"And if there was something we could perhaps give to them, leave with them so they can sort of sit and digest it at their own pace. So that might help them be a bit clearer. About what is going to happen." **(Police #7)**

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented in this chapter are derived from the findings presented in this report and developed in consultation with professionals (see The victims' journey: workshop summary report) and victims (consultation workshop with people with lived experience of trafficking and exploitation)

6.1 For policy

1. Accredited tier-based training curriculum: Findings highlight the need for more (and improved) training. Participants noted the importance of ongoing training and, therefore, the need to shift towards continuous, periodic development. They pushed for specialisation in training, tier-based training according to roles/duties, and the development of accredited programmes for practitioners working with MSHT victims.

Training requests included more opportunities for joint training involving partner organisations and interpreters, training on trauma-informed and victim-centred approaches, and more and improved training on NRM form completion. NRM-related training requests stemmed from the perceived low quality of NRM referrals, leading to challenges in securing support, delays, and extra workload for professionals supporting victims (who need to 'fight'/challenge NRM decisions).

2. Standardised guidance for victim response: An accredited victim-centred best practice guidance should be developed, including the empirical evidence presented in this report. Guidance should be used across professionals engaging with victims to stimulate victim engagement and prevent failures in victim safeguarding.

3. Revised policy for support provision: There is a need to develop clearer requirements and responsibilities among agencies. The development of clear protocols and guidance on support provision was found to be critical to enhancing professional and service resilience, improving safeguarding outcomes, ensuring better access to services, and preventing/minimising delays in safeguarding.

They also emphasised the need to review the current NRM support provision, which was deemed inconsistent, insufficient, and unfit for purpose. Participants noted the variation in access to support (legal, counselling, and housing) among victims and the constraints it can impose on individuals' recovery.

The revision of support provision should explore opportunities to develop a survivor-led network to act as mentors, offering emotional support to victims, providing a "safe" space to raise concerns and building victims' hopes and confidence in a better future. Opportunities to build social networks and interpersonal relationships in long-term recovery should also be considered.

4. Victim-sensitive resources to prepare the victim: Need for the development and rollout of victim-sensitive explanatory packages on procedures, professionals, stages, and options. Such resources can help in a) comprehension of their victimisation experience, their rights and options/choices available for support; b) better expectation management on the procedures, stages, timescales and potential outcomes, including also better understanding of what is expected from the individual. Such resources/packages can lead to improved victim engagement and victim satisfaction.

5. Dedicated funding for specialised roles and units within police forces and for victim navigators: The relevance of specialised units and roles within policing (e.g. tactical advisors, Victim liaison officers) and MSHT specialist teams was well recognised. Likewise, the figure of victim navigators was recognised as critical for effective victim engagement. Yet there are still inconsistencies in the numbers and availability of these roles across forces. More funding should be dedicated to establishing and allocating specialised policing units and roles, and to deploying victim navigators across all police forces and ROCUs.

6.2 For practice

6. Access support from specialised roles: During police operations, officers need to engage and work with **victim navigators** and other specialist policing roles (e.g., **victim liaison officers, tactical advisors**) from early investigative stages, including planning stages, to ensure a culturally sensitive, trauma-informed approach.

It was also noted that police forces need to clearly disseminate information among resources and roles available within the force, and on how to access/contact them, so that a more victim-centred and coordinated approach can take place from the first interaction with a potential victim of trafficking.

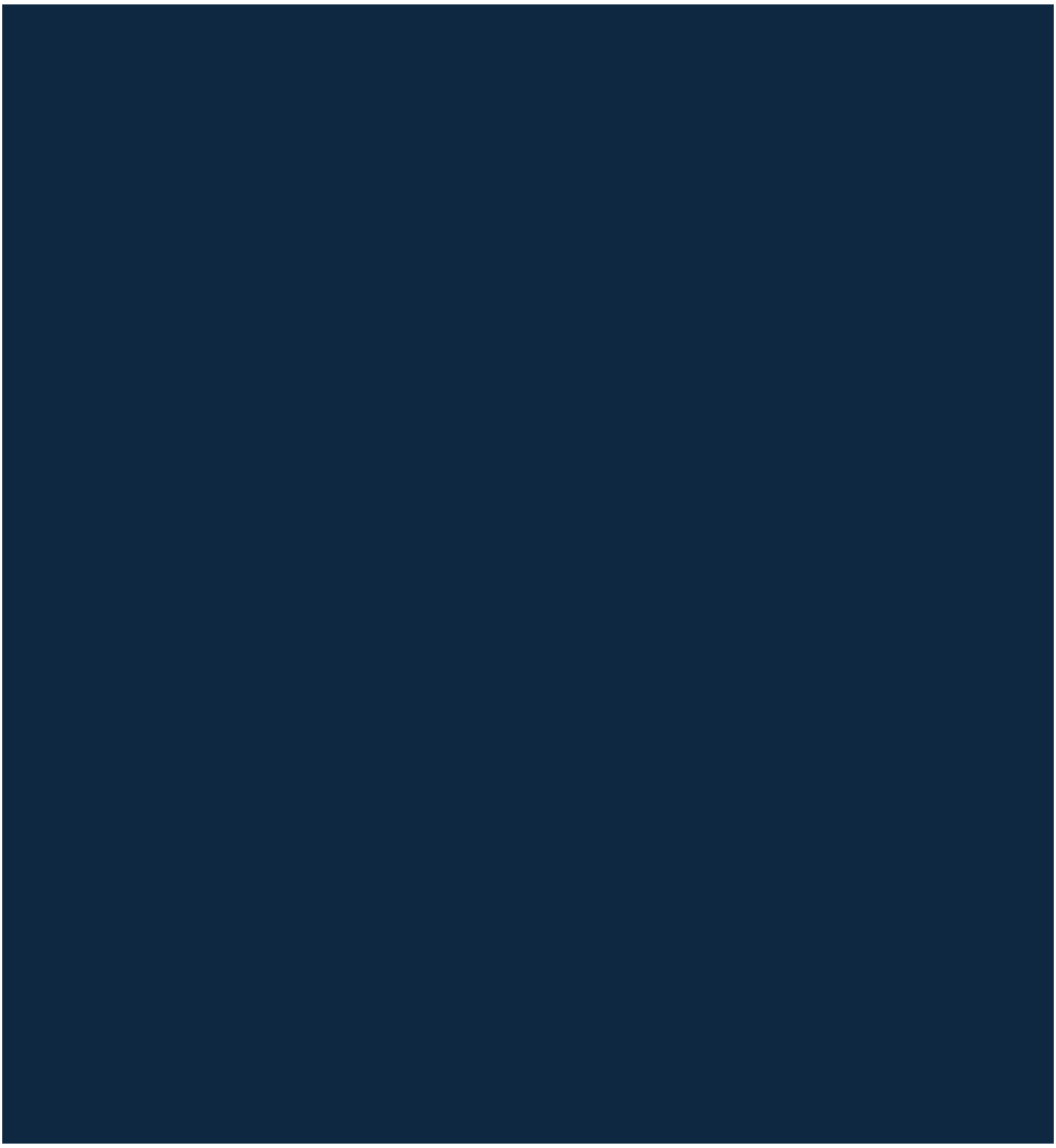
7. Point of contact: A point of contact to secure and maintain engagement with the victim should be established once a victim is identified. When possible, the victim should have access to a victim navigator and a point of contact within the investigation team. It should be ensured that the officer serving as the point of contact has the time and space to maintain that long-term relationship.

8. Using evidence-based principles when engaging and interacting with victims: When interacting with victims, practitioners should consider the evidence presented in this report and ensure that their actions and responses are targeted at securing victims' safety and well-being, building rapport and trust and restoring victims' sense of control. Practitioners must recognise and consider the consequences of victimisation and potential exacerbators of stress, fear, and uncertainty, and ensure that the evidence-based attributes presented in this report guide their practice. See the 2-page guide/advice on Engaging and Communicating with Victims of Modern Slavery.

9. Non-threatening locations: Forces should ensure that victim-sensitive spaces are in place for interacting with vulnerable populations, including interview settings. When possible, interactions should take place outside the police and in a comfortable setting for the victim.

10. Connectivity and engagement with partners. Participants pointed out the need to strengthen strategic connections with PCC networks to more efficiently safeguard and spend public funds, and to establish a formalised connection nationally and internationally (with other agencies and police forces).

During police investigations, practitioners should engage with CPS and partner agencies to ensure a more effective response and support. Discussion of expectations and capabilities should take place in the early stages to maximise opportunities to safeguard victims and engage with them.



LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

School of
Law and Justice Studies

JUSTICE & CARE