

ENGAGING AND ASSESSING THE RISK OF HARM AND EXPLOITATION OF MIGRANTS AT INITIAL ENCOUNTERS

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Laura Pajon (Liverpool John Moores University)

Jenny Skrifvars (Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland)

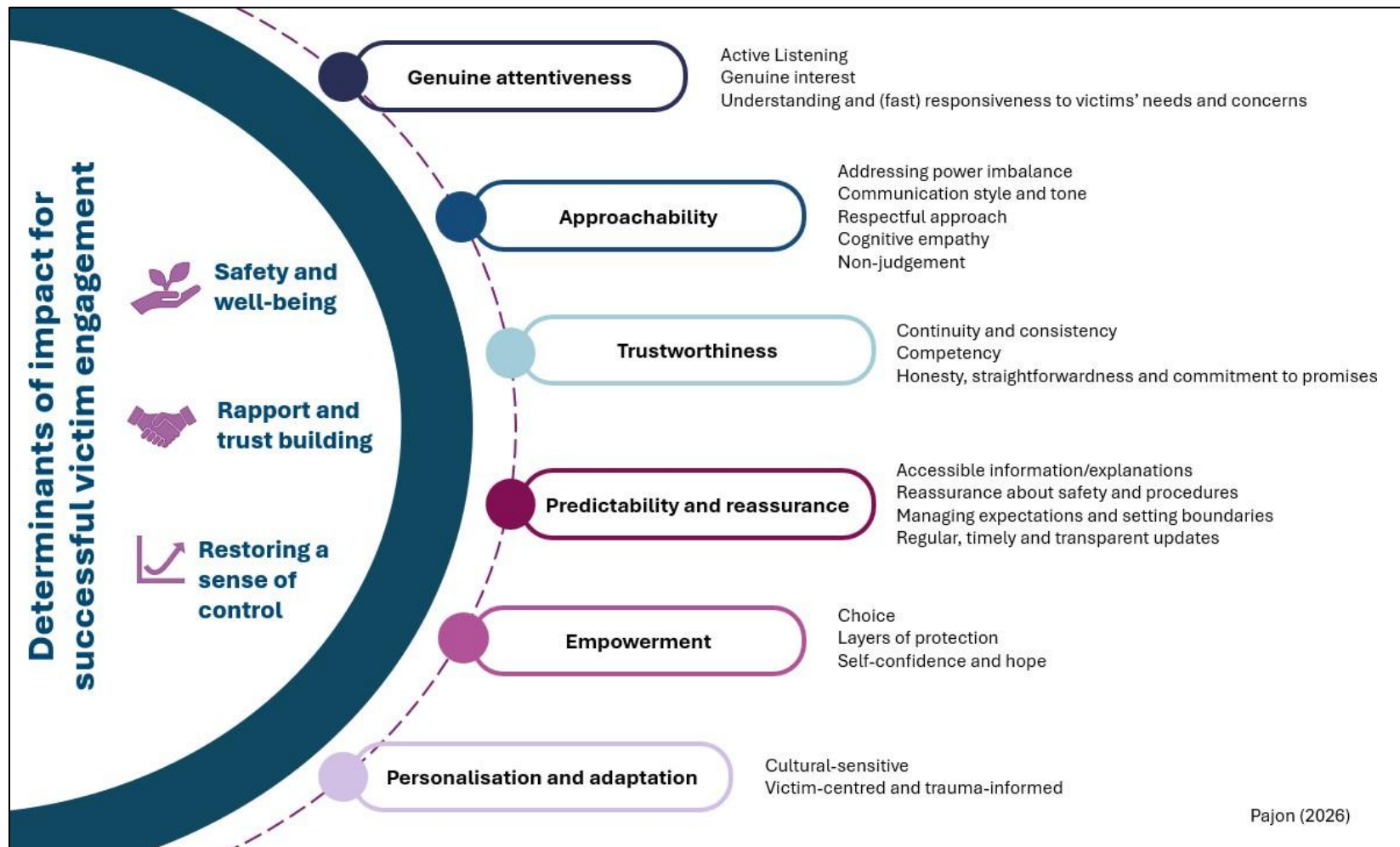


WORKSHOP SUMMARY REPORT

1. Background

As international migration continues to rise, legal authorities and frontline practitioners are increasingly likely to encounter individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Individuals in need of international protection and people with experiences of, or vulnerability to, exploitation and harm are among the most vulnerable migrant groups. Early encounters with authorities are often critical for identifying vulnerabilities, risks, and safeguarding needs. Nonetheless, engagement is recognised as challenging because of language and cultural barriers; individuals not self-identifying as victims or in need of protection; trauma; fear and lack of trust in authorities; and unfamiliarity with legal procedures.

To that end, the authors organised a workshop with practitioners to support the development of material that can be used and adapted in training and guidance packages based on the first author's recent work (see [Promoting Victim Engagement in Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Police Operations](#) Pajon, 2026), which empirically identifies **determinants of impact for successful victim engagement** and **core attributes** in professional practices that, together, stimulate victims' engagement in human trafficking cases.



2. Goal

The workshop aimed to support the development of fictitious case studies based on professionals' experiences when interacting with migrants at risk of harm and exploitation. The case studies are intended for use in larger training and guidance packages, complementing theoretical and evidence-based learning material.

3. Participants

In total, eleven representatives from UK law enforcement agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations with extensive experience interacting with migrants at risk of exploitation during initial encounters participated in the workshop.

4. Workshop activities

During the four-hour workshop, participants shared examples of initial interactions with individuals at risk of exploitation and reflected on the outcomes of those interactions in relation to assessing vulnerabilities, risks, and safeguarding needs. First, professionals reviewed the empirical evidence on the principles and determinants of impact for effective engagement with victims of trafficking (Pajon, 2026). Next, drawing on their professional experience, they reflected on the core aspects, factors, and strategies that promote engagement during initial encounters with migrants at risk of harm and exploitation. They also reflected on the structural factors and professional practices that prevented or hindered engagement. Upon discussion and reflection on different professional encounters, participants identified and agreed on the considerations, factors, and aspects to include in case studies to strengthen practice, improve identification of individuals at risk, and ensure effective and prompt safeguarding.

5. Examples

Drawing on professionals' shared experiences and examples from interactions with individuals at risk of harm and exploitation, a series of positive and negative examples were co-developed to reflect good and poor practice and potential outcomes. Table 1 provides a series of examples (based on professionals' previous experiences) and reflects which evidence-based principles have (or have not) been implemented.

● POSITIVE	<i>During initial screening, the official noted that the victim had repeatedly stated that she had not had a passport for several years. In response, the official offered to arrange an appointment at the embassy to obtain a new passport. The next day, the official accompanied her to the embassy where a new passport was issued.</i>	Here, by active listening, the official recognised a key need or priority for the victim and addressed it before asking her to disclose or provide any information relevant to the legal procedure. By addressing what matters to the victim first, before expecting anything in return, the official signals genuine attentiveness.
● NEGATIVE	<i>A migrant discloses what could be a situation of exploitation during initial screening at the border. In response, the official conducts a long line of questioning about the potential criminal offence without considering whether the individual has slept, is rested enough, or has eaten in the last few hours.</i>	Here, the official takes a prosecution-oriented approach (rather than a safeguarding one) and ignores the migrant's basic needs. Not addressing those needs not only prevents safeguarding but can also impact the person's cognitive and physical capacity to provide information.
● POSITIVE	<i>A victim of exploitation refers to what seems like voodoo practices. For the interview, the individual is invited to a private, quiet room where an official familiar with voodoo practices offers her a drink and invites her to sit on a sofa. Throughout the interview, the official keeps a calm tone of voice and offers breaks when the victim shows signs of tiredness and loss of focus.</i>	Here, the official creates a calm, non-threatening environment, presents a welcoming demeanour, and monitors the victim's well-being. The official is knowledgeable about a key aspect of the victim's exploitative experiences, therefore increasing the likelihood that the questioning style and focus will be relevant for the investigation.

● NEGATIVE	<i>An official, in full uniform, approaches a victim without using the victim's name or introducing herself. During the encounter, the official tells the victim they will take her to a reception centre in [location], where [organisation] will get her account, and then ends the interaction.</i>	Here, the official tells the victim what will happen but does not explain what a reception centre is, who the organisation is, or what to expect there. The uniform and not addressing the victim by his name exacerbate the power imbalance.
● NEGATIVE	<i>A migrant discloses an experience of discrimination in his country of origin, and the official, in an attempt to be empathetic, says that she 'understands how he feels'</i>	Here, while empathy is critical in interactions, claiming to fully understand someone else's experience can instead undermine the person's experience and feelings.
● NEGATIVE	<i>During an initial screening interview with a migrant entering the country, the official strictly fills out the forms, noting only the key information to check the boxes, despite recognising it could be a script.</i>	Here, the official chooses not to ask follow-up questions or check for potential red flags in the narrative, which could lead to missing safeguarding and prosecution opportunities.

 POSITIVE	<i>A migrant discloses that one of his main fears for disclosing information to the police is the safety of his parents in his country of origin. The official acknowledges the concern and is honest about the system's limited capacity to ensure the safety of their relatives in a different country. However, after exploring options together with the migrant, the migrant decides he would like to warn his family and check if they are ok. In response, the official helps him contact his family via a phone call.</i>	Here, the official is honest about the system's capacities and limitations without making false promises and shows competency by offering feasible options that address the migrant's concerns. At the same time, he offers the migrant choice and encourages him to decide on next steps. By doing so, the official builds trust while restoring migrants' sense of control.
 POSITIVE	<i>An official interacting with a couple travelling together notices the female's distress. The official therefore conducts the initial screening interview separately with each individual in private rooms. The female discloses that she was sexually abused during their travels but does not want her husband to know about this.</i>	Here, the privacy provided an opportunity for the migrant to disclose sensitive information.
 NEGATIVE	<i>After initially safeguarding the victim, the official gives extensive details about all the steps that will take place and all professionals she will encounter from this moment until court. He also gives her a list of organisations and contact numbers</i>	Here, the official provides important information; however, the amount of new information can be overwhelming, especially if there are no explanations or checks to see whether she has questions or concerns. Best practice is to present the information from most to least relevant, give her time to process it, and follow up by checking whether she has any questions or concerns.

 POSITIVE	<i>A victim of sexual exploitation does not self-identify as a victim and does not want to accept any safeguarding options for her. The official provides her with information on organisations that work with sex workers that she can contact if she, in the future, would like to get in touch with someone.</i>	Here, the official does not push the victim to engage in the procedure yet offers layers of protection through options for later safeguarding.
 NEGATIVE	<i>A support worker completes the official forms for access to healthcare and social benefits to support the migrant's integration, on behalf of the migrant.</i>	Here, as the migrant is not involved in the procedure, the opportunity to empower the migrant to learn and become familiar with systems in the host country is lost.
 POSITIVE	<i>An official recognises that a migrant does not speak the language and requests an accredited interpreter instead of allowing a family member to act as interpreter.</i>	Here the official recognised the need for an interpreter and adapted the procedure accordingly. By requesting an accredited interpreter instead of using a family member, the official safeguarded confidentiality and created better conditions for the migrant to disclose sensitive information freely.

6. Development of training material and guidance

The above examples are intended to support the development of more extensive case studies and exercises that can be used for different purposes, including training, guidance or even empirical research. It is important to use them with caution and place them in a wider contextual scenario that reflects the complexities of professionals engaging with migrants at risk, including time constraints, competing priorities or limited resources. For further guidance on how to better use the above examples and/or access to more extensive fictitious case studies, please contact the authors of this report.



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For access to the evidence base informing this workshop, see: Pajon, L. (2026). Promoting Victim Engagement in Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Police Operations. <https://doi.org/10.24377/LJMU.t.00028225>

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