

# Police are leading fight against the gangs of human traffickers

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**Police in East Lancashire are leading the way in fighting the vile trade of human trafficking - people being sold for slave labour or for sex.**

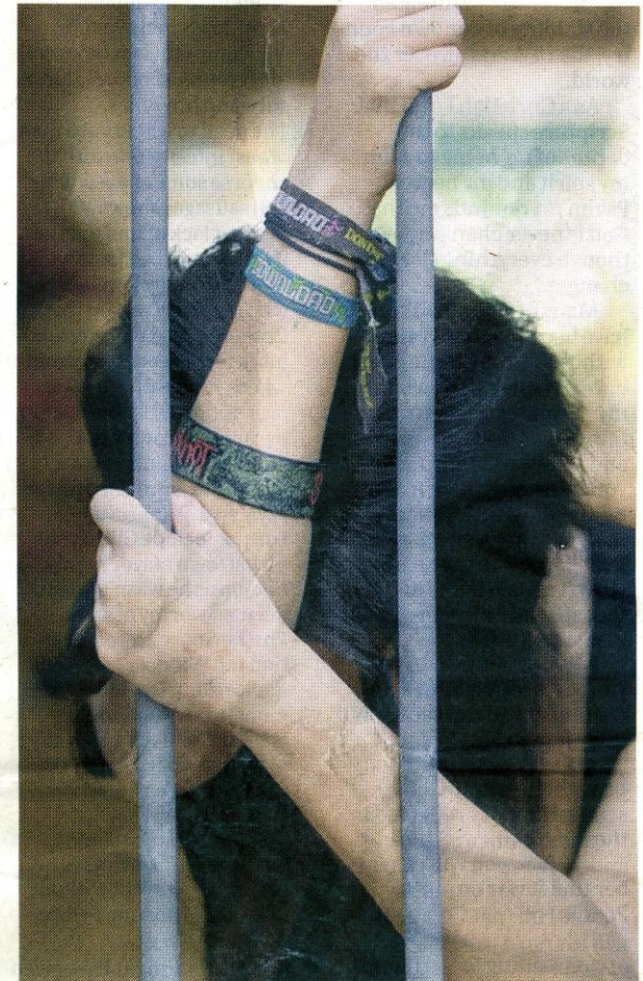
A dedicated police team to catch the criminals - with support from Catholic agencies to help the victims and raise awareness - is achieving considerable success.

The recent landmark case at Preston Crown Court when three Blackburn men were jailed for more than 10 years after being convicted of human slavery, was a direct result of this operation, but police still need more help from the public.

A police campaign to tackle the problem, Operation Proteus, was launched in February 2014 led by DCI Sion Hall of Clitheroe and now has a dedicated team of eight officers, the largest for a division of its size in the UK. And they have seen the number of arrests and rescues of victims increase dramatically, so much so that traffickers are starting to move out of the area and their operations are being disrupted.



Anthony Brown and his wife Mary have set up a local group in Clitheroe to combat human trafficking





"Exploitation of vulnerable people is totally unacceptable and it falls to us all to tackle this problem. Information from the public will be dealt with sensitively," said DCI Hall.

Police have liaised with other forces and with officers in Romania where many young female victims come from after being lured to the UK with promises of a better life. They then find themselves prisoners of cruel traffickers, many of whom run pop-up brothels and sell them for sex. It sounds like something out of a Hollywood movie, but is actually happening here on the streets of East Lancashire.

In the past year the anti-trafficking team has arrested and charged suspects in Burnley, Pendle and Blackburn and rescued victims, many of whom have now returned home. And at least two business premises in the Ribble Valley have been the subject of police investigations, following information from the public,

Work is also ongoing in connection with a much bigger operation with the Metropolitan Police, though no arrests yet. And there are other individuals being pursued via Europol.

In addition to the sex trafficking, Operation Proteus has targeted many business premises and made arrests. This kind



DCI Sion Hall

of criminal activity goes unnoticed, but is happening in car washes, nail bars, building sites, takeaways, fisheries, industrial sites, factories, warehouses, agricultural sites and caravan sites.

DCI Hall says that although a significant amount of this success is due to police surveillance and manpower, intelligence

from the public has also been a factor and it is this support that the police need most of all.

"Following officers receiving a tweet about a young girl being held, there was a 9am briefing followed swiftly by a raid which led to the rescue of the girl and three arrests. People are unaware that their cheap car washes and takeaways may actually

be at the expense of victims of exploitation. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't," he said.

All the recent sexual exploitation cases involved victims - and perpetrators - from Eastern Europe, mostly Romania. The men use websites outside the UK to access the girls and then advertise them according to postcode, nationality and the services on offer. From the websites it is easy to see that the girls are moved from town to town, from one pop up brothel to another, never staying too long in one place.

And as the Police become efficient at dealing with the crime the perpetrators change tactics. There has been a shifting of emphasis from pop-up brothels to outsourcing of the girls. This happens in hotels where rooms are booked for short periods and the girls moved in. With the right type of hotel, men can move in and out barely noticed. In an attempt to combat this new development night porters are being trained to watch out for the signs.

Once arrests have been

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made and victims rescued they are often unwilling to testify out of fear. Victims do not always

behave as people might expect and are conditioned to endure a great deal without trying to escape. Which makes the recent Blackburn case a huge victory for the police and the justice system as the men were convicted without the

testimony of the victims.

To raise awareness of modern slavery and get more input from the public, DCI Hall's team have been working with organisations and charities, including many within the Catholic Church. Specifically with the Medaille Trust a national charity working for the eradication of human trafficking, and Salford-based Caritas which provides temporary care and housing for the victims and helps them to find permanent work and housing, or repatriation to their native country.

Caritas and the Medaille Trust, whose local lead volunteers are Clitheroe couple Anthony and Mary Brown, work tirelessly aiming to spread their message through every church in the Salford Diocese. Locally

awareness events have been carried out at Catholic high schools which now have Caritas ambassadors. Prayer cards, leaflets and information cards have been distributed at nearly every Catholic church in East Lancashire and in all the Christian churches in Clitheroe.

They also talk to Women's Institutes, Soroptimists, Rotary Clubs and other organisations to let people know about this vile trade.

"We believe our campaigning and our partnership with the police is really working," said Anthony Brown. "When we speak to people locally they are shocked and appalled at what is happening so close to home. We just want people to be aware and look out for the signs among their neighbours and local businesses. As the police say, if it doesn't look right it probably isn't."

Anyone who suspects that someone could be the victim of modern slavery or has suspicions about a perpetrator can share information anonymously through Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 or with police on 101. There is also a national Modern Slavery Helpline offering confidential help and advice and you can also report information to them on 0800 121 700.