

Anti-slavery fight goes on

Public urged to look for signs of human trafficking

FEATURE

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This week charities, individuals, local authorities and police forces have marked Anti-Slavery Day to raise awareness of human trafficking and modern slavery, and encourage everyone to do what they can to help address the problem.

On Wednesday the new boss of the police team hunting down human traffickers in East Lancashire called for more help from the public as they try to track down those who bring misery and despair to their victims.

DCI Mark Vaughton has succeeded DCI Sion Hall of Clitheroe who has retired as head of Operation Proteus, a police squad of eight dedicated officers. He wants people to look out for signs of people looking out of place, unkempt, showing signs of fear or anxiety – and raise the alarm. Please alert the authorities – anonymously if you wish – if you are the slightest bit suspicious of an activity near you.

Even if an arrest is not followed by a successful prosecution, if the victim has been rescued and ideally returned to their family, this is a success. "Trafficking convictions are notoriously difficult to achieve and if victims are safeguarded then deportation, conviction for lesser offences, and disruption of criminal operations all have to be counted as successes," he said.

DCI Vaughton's enthusiasm and commitment strikes you immediately.

A gentle and respectful manner belies the character of the man who has to cope with what most of us will never see and would never want to see.

Victim focused he may be but he joined the Force to hunt down criminals and put them where they are no longer a threat to anyone.

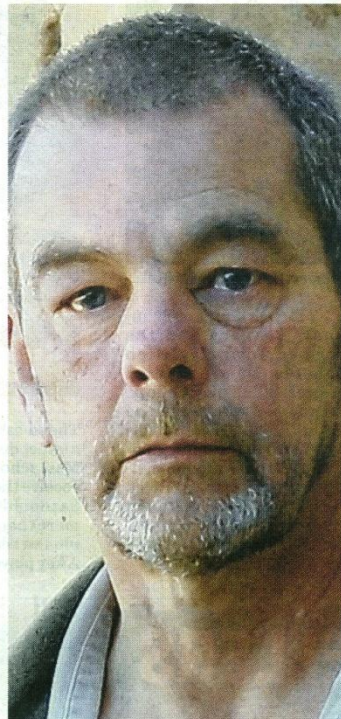
Many a time he led teams on raids into brothels. Now he commands those teams as the man in charge of Operation Proteus.

In East Lancashire the team has handled cases of enforced labour, domestic servitude and forced criminality, but in the last three years most resources have been centred on sexual exploitation.

And it is organised crime on a large scale, East Lancashire being a small part of an oper-



DCI Mark Vaughton



Mike Emerson of the Medaille Trust

ation based in Romania and stretching across Europe.

In the last 18 months they have handled 14 cases in Burnley, Pendle and Blackburn, including in April the arrest of eight people from a crime gang who are thought to have netted more than £1m. From eight young East European women who were earning them approximately £600 a day.

In five of these cases, the defendants are still awaiting trial, another case is ongoing, one case resulted in deportation, but others have been dropped.

There were also cases of serious exploitation and breach of labour laws which fell short of trafficking. One car wash was fined £20,000 but is now back in operation.

However, conviction or no conviction, if victims are rescued and safeguarded this is the most important success of all.

Police admit that trafficking prosecutions are hard won because victims from other countries are distrustful of authority figures and fearful of what may happen to them or their families if they escape or testify.

Officers say defence barristers minimise the psycho-

logical bonds which hold the victims and attempt to discredit them and convince juries that their stories are less credible than the accused in the dock.

For this reason DCI Vaughton gives the highest priority to victim care.

Officers are trained to know what the victims will have experienced and their reluctance to trust uniformed officers.

"People trafficking is a crime that is committed in plain sight. People look, but they don't see"

Rescued women are interviewed by specially-trained plain clothes officers in an informal environment and found temporary accommodation until a safe house is available, to ensure they do not go back into the hands of the traffickers.

The team relies heavily on intelligence and has run conferences for the NHS and other organisations whose staff will come into contact with victims who are often accompanied by their trafficker. Well informed

staff can recognise the combination of an unlikely couple, one being overprotective of another and where something appears to be not quite right.

In 2015 they dealt with the case of a woman who did not regard herself as a victim though the invisible bonds that held her were clear enough.

With a husband and two children in Romania she had come to the UK to work as a prostitute and made £600 for a 17-hour day yet received only a pittance to live on and send back to her family.

Photographs of her smiling and holding large quantities of money did not help a prosecution for trafficking and the perpetrator was jailed for four years for the lesser offence of living off immoral earnings and she was returned to her family.

The public and juries do not have a lot of sympathy for cases like this, yet these women are victims and deserve to be treated with the same respect as anybody else.

DCI Vaughton is calling for more public awareness and referrals.

He said: "Trafficking is a crime committed in plain sight. People look but don't see."

"They notice a premises or a hotel but miss the more serious

Support available for victims

Because the Police do not have the resources to offer long term support and accommodation to those traumatised by trafficking and slavery, in 2009 the Government established a National Referral Mechanism to co-ordinate the identification and support of victims.

But as it decided not to make the support of victims a statutory obligation and only provides limited funding, it has fallen on charities and faith groups such as Catholic charity The Medaille Trust, to step in.

The Trust has nine safe houses in England with more than 100 beds and 90 dedicated staff working with men, women and their dependant children. On arrival at a Medaille safe house victims are assessed for their physical, psychological, social and emotional needs and a support plan agreed. "The aim is to help the victim make informed decisions about their future and their recovery to become empowered and a survivor, regaining confidence and self-esteem."

One such victim called Anne arrived in the UK from Kenya for a holiday arranged by a "family friend" but was met by traffickers when she arrived and for the next two years was kept captive and forced to cook, clean and work for up to 20 hours a day with little food and no pay. She was beaten and burned with cigarettes, until she managed to escape through a window and eventually found herself in a safe house. She was dirty, malnourished and could barely speak. After months of patient care and support she is now smiling again and beginning to rebuild her life. But she is determined and the support is there as long as she needs it.

Of course part of the healing process for victims must be the pursuit of justice and the Medaille Trust is proud of its constructive relationship with the Police.

They are both looking for similar results – good victim care produces good witnesses, good witnesses produce good prosecutions and good prosecutions realise justice.

side of what may be happening.

"They get a car wash for a price that couldn't pay for the wages of staff who seem out of place, not properly dressed for the job and not easy with our language."

"They may see men on industrial sites or elsewhere that look downtrodden or out of place."

Slaves recently rescued from a traveller site in Lincolnshire had been working on people's drives for many years without anybody reporting anything.

Another man working in enforced labour was seen by a member of the public two years before he was rescued. Nobody reported a distressed prostitute accosting the public on a main road. It came to light in casual conversation and was only then referred to the Police.

For every slave in the United Kingdom – the quoted figure of up to 15,000 only representing the tip of the iceberg – there must be many thousands of people who see them every day.

The public are coming forward in greater numbers and the number of calls logged has increased dramatically over the past three years leading to more arrests and prosecutions, but the Police need much more.

They want people to look out for the signs of human trafficking:

- People unkempt or ill equipped for work and unable to leave their work environment;
- Fear or anxiety and signs that their movements are being controlled;
- Not know the address of their home or work and receive little or no payment;
- Work excessive hours with no days off and have limited or no social interaction;
- Distrustful of the authorities and have no passport or other important documentation.

If you see something take careful note of locality, premises, age, sex, clothing, nationality, language, whether supervised and details of what is happening and what is being said.

Ring 08000 121 700 will take you to the National Slavery Helpline who will pass you immediately to a specialist unit in the area.

Call 999 only if someone is seeking help or being moved against their will.

Ring Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111.

Ring 101 may take longer to get to the right person.