New boss calls for more help in the hunt for human traffickers

Grouping together and raising awareness to mark Anti-Slavery Day are care for victims

By MARGARET PARSONS www.clytheroeadvertiser.co.uk

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

Yesterday the new boss of the police force 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 Simon Hall of Chiltereore 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 four or more day and raise the alarm. Please alert the police and don't assume it is something you wish if you are the victims or are aware of the activities of an activity near you.

Even if an arrest is not fol lowed by a conviction, the victim may have been rescued and ideally the court and family should be aware of the success. "Trafficking convi cts are difficult to achieve and if victims are safeguarded then depor tation, 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 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 continues those tactics as the man in charge of Operation Proteus.

In East Lancashire the team has handled cases of enforced marriage, 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 operation based in Romania and stretching across Europe.

In the last 18 months they have handled 14 cases in Lancashire, including in April the arrest of eight people from a gang who are thought to have netted more than £5m, from eight young East European women who were earning them £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 extortion and brothel labour laws that fell short of trafficking. One case of fraud was fined £20,000 but is now 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 difficult to figure and fearful of what may happen to them or their families and they escape or testify. Officers say defence barristers minimise the psychologi cal bonds that 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 relationship to trusted uniformed officers. Rescued women are interviewed by specially trained plain clothes officers in an informal environment and temporary accommodation until a safe house is available, to ensure they do not have to face their own sites or elsewhere that do not provide the funds for 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 more on local markets or sites or elsewhere that look deserted or out of place.

Slaves recently rescued from a travel agent site in Lincolnshire had been working on people's drives for many years with nowhere to report 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 accounting the police on a main road. It came to light in usual conversation and was only then referred to the police.

For every slave in the UK - the quickest 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 encouraged to make reports of suspicious activity and bring them to the attention of any of the three agencies, the police, fire and rescue or social services. Call 999 or 111.

DCI Mark Vaughton

Mike Emerson of the Medaille Trust

Support 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 ordinate the identification and support of victims.

But as not to make the report of victimisation 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 dedicated staff working with men, women and their dependent 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 be come empowered and a survivor, regaining confidence and self-esteem.

One such victim was called Anne arrived in the UK from Kenya for a holiday arranged by a "family friend" but was not a traffick er when she arrived and for the next two years was kept captive and forced to cook, clean and work for up to 10 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 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 resolve justice.