

# Fighting human traffickers

How police are combating the crime and how the community can help stop this vile trade

## FEATURE

By MARGARET PARSONS  
margaret.parsons@jpress.co.uk  
Twitter: @ClithAdvertiser

**H**uman trafficking and modern day slavery is at the forefront of police work in East Lancashire.

Cheap rented housing and large companies offering work to low or unskilled people is attractive to many genuine migrant workers. However, it also provides opportunity for the unscrupulous to exploit.

Det. Chief Insp. Sion Hall is the lead officer for trafficking, while also dealing with child sexual exploitation, serious and organised crime, the Intelligence Unit and burglaries in people's homes.

He said trafficking "isn't an epidemic, but it is happening here".

Exploitation and slavery involving enforced labour, the sex industry and organised thefts have all happened on our streets and what we hear about happening nationally and internationally is being played out locally.

A practising Christian – and a member of SS Michael and John's RC Church in Clitheroe – he says a significant proportion of his time is involved with the challenges of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation for which the police have two specialist, multi-agency teams. However, the uniformed officers

out on patrol also understand the many aspects of these crimes so can identify potential victims while they deal with all sorts of other everyday incidents.

For instance a patrol may go to a house investigating a burglary, and sense that there is something wrong; a locked door, a nervy frightened person. Officers soon learn to spot the signs of possible trafficking which can be happening behind any front door.

The Intelligence Unit and the Organised Crime Team pull together all the various strands of information so they can target known and suspected offenders. This may be through overt activity by visits or executing warrants, or in some cases through covert activity such as surveillance.



"Proteus" is the name for all activity to counter trafficking in this police division.

Earlier this year police carried out a crackdown called "Operation Eagle", which involved swoops by a team of 25 police, immigration staff and officers from the Gangmasters' Licensing Authority. Visits were made to seven large employers to remind them of the law. They discovered the exploitation of migrants at a car wash in Rishton and there was a raid on a property in Nelson where there had been a rescue a few weeks earlier of a Polish couple, who had been working as domestic slaves and living in a garden shed. All these cases followed on from the public reporting



concerns to the Police. "Don't be afraid to report something suspicious – far better to have a false alarm than a missed opportunity to rescue a victim of trafficking," said DCI Hall.

He added: "East Lancs is a very diverse area and we cannot be complacent that things won't be happening in any part of the Division, however, the main areas are obviously the more populated ones – Burnley, Blackburn, Nelson and Brierfield where cheap rented housing and large companies offering work to low or unskilled people is attractive to many genuine migrant workers, however, this also provides opportunity for the unscrupulous to exploit people."

"Exploitation is very much on a sliding scale, from domestic servitude to complete control over the victim's life. It is important to understand that control over vulnerable victims need not just be physical restraint. Withholding passports and identity documents, implied threats and isolation from their family and friends all work towards controlling the movement and freedom of victims."

### ORGANISED CRIME AND THE TRAFFICKERS

Due to the potential to make vast sums of money, people trafficking has attracted the attention of many Organised Crime Groups.

The police are working to identify "hotspot" areas of business that tend to attract traffickers and while the opportunities

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are almost endless, some specific areas of concern are around low paid and unskilled work. Organised Crime Groups very often use cash-only businesses

such as takeaways, nailbars and car washes to employ trafficked labour, but they also use them to launder large sums of cash from illegal drug dealing activities and prostitution.

They rarely confine themselves to just one area of criminality and so groups involved in exploitation may well also be involved in drugs, money laundering and violence.

Police have dealt with instances of slavery or trafficking in Blackburn, Burnley, Preston, Chorley, Bolton and Rochdale which have been reported in the Press. These cover domestic ser-

vitute, enforced labour, forced marriage and prostitution, but often the threshold of evidence is not reached. "More often than not we have to be content with convictions for lesser offences or disruption of activities," said DCI Hall.

Some local examples he cited include people ensnared with the promise of work, only to find themselves forced into shoplifting to cover their travel and accommodation expenses. The debt was enforced through threats of violence to them and their families and the police found it difficult to prosecute because the victims were too frightened.

"We offered support and managed to facilitate their return to their homeland and the support of their families. The offenders were never prosecuted for this offence, however, once we became aware of them we were able to target and disrupt them in an effort to ensure they don't do the same to others."

There is an ongoing case where somebody alerted the Police about a vulnerable man working in a garage in Burnley. He turned out to be trapped and abused and was living on the premises. He is a UK citizen, but is extremely vulnerable due to his mental state and, through the police working with other agencies, he has now moved away and is being supported and safeguarded. Said DCI Hall: "Hopefully he will start a new life. This is trafficking and forced labour, with threats of violence. A prosecution was difficult but the man is now safe and the perpetrator is being targeted to ensure the same thing won't happen again."

Another case involved an arranged but not enforced marriage, where the victim was controlled and miserable. She told

police that from the moment she arrived in the UK she was locked in a room, treated like a slave, treated badly by up to 10 occupants of the house, humiliated in front of the family and systematically raped by her husband. Although she was allowed out of the house to go shopping and do chores, her movements and time away was monitored and controlled. She eventually ran away.

"This case highlights the differences in offending as this case falls within the definition of domestic servitude, rather than trafficking, because she came of her own free will. Unfortunately, due to issues of giving evidence, the case did not make the threshold for prosecution, however, she is now out of that scenario and is building a new life," he said.

Summing up, he said human trafficking happens mainly in the populated areas, but not always, so we should not



be complacent and information and intelligence are key to identifying both victims and offenders.

"It's a multi-agency task – not just a police problem, it is a social justice issue and the signs are there for people to spot them. Modern day slavery is more subtle than thinking of an image of a man chained up in a shed."

"People are being exploited even as you read this; many victims don't realise they are victims and many others don't know how to reach out for help. Victims rarely have the confidence to report."

"It's about safeguarding – being proactive rather than reactive and while prosecutions may be difficult, disruption is effective and should be regarded as a positive outcome."

"Every person should be allowed to live freely and without fear or exploitation."

## What can the public do to help?

Trafficking is often a hidden crime where even the victims are reluctant to complain. The public can help by spreading awareness of the issues and being vigilant to the signs of exploitation. Signs to look out for:

- People unable to leave their work environment.
- Showing signs that their movements are being controlled.
- Showing signs of fear or anxiety.
- Being subjected to violence or threats of violence against themselves or their family.

- Being distrustful of the authorities.
  - Not in possession of their passport or other important documents.
  - Not know the address of their home or work.
  - Receive little or no payment.
  - Work excessive hours with no days off.
  - Have limited or no social interaction.
- If you have any concerns, please report them to the Police or other agency.



Det. Chief Insp. Sion Hall