**FEATURE**

**By Margaret Freamon**

**Clerkenwell Advertiser**

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

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. Shaun 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, it is happening here".

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

A practicing Christian and a member of SS Michael and John's RC Church in Clissold, he says a significant proportion of this crime is involved with the challenges of human trafficking and child sex 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 everyday incidents.

For instance a patrol may go to a house investigating burglary, and sense that there is something wrong with a locked door, a nervous 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.

"Protec" 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 agents by a team of 17 police, immigration staff and officers from the Gangmasters' Licensing Authority. Visits were made to seven large employers to rescue 65 victims and the team discovered the exploitation of migrants at a car wash in Fishponds and there was a flat in property in Nelson where there had been a rescue a few weeks earlier of a Polish couple, who had been working as domestics slaves and being alienated.

All these cases followed on from the public reporting concerns to the Police. "Don't be afraid to report something suspicious", for better to have a false alarm than a missed opportunity to rescue a victim of trafficking," said DCH Hall.

He added, "East Lanes 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 - Barking, Bluefield, Nelson and Barking.

Warrenwhere cheap rent of 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 identities, loans, 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 are almost endless, some specific areas of concern are around low paid and unskilled work. Organised Crime Groups very often use company businesses such as takeaways, nurseries and care homes to exploit trafficked labour, but they also use the human traffickers to launder large sums of cash from illegal drug dealing activities and prostitution.

They rarely confess themselves to just one area of criminality and the police are involved in other crimes, money laundering and violence.

Police have dealt with instances of slavery or trafficking in Blackburn, Burslem, Preston, Bolton and Rochdale which have been reported in the Press. These cover domestic servitude, forced 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 DCH Hall.

Some local examples he cited include people engaged in 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 caregivers were never prosecuted for this offence, however, since we became aware of them we were able to target and disrupt them in an effort to ensure they don't do the same again to others.

There was an ongoing case where somebody alerted the Police about a vulnerable man working in a group in Bury. He turned out to be traipsed and abused and was living in the premises. He is a UK citizen, but is extremely vulnerable due to his mental state and, through the police work with other agencies, he became moved away and is now safe and supported and safeguarded, said DCH 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, in which the victim was controlled and miserable. She told police that from the moment she arrived in the UK she was locked in a room, tied up like a slave, thrown badly up to be occupied 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 were monitored and she 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 it is always, we should not be complacent and investigation efforts are key to identify both victims and traffickers.

"It is 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 search for help. Survivors 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 dealt with fairly and without fear or exploitation."