

OFFICIAL



Operation Fort Safeguarding and Multi-Agency Working Debriefing Report

4Ps Team
October 2019

HANDLING INSTRUCTIONS: USING THE GOVERNMENT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION (GSC) THIS DOCUMENT AND THE DATA REFERRED TO HAS BEEN CLASSIFIED WITH A HANDLING CODE OF **OFFICIAL**. THIS REPORT SHOULD NOT BE ALTERED OR AMENDED WITHOUT PRIOR AGREEMENT FROM THE REPORT OWNER, MSPTU LEAD (E: MODERNSLAVERY@DEVONANDCORNWALL.PNN.POLICE.UK)

Table of Contents

Operation Fort Summary 3

1. Hope for Justice 3

2. Victim Journey..... 5

Operation Fort Summary

An organised crime group of five men and three women of Polish Roma decent lured vulnerable people from Poland, including the homeless, ex-prisoners and alcoholics with the promise of employment, money and accommodation. In reality they were forced to work long hours on farms, in waste recycling centres and turkey factories and given as little as £20 per week by the traffickers who pocketed the bulk of their salaries. If they objected, they were beaten or threatened with violence and told family members back home would be attacked. Some were told they would be taken to the woods to dig their own graves. One man who had an accident at work was forced back to the factory and denied hospital treatment, leaving him with long-term damage to his arm. Most felt powerless to escape, with no knowledge of the area, little or no English language skills and no-one to turn to for help. Their lives were reduced to misery and they all have the physical and psychological scars of exploitation.

Trafficked workers were housed in vermin-infested properties dotted across Birmingham, often crammed four to a room, fed out-of-date food and forced to scavenge for bedding and mattresses to sleep on. Some properties had no working toilets, heating, furniture or hot water and victims were forced to wash in canal water.

Traffickers opened bank accounts in victims' names, using addresses where the victims were not living, but were controlled by the Exploiters who were handing over anything from £100 to just £20 per week to their illegal work force. It meant in some cases the 'slaves' – ranging in age from 17 to a man in his 60s – were receiving just 50 pence per hour. The group also topped up their criminal takings by claiming benefits in the victims' names without their knowledge. It is estimated the abusers made in excess of £2million between June 2012 and October 2017 and enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, buying designer clothes and driving around in a Bentley and other high-end cars.

West Midlands Police launched an investigation in February 2015 when two victims escaped from their captors and disclosed offences to a local church outreach worker who contacted slavery charity Hope for Justice.

1. Hope for Justice

- 1.1 Hope for Justice is a global non-profit organisation with the mission to end human trafficking and modern slavery. When Operation Fort first began in 2015 it was one of their staff, working alongside a support worker, who first recognised there were victims in his area within the Polish community. The support worker was an advisor from a church group and had received some training from Hope for Justice on spotting signs of Modern Slavery. They supported the victims and attended the local police station with them to speak with police. Their support then continued throughout the operation as they identified more than 30 new victims coming forward during the busiest week.

OFFICIAL

- 1.2 The support worker is Polish and at times was used as an interpreter and single point of contact for many victims so found he came under increasing pressure. As a result, he quickly became well known in the community to both victims and traffickers and so carried a lot of risk.
- 1.3 From the first visit to the police station there were difficulties faced by both the charity and the victims around communication and processes in terms of who to speak to and which police department was taking the lead. During visits they made to police stations with victims from different local authority areas, they faced long waiting times to speak to someone and were not clear about who had responsibility at each stage of the investigation or knowledge of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) process. At that time the level of understanding from police officers they spoke to varied considerably and as more victims came forward from different policing areas different police CID teams were being allocated the crimes individually as they had not at that stage appreciated the links between the reports. The local police had not worked with Hope for Justice before and the charity felt at that time they were not trusted by police officers they spoke to and consequently had to fight hard to be listened to.
- 1.4 Those staff working closely with the victims held large amounts of information and intelligence that was being shared with them. Some staff were unsure of the pathway for referring this information to police, the mechanism and format for doing so and what information was important for the police investigation team to know.
- 1.5 The Salvation Army were used as first responders by Hope for Justice and issues around communication between them and the victims were apparent very early on. At times the Salvation Army felt unable to share information about where victims were being housed and for Hope for Justice this caused difficulties in continuing the support for the victim.
- 1.6 There were problems with differences in interpretation of the NRM process such as who was going to conduct an initial assessment interview and as a result the process sometimes took longer than it should have. This meant some victims were housed in hotels by Hope for Justice and in some cases, victims disengaged or repatriated as they felt uncomfortable with some of the questioning and whether their story was being believed.
- 1.7 Dialogue with the safe houses was difficult at times and they had not appreciated the complex needs of the victims nor were they able to provide the high level of support necessary due to the trauma some victims had experienced. Hope for Justice also wanted to be able to meet with the victims in person to be able to effectively assess their needs and this proved difficult at times due to the rules in place by the safe house.
- 1.8 Key workers at the safe houses were subcontracted by the Salvation Army and the standard of key worker varied. For example, some were encouraging victims to return to their home countries at the earliest opportunity.
- 1.9 Hope for Justice were being contacted by the media for information and they took steps to ensure they had a co-ordinator in post to manage this.

- 1.10 Hope for Justice tried to work with banks where multiple accounts were being opened by traffickers. At that time however the banks were not open to the offer of support or engaging in work alongside the charity. They also approached the recruitment company involved in the investigation and highlighted they believed a member of their staff was working on behalf of the traffickers. At that time the company were not willing to take any action as the individual was creating so much business for them.
- 1.11 Independent advocates were key to ensuring victims knew about their benefit entitlements keeping them informed of any changes and keeping the investigation team up to date with contact details. Some victims were reluctant to claim benefits because they did not fully understand or trust the system.

2. Victim Journey

- 2.1 Hope for Justice identified there were extreme anxieties and misunderstandings for victims around reporting based on a mistrust of the authority figures they were asked to engage with. There were barriers around language, culture and the spread of false information from within their own communities which was coming from the traffickers.
- 2.2 The spread of misinformation affected the relationship between victims and Hope for Justice and as a result their referral pathways. There was a push for repatriation from key workers at the safe houses and this caused conflict for the charity as it caused loss of trust and confidence with them as some of the victims felt they were being pushed to return to their home countries where they did not feel safe. There was also misconception that Hope for Justice were working closely with Immigration Enforcement.
- 2.3 In the early stages of the investigation the victims were not clear who the police officers dealing with their case were and who their single point of contact was. At one point a victim turned up at a police station at the same time as an offender answering bail and this could have potentially been avoided had clear communication pathways been in place.
- 2.4 There were issues with traffickers turning up at hotels and victims going missing during the early stages of the NRM.
- 2.5 Hope for Justice took victims to safe houses who were then moved by staff within the safe house without Hope for Justice being informed making their support problematic.
- 2.6 Victims were not given written information in their own language when they arrived at the safe house. Due to their trauma and often complex mental health issues it is important the key workers in the safe houses continually update the victims both verbally and in written form and the need for repetition is important.

OFFICIAL

- 2.7 Some victims felt their only option to remain in the UK was to co-operate with the police and they therefore felt pressured to do so.
- 2.8 Victims were given the wrong advice around welfare benefits and this led to them panicking and accepting further exploitative work because they felt they had no other option in order to support themselves to live day to day.
- 2.9 Around ten victims within the operation could not access emergency housing as they were unable to produce three weeks wage slips. Some needed longer to decide about the NRM process and so should have been offered this but instead relied on Hope for Justice who were also trying to protect them as they remained at risk from traffickers. Homelessness was an issue that many victims faced both pre and post the NRM process.
- 2.10 Some victims exited the safe house as they felt able to work, but their mental health began to suffer, and they quickly deteriorated. Ongoing access to support was not always available or the victims did not know who to contact.
- 2.11 One victim described feeling he would be better off with his traffickers as a result of his experience during the NRM process
- 2.12 Victims were encouraged to do a court visit supported by Hope for Justice and the Investigation Team so they could understand the system as screens were used, and they were advised around any risks. By visually seeing this as early as possible it offered reassurance and allowed the support workers to gauge their psychological state by their reaction towards the prospect of giving evidence.
- 2.13 Special measures were used in Op Fort and applications for this went in early and were granted quickly. Due to pressures on the investigation team some victims were left alone in the hotel during the trial and it was highlighted they would have benefited from further support as they had long periods on their own to worry and become anxious about what was expected of them. The date of the trial kept changing and it was important for all agencies involved to be kept up to date to ensure the victim could be told in person and reassured. It helped that a Polish speaking Police Officer was available to victims during the trial.