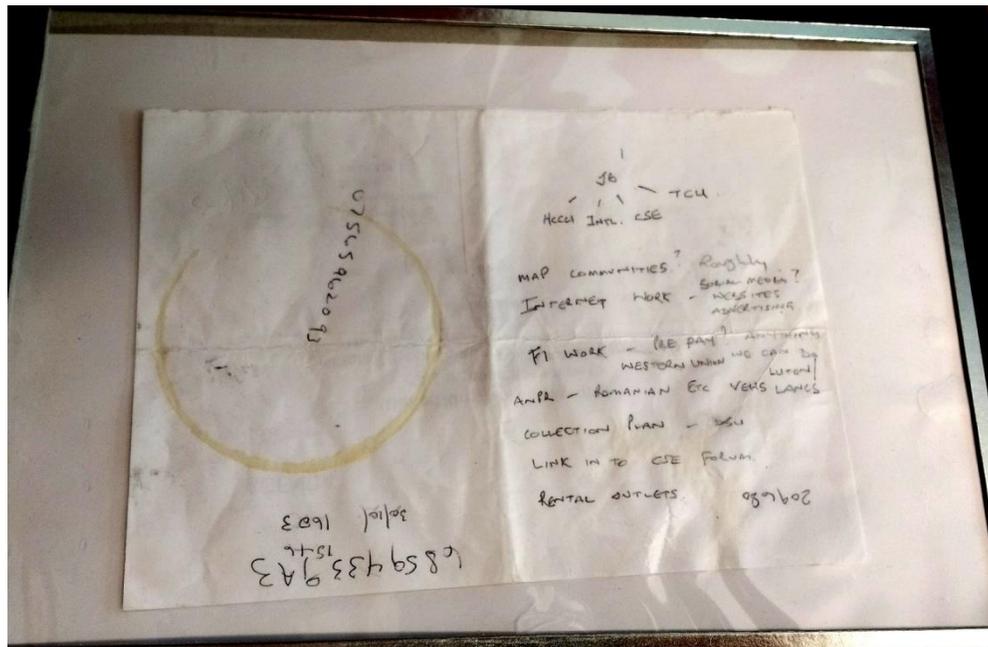


## Combating sex trafficking in Lancashire



In a Detective Chief Inspectors office in Blackburn something unusual hangs from the wall.

A recent LEP article took me back to 2015 when a special anti-trafficking unit was set up in East Lancashire. DCI Sion Hall was travelling back from a European conference on human trafficking with a colleague. They were inspired to do something and scribbled down their initial thoughts on the back of an envelope. From those first thoughts emerged Sion's team of 7 officers fighting human trafficking in East Lancashire. For the size of the Police division it was proportionally bigger than any other Police force in the country yet no bigger than Sion judged to be the minimal requirement to be effective. That envelope now hangs in a frame in the office of the current Chief Inspector's office as testimony to what can grow from small beginnings. Lancashire Police's achievements are recognised throughout the country.

The nature and extent of sexual exploitation is little recognised locally. In 2017 I went into a pop up brothel after the second major East Lancashire operation. The door had yielded easily to the Police battering ram leaving only a barely noticeable circular impression. The perpetrators and victims had been taken away and I looked at what was left in the now vacated terraced house in Preston - condoms and thrush pills on a table, barely any furniture, mattresses on the floor and next to one of them a teddy bear. I looked into the eyes of the big, hard looking, steely eyed policeman I was with and recognised in his face the same emotion I was feeling. One of the girls had left a diary. She was a Romanian as are many of the girls who are trafficked to the UK. She wrote *"I'm no longer a human being and my soul is wrapped in thorns. Oh, God this is so hard and I'm feeling so bad, that's it, I can't take this anymore! The pain in my heart is making me scream. I wish for happiness and I get sadness, I wish for love and I get*

*nothing but pain. I'm worth nothing, maybe death doesn't hurt as much as life does.*" I wondered if the teddy bear belonged to the girl who wrote that.

Detective Stuart Peall was one of Sion's recruits and he featured in a recent LEP newspaper article talking about how Lancashire Police were successfully tackling modern slavery in the way they are targeting the gangs. Stu emphasised the reluctance of terrified victims to cooperate with police which makes victim testimony almost impossible to get. But a tactic used by Lancashire Police has enabled them to have the best charge rate out of any force in the country at almost 30 per cent.

The force has found success by pursuing sexual offence charges such as controlling prostitution alongside trafficking charges, to strengthen cases without a cooperating victim. Victims don't testify because the protection offered by authorities to eastern European women "is nothing near what the offenders can offer them in threat. All they want to do is go home," Stuart said. "And that's basically just sending them back to the problem of how they got here in the first place.

"Every woman I've met is poor, they're from Romany backgrounds, and they have children. He pointed out that nine in 10 investigations are sparked by tip-offs from the public and other forces should simplify their approach. He said: "People think that to prove a human trafficking offence you have to prove that the perpetrator moved a girl from say Romania to England." But actually it's much simpler. "All you have to do is prove movement from one place to another. If a girl in a brothel in Preston gets an incall for a private house you have proof that that there was movement or control of movement and that constitutes human trafficking in the terms of the Modern Slavery legislation. That's enough. You don't have to move to another town or even another street.

East Lancashire Police had another idea. While it's illegal to pay for sex with a trafficking victim many of the men will be unaware they are committing a serious crime. The criminals targeted are the gangs bringing the girls in but the reason they're brought in is the demand. As a way of reducing demand East Lancashire Police came up with another idea. Officers recently contacted numerous men whose numbers they found on seized mobile phones and texted: *'A lot of women around this time are being trafficked. If you have any concerns or know anything please contact 101 or reply to this text message'*. Men have nothing to fear if they tip off police about a suspected trafficking victim but very few do. However even without a response to the texts they probably went a little way in reducing demand making the exercise worthwhile. If men really understood what they were doing far fewer would do it.

You can read the full LEP article here <https://www.lep.co.uk/news/crime/we-think-outside-box-how-lancshires-exploitation-squad-successfully-tackles-sex-trafficking-and-modern-slavery-3130249>

The Modern Slavery Helpline for reporting potential cases is 08000 121 700.