


Reflex action

At 15 years old 'Elena' was offered the chance to take a summer job selling ice cream in Britain. The reality was that she would be trafficked into the country for sexual exploitation. During her stay she would be raped repeatedly; she would be sold on to brothels throughout the UK at the cost of a second-hand car; she would be battered and bruised and used like a commodity.

 Elena's true story illustrates the importance of the work currently being carried out to combat human trafficking.

Around 90 million people pass through the UK every year and police believe that around 2,000 young women are known to have been trafficked into the UK from Eastern Europe.

Operation Reflex, launched nationally in 2000, is a national response to track down the criminals who traffick people into the UK for exploitation, generally sexual exploitation, and to prosecute those who smuggle people into the country and provide false documents.

The project involves police forces across England and Wales, the National Crime Squad, National Intelligence Service, Immigration Service, Passport Service and Crown Prosecution Service.

South Yorkshire Police has now set up their own scheme to tackle organised crime in the region and those who make huge profits by exploiting people like Elena.

The force set up a joint intelligence group in August 2003 and then, in August 2004, secured £2.5million in Government funding to create joint intelligence groups in West Yorkshire and Humberside Police.

The intelligence teams include representatives from the UK Immigration Service and Passport Service and means they can work across forces boundaries.

The three forces also have their own tactical teams, who can work together to gather the evidence needed to arrest and convict those involved in trafficking and people smuggling.

Det Insp (acting) Scott Green, leading Operation Reflex, put together the bid for the joint intelligence group, explaining that at this point he knew there were problems with trafficking but did not know the scale of the problem in the region.

'The policing of organised crime is a little bit like drugs and prostitution, if you don't look under the stone, you don't have a problem.'

Most people would not necessarily associate South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire or Humberside as places which may suffer from organised crime of this kind, but Det Insp Green believes they are certainly not unique.

'The problems in South Yorkshire are no different from any other metropolitan area. Any area where there can be movement of people can provide business for organised criminals.'

Elena's case was the first to be dealt with by Reflex in South Yorkshire and the three men prosecuted for putting her through such torturous experiences in the UK, were the first to be prosecuted under Section 58 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (trafficking within the UK) by any police force in England and Wales.

Setting up the scheme

Det Insp Green put forward an idea for a structure which would enable all three forces to pool their resources and which would include representatives from other agencies. 'We discovered a number of operations which needed an investigative arm to them. We already had competing demands in level 2 [cross-border crimes] such as firearms and drugs.'

'Criminals do not respect force boundaries so we felt we needed to work alongside other forces and agencies to get a grip on organised crime such as trafficking.'

All three forces have an intelligence team made-up of a detective sergeant, detective constable, immigration officer, intelligence analyst and an administration support person.

Each tactical team consists of a detective sergeant, an immigration officer and three detective constables.

The scheme may be innovative but it took negotiation and significant commitment from chief officers and solicitors to draw up a joint protocol for the teams to work across force boundaries.

Reflex will deal with organised immigration crime which falls into three categories; volume smuggling, people trafficking and corruption issues and document fraud.

Operation Reflex kicked in when the horrific events of Elena's experiences came to light.

Elena's story

Last year Elena, a 15-year-old schoolgirl from Lithuania was offered work selling ice cream in the UK. A cold call had come through to her family home, a common practice in the country, as even young teenagers are expected to work during the summer.

Elena's parents were not sure about the trip. However, over two days, two older girls aged around 17 and 18 came to speak to the family about the work.

Both girls said that they had been to the UK and enjoyed it, describing the logistics of what would happen to Elena. Her parents felt reassured and, after Elena said that she was keen, they agreed to sign a 'consent to travel' form.

After just a few days, the teenager was taken to Riga, in Latvia – chaperoned by an 18-year-old who called himself 'Kastas'. At Riga they could fly Elena cheaply into Heathrow by using a 'no frills' airline.

Arriving at Terminal 3 in the late afternoon of July 12 last year, Elena would have no idea of what was about to transpire. As soon as she had been taken through customs by Kastas, she had her passport taken away and they were met by two others who would be involved in trafficking Elena, Ilir Barjami and Shaban Maka as well as Maka's girlfriend, Lina Yunel.

The next day Elena would be 'sold' by Kastas for £4,000 to a man called 'Blade'. She would see

the money being handed over for her; she would be raped; she would be taken to a brothel in Birmingham where on her first day she would have five 'clients'.

Instead of the dream job she and her family had expected her to be doing in the UK – she would be taken back to the brothel for the next ten days. The money she would earn would go back to her owner 'Blade'. This was just the start of her nightmare in the UK.

After this time, she was sold on to a man known as 'Jerry', later found out to be Xhevahir Pisha, for £3,000. Blade had made his money back on the teenager taking cash from her clients and still cleared himself a £1,000 profit.

The 15-year-old would live with Pisha for a week where she was bought clothes and treated slightly better, but she knew to expect something more sinister on the horizon. Elena was being 'groomed' to be taken to a sauna in Leicester.

The teenager ran away not long after she began work there but her only contact in the UK was Maka. He would cunningly encourage her to run, then catch up with her, so he could then sell her to another contact and make more profit.

Elena would also be told that if the police caught her in the UK, she would be locked away in prison.

All in all, Elena, would be sold on several times, 'John' was one of the worst men. He would repeatedly rape Elena regularly throughout the day. She ran away, but back into the hands of Maka, the only person she knew. The teenager tried to kill herself by slitting her wrists, but she would be pulled away and punched in the face by one of Maka's friends.

By this time, Elena's worth as a commodity had deteriorated, she was no longer a virgin, she had lost weight and had facial injuries from being beaten.

Maka then sold Elena to a friend of his, Barjami, who paid £1,500 for the girl. Again, Elena would have to go through being repeatedly raped.

One day, he decided to show his 'possession' off to his friends and told Elena to dress up as he



was taking her to a nightclub in Sheffield.

During the night of September 12 last year, Elena went to the nightclub and while she was in the ladies toilets, she tried to explain to some English girls what had happened to her.

Three girls listened to the horrific story of what she had endured over the course of her three-month stay in the UK.

While two of the girls distracted Barjami, who was waiting outside the toilets, one of the girls would push Elena through the fire exit to make her escape. The teenager pulled off her shoes and ran barefoot, weeping, along the dark city streets until she found a police station.

That is where Operation Return, under the remit of Reflex, came into play.

Using intelligence

Det Sgt Alisdair Duncan, heads the Reflex intelligence group at South Yorkshire, involved in supplying detailed information on those suspected of being involved in people smuggling, human trafficking or document fraud.

The most common forms of such organised crime in this area of the country has, so far, related to the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation.

'If we receive intelligence that girls are being trafficked for sex at brothels or of a trafficked girl that is being held against her will, as in

Elena's case, we put together an intelligence package very quickly. This would be an example of a high priority case.'

The next step would be to obtain an immigration warrant – if the suspects involved are in this country illegally, we would then move to arrest people.

Susan French, is an immigration officer from the Immigration Service but works full time as part of the Reflex team. She has been working in the position since the team was first set up.

She and her colleague, who works on the operational group in the force, have access to the main immigration computer system. This can be key to police operations – as it provides the gateway to a whole host of information on individuals that may be involved in immigration crime.

'We have access to information on every person who has been served papers as an illegal entrant. We have information stretching up to around 20 or 30 years on every person who has claimed asylum, people who have applied for, and been granted nationality in this country,' she explains.

The system also allows access to information on the visa system – on people who have applied for visas and information from landing cards.

'This could mean we have photographs of illegal entrants and asylum seekers or any foreign national in this country who has been through the system.'

It can contain personal information crucial to an investigation such as names, addresses and the reason the person gave for entering the country as well as their intentions on returning to their own country.

The 'multi-agency' teams, basically different organisations working together, have seen enormous benefits from gaining access to information they could not previously see without a great deal of bureaucracy.

Working across agencies has been the key to making Operation Reflex a success in the region, according to DC Andy Justice.

continued on page 21

DC Justice, has been working in Reflex for 12 months. He visited Lithuania as part of Operation Return to speak to colleagues in the country to set up links with officers there to gain intelligence on traffickers.

'We now have a team to dedicate to this kind of thing. We already have the resources, contacts and ability to be able to respond quickly. I think normal CID officers would have struggled,' he tells me.

DC Justice explains that in Elena's case, the first step was to glean as much information as possible from her in order to track down those responsible for her abuse.

In this case Elena was interviewed by specialist officers from the child investigation unit alongside an interpreter.

'We had to get an idea about exactly what had happened and where and how she had come to be where she was. Her account was in excess of 24-hours worth of videotape. It took two weeks to get the full picture as to what she had been through,' says DC Justice.

'We had the addresses of where she had been taken and had various first names of people she had met and where she had been taken in the country.

Elena was taken on a tour of the areas she had been taken to during her ordeal and, amazingly, remembered many of the places.

'It all comes back to basic good detective work really. This led us to a number of addresses.'

DC Justice visited Lithuania to speak to police colleagues and to pick up crucial information.

'We had two objectives. One

would be to pick up evidence from the hospital and authorities to collect documents verifying Elena was only 15-years-old,' he says, as this would have an effect upon any court case as she was a minor when the offences against her occurred.

The officer also spoke to police colleagues in Lithuania who asked what they could do to help catch those responsible.

'I said that if we had a phone call from them to tell us that those involved were getting on a plane to the UK at x time then we could be there waiting for them.'

The working trip turned out to be critical to catching those involved when DC Justice received a call in the early hours one morning.

'It was from our Lithuanian colleagues, they had intelligence about when the traffickers were due to come into Britain and which plane they would be on.

'This would never have happened if we had not been able to sit round a table with them, before this we would have been looking at fighting our way through red-tape to get the information.'

And because the team are in close contact with other agencies, an immigration officer was called at home and went straight to the airport.

'It meant that we were waiting for them when they came through with two more girls.'

DC Justice now has contacts in social services and a prosecutor in Lithuania to help keep him informed and he also speaks regularly with a police officer that liaises with Europol and Interpol.

Ten days after the complaint was made by Elena, Operation Return had made the first arrests and DC Justice believes this could only have happened under such a dedicated unit with its own resources.

The officer, who worked at South Yorkshire CID on the robbery squad before joining Reflex, said: 'From day one we were given an opportunity to set something up, be part of creating the best way of working.'

Det Sgt Steve Titterton, heading the tactical team, has worked as a uniformed officer through to a uniformed sergeant and during his time worked in CID, the force's drug squad and robbery squad and in intelligence.

He explains that the idea is that his team are supplied with a detailed intelligence package from the intelligence team which then gives them the information they need to make arrests.

However, he adds that they have also been working very reactively. 'You do not get intelligence on a 15-year-old girl running into a police station – you have to react to that kind of thing. The work is essentially intelligence-led but, probably around 50 per cent is reactive.'

Because the forces have, to an extent, pooled resources, it means that other officers from across the border can be called upon to help each other with particular operations.

They can also bid for surveillance officers from CID or specific financial investigators to help with an operation.

'I am really enjoying it,' says Det Sgt Titterton adding that it is

the first time he has worked in a properly-resourced unit.

'It's a new way of working – we are working alongside other agencies which is excellent. We have access to each others systems and we can get questions answered far more quickly than would normally be the case.'

When the men involved in Elena's case were caught, they appeared before Sheffield Crown Court and were jailed for offences relating to trafficking.

Pisha was given five years for trafficking within the UK and false imprisonment; Barjarmi was sentenced to 15 years for trafficking into the UK, trafficking within the UK and on four counts of rape.

Maka received an 18-year sentence for his part in trafficking Elena into the UK and trafficking within the UK.

During the court case, Elena turned down any special measures she would be entitled to because of her age and the nature of the case, this included being able to give evidence behind a screen or by video link – but she wanted to look her abusers in the eye.

Det Insp Green said: 'Without doubt Elena is the bravest person I have ever met. She refused all special measures, she wanted to stand in front of a jury and say 'this is what happened to me, this is what they did to me in your country'.

'We are just glad to have had a part in helping her to do that and in bringing the traffickers to justice.'

● Anyone who would like further information should contact Det Insp Scott Green on 0114 252 3887

