

Exposing Exploitation

The UK's first dedicated response to tackling the pervasive threat of organised exploitation is having a positive impact on identifying and investigating these crimes. Carol Jenkins talks to Det Chief Supt Kate Thacker, Director of the Tackling Organised Exploitation (TOEX) programme.

The scourge of organised exploitation is a grim reality in our communities. It exists in many forms, from county lines to human trafficking, modern slavery, violence against women and girls and the sexual exploitation of children and adults. At its heart is the exploitation of the vulnerable for financial gain and sexual gratification.

Those behind the heinous crimes don't respect traditional police boundaries or borders and many such crimes have wide UK-base or even an international footprint.

These groups are agile and due to the 'hidden' nature of their crimes, are often difficult to detect. They are increasingly conducting their business online and resorting to communicating with encrypted mobile devices to protect their anonymity.

Response

Acknowledging this threat, law enforcement organisations including police forces, Regional Organised Crime Units and the National Crime Agency have worked hard at revising their response, appointing advisors and liaison officers and setting up specialist units.

As the pace of the criminality has increased and its profile more complex, there was an acceptance

among law enforcement that existing ways of investigating organised exploitation needed to be further enhanced.

This formed the backdrop to the setting up of an innovative National UK programme under the auspices of the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) called Tackling Organised Exploitation (TOEX).

Supported by government funding, TOEX was launched in 2019. It takes a proactive intelligence-led approach that involves mapping the threat, developing the intelligence and tasking appropriate ownership of the resulting investigation TOEX works with partners on tasking specific activity to tackle the crimes in a proactive and co-ordinated way that produces tangible results.

Approach

Programme Director Det Chief Supt Kate Thacker is a career detective with more than 26 years' experience including as Head of Investigations at Norfolk Constabulary.

Speaking to the Investigator, Kate tells us that she was given a blank piece of paper and was encouraged to take a totally different approach to tackling organised exploitation.

‘The impetus for change was definitely there and there was a collective recognition in policing that a different response was required,’ she explains.

Structure

The structure of TOEX is based on a hub and spoke model, which comprises of a national team as well as teams of highly motivated, trained and experienced intelligence staff and analysts who work within the Regional Organised Crime Units. What makes TOEX unique is that staff are recruited and managed within the individual ROCUs so that their work is truly embedded into ‘business as usual’.

It works closely with the NCA, UK forces and international agencies and aims to bring together the existing local, regional and national responses to ensure a truly joined-up and co-ordinated response.

TOEX staff use the latest training, software and technology to support their activity. Kate is proud of the fact that it has worked with industry to help shape technology solutions that fit policing’s business need rather than using existing technology which might not fit their specific requirements.

Operation Headdress

One of the recent successes for TOEX was Operation Headdress, an investigation into violence against women and girls. More than 70 per cent of investigations that TOEX are supporting relate to VAWG offences and 83.9 per cent of these have a primary threat of child sexual abuse or modern slavery and human trafficking.

During August 2021, a referral was received by the TOEX team in the West Midlands following information provided by a third sector partner indicating there was a network of brothels operating in Birmingham and surrounding areas. Initial development was undertaken by the team, with help from forces, which identified an organised crime group recruiting vulnerable young females in Hungary, usually via a family member or friend already in the UK.

The victims left their homes, some leaving children, with the offer of work in hospitality or agriculture, before finding out the offer had fallen

through once they had arrived in the UK. One victim was exchanged for the price of a mobile telephone.

Once in the country, the group, using debt bondage, advertised the women online and forced them to engage in sex work, paying controllers a proportion of the money made. Their names and identities were also used to open bank accounts and pay for utilities such as gas/electric and council tax.

Enforcement activity was carried out in late 2021, with several people in the UK being arrested and charged with conspiracy to arrange or facilitate the travel of another person with a view to exploitation and conspiracy to control prostitution for gain.

Intelligence

Despite the initial arrests, witness testimonies and intelligence indicated that the upstream nominals of this organised crime group were in Hungary and their ongoing business model was well organised

It was acknowledged that to truly disrupt and dismantle the network, TOEX needed to work in unison with its Hungarian counterparts, supported by Europol.

One year later and following extensive work, members of the TOEX team and ROCUs, supported by National Crime Agency colleagues, travelled to Budapest to discuss next steps.

The intelligence-led strategic meeting, a UK Policing and Europol first, was successful, and resulted in recommendations being made for UK and Hungarian law enforcement to progress the investigation, ultimately disrupting the OCG and safeguarding further victims.

Another investigation called Operation Strive is a proactive investigation into adult services websites. TOEX successfully engaged with the Third Sector, the NCA and industry providers to



Det Chief Supt Kate Thacker

develop a rich understanding of the nature of these threats. These insights have led to safeguarding interventions by forces, identification of novel OCGs for regional investigation and the engagement with the NCA for disruptions on a national footing.

‘It’s all about understanding how the criminality is manifesting itself and then using that to inform a set of indicators that has enabled us to review and understand the online threat,’ says Kate.

She admits that the picture of organised exploitation across the UK is ‘highly complex’ and that each region has its own distinct threats and that this has a fundamental impact on the TOEX response.

‘Each region and every force has different challenges and different threat priorities. They have different criminal groups operating in these areas and we do need to have a degree of scalability and flexibility in our response.’

Trends

In terms of current trends, Kate explains that modern slavery and human trafficking is still a significant threat area.

‘It is manifesting itself in serious criminality,’ she admits.

‘What we have seen through our proactive operations is that it still has a significant grip on the UK, on communities and on economic outcomes.’

Over the past three years, TOEX has proved the success of its approach and as a result it is now provided with a third of its funding through ROCU and force Police Uplift Programme support.

Future

In terms of the future, Kate hopes that TOEX will become completely embedded into the UK wide ROCU network and become business as usual.

‘My aim is to see a truly threat-neutral approach to organised exploitation, plus the opportunity to support serious and organised crime investigations with the coordinated deployment of intelligence and analytical tools that meet policing’s business needs. This model has many applications and the progress that TOEX has made in collaboration with its regional and national counterparts could be expanded into other areas.’

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