



WLGA Evidence

The National Assembly for Wales' Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee's Scrutiny on Human Trafficking

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit evidence to its scrutiny exercise. Human trafficking is an abhorrent crime which cannot be allowed to take place in our society and we therefore welcome its consideration by the Committee. While an accurate picture of the extent of trafficking is difficult to obtain (both at Wales and UK levels), we know the impact on victims is extremely high and this necessitates commitment and action from central and local partners alike. Local government recognises the important role it has to play in moving this agenda forward and is committed to playing its part in making Wales hostile to all forms of trafficking.

The role of the Wales Anti-Human Trafficking Co-ordinator, including its effectiveness and achievements so far

We welcome the appointment of an Anti-Human Trafficking Co-ordinator (AHTC) in Wales. The post is a necessary means of supporting public services to build the knowledge, expertise, systems and processes needed to tackle human trafficking, particularly given this is a relatively unfamiliar agenda for many organisations and professionals.

The AHTC has been proactive in building relationships with local government, notably with Chief Executives and Regional Community Cohesion Coordinators. He has established the Wales Anti-Human Trafficking Leadership Group to provide strategic leadership and this group has developed an initial Delivery Plan. However, it must be recognised that the AHTC is a relatively new post and has had relatively limited capacity or resources to drive this agenda forward to the extent that is needed. Recent new appointments to support the role should assist with this. However, as the arrangements that are being put in place mature they will help drive forward progress and embed anti-human trafficking work in day-to-day organisational business. In short, the AHTC and organisations have made a positive start, but tackling this challenging issue will take time and sustained effort.

Further to the work already undertaken to develop a Delivery Plan, we would also advocate the development of a clear, Wales-wide strategy. Given the complexity of this agenda, the number of partners involved and the importance of getting it right, a

clear strategic national focus would help to secure the necessary engagement and ensure the right action is developed at the national, regional and local levels with consistency where necessary and the promotion and systematic use of best practice.

The effectiveness of multi-agency working between UK and Welsh Government departments and other bodies such as health boards and the police

The AHTC has been proactive in building effective links with local government officers at leadership and operational levels. This is helping to ensure there is a productive working relationship between Welsh Government and local authorities as well as supporting the development of consistent approaches across the public and third sector in Wales.

The strength of local partnership working, developed through Community Safety Partnerships and Local Service Boards, provides an ideal platform for taking forward multi-agency action to tackle human trafficking. The close collaborative relationships and established approaches to information sharing will, in particular, stand statutory and third sector agencies in good stead. Furthermore, there are opportunities to borrow and build on models partners have already utilised in relation to other issues, such as the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and third party reporting.

In addition to local multi-agency working, the North Wales Regional Leadership Group is developing a regional approach to tackle human trafficking. They have recently arranged a conference on the issues and have also appointed a Regional Anti-Human Trafficking Coordinator who will seek to develop strategic and operational links across all relevant bodies and groups and develop shared processes and practices for the region.

Finally, multi-agency working needs to extend across national borders, particularly from the perspective of enforcement and enabling people to return home.

The role of local authorities in identification and awareness raising

Identification and awareness raising are crucial if victims are to be found and supported as early as possible. Local authorities clearly have a significant role to play in identifying cases of human trafficking, along with other statutory and third sector organisations. Importantly, the responsibility for identification does not sit with any particular role or department within an organisation and success is dependent on professionals and communities seeing the signs and acting on that information. Local authority officers work on the frontline in diverse roles and it's important that they can recognise potential evidence of trafficking and know what to do if they find it. On that basis, training is needed for a wide range of staff and would best be undertaken on a multi-agency basis to ensure consistency of understanding and approach. This is being developed as part of the work of the Wales Anti-Human Trafficking Leadership Group and is being designed to meet the needs of staff working in a variety of roles, with different tiers to cover the different levels of knowledge required. We welcome the development of this training and will help promote awareness of its availability.

However, identification is an ongoing challenge. Multi-agency training needs to be supported by shared definitions, commonly understood, multi-agency processes and consistent use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This will help save as many victims as possible and importantly, ensure victims are recognised as victims and not criminalised for the acts they commit under the duress of the traffickers. As mentioned above, partners are working to develop this, but a national strategic approach which shares and extends the use of best practice could be beneficial.

How the recommendations of the Council of Europe 2012 'GRETA' report and the 2009 SOLACE report on human trafficking are being taken forward and plans for future work

Both of these reports helped to raise the profile of human trafficking and increase its prominence. For the local government, the SOLACE report in particular sparked further consideration both nationally and at the local level. This has certainly contributed to senior level championing of the agenda, with Dr. Mohammed Mehmet, Chief Executive of Denbighshire Council taking on the lead for human trafficking within the Public Service Leadership Group. At the operational level, the competency and evidence framework included in the SOLACE report has provided a useful tool. For example, the South Wales Anti-Human Trafficking Forum has been working to embed the competencies in each respective local authority. The GRETA report also remains influential, receiving continued focus from the AHTC and informing the work of local human trafficking forums. We would see these reports continuing to be used as reference points and influencing work on an ongoing basis.

Further comments

While progress is clearly being made, it is important to recognise that the journey towards making Wales hostile to human trafficking is still at a relatively early stage. Consequently, there is still work to be done in raising awareness and developing shared understandings. For example, the language of slavery is emerging in parallel to human trafficking. Adopting the term of slavery or 'modern slavery' in place of human trafficking could have a number of advantages. For example, slavery puts the emphasis on the experience of victims once they have been brought to their destination, whereas trafficking implies an emphasis on the forced movement of victims. In addition, slavery may be better understood and recognised by the public. The use of 'modern slavery' may also increase in prominence with the introduction of a UK Modern Slavery Bill.

As outlined in the opening paragraph, organisations are still without a clear picture of the extent of human trafficking into the UK. This is to be expected, given the lengths traffickers go to hide their victims and prevent them from coming forward. There is potential that a lack of data and likely under-reporting could result in a diminished or insufficient focus. Consequently, improving our understanding of the nature and extent of this crime must be a priority. This obviously goes hand in hand with awareness raising and identification, so human trafficking is being recognised, responded to and recorded to as such. It also means recognising the value of less formal intelligence that can help build a more reflective local picture, in addition to the official data that includes referrals made to the NRM. In short, a lack of data

doesn't mean there isn't a problem and as partners continue to improve processes and practices more accurate data will emerge, leading to more sophisticated intelligence and improved responses.