

We are a few days past the second anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act. It was one of the first of its kind in Europe, and indeed one of the first of its kind in the world. It increased the maximum sentence for slavers from 14 years to life imprisonment. It made sure that we could seize the assets of the perpetrators. And it made the necessary provisions so that victims would be properly looked after.

Prosecutions and convictions for slavery offences are increasing and we have seen the first few convictions under the Modern Slavery Act itself for both sexual and labour exploitation offences. They include the Markowski brothers, both sentenced earlier this year for their brutal treatment of the vulnerable men they recruited to work for Sports Direct. The plight of these individuals only came to light when one of them summoned the courage to go to the police and report the brothers' theft of wages, their threats of violence and the squalid conditions in which they were made to live.

We might have previously thought that slavery and trafficking were consigned to history books. But we realised it wasn't. In this country alone, there are thousands of poor souls being exploited and abused. They are in backstreet brothels, trapped in domestic servitude, forced into hours of back-breaking agriculture labour. They are on our high streets – in nail bars, restaurants and car washes. Many of them will have come here on the promise of a better life; those hopes will have been crushed.

New figures this week show that over 3, 800 potential victims - from 108 different countries - were referred to support in 2016, through the National Referral Mechanism, which is the system we established for identifying victims. As a country, I think we are rightly proud of what we have achieved. That's more potential victims than ever being helped. But being proud of what we have done so far isn't the same as being complacent about it. That's why today I am committing us to go further in making sure that we have the *right* system in place to help those in the trap of modern slavery find a way out of it.

Later this year, we will publish an assessment of the National Referral Mechanism pilot which will tell us how it is working in practice. I already know it doesn't work perfectly. And I know that there is room for radical changes. We must be better at getting immediate support to victims when they are at their most vulnerable. Otherwise they just slip through the net, to be abused all over again, and we lose any opportunity to gain information on the criminals who exploited them in the first place.

We want to make sure that frontline staff – for example those that work at our borders – know how to spot the signs of slavery, and know how to refer potential victims into support. We also want to streamline the process potential victims of modern slavery have to go through when a decision is being made about what exactly has happened to them. These decisions are complicated – particularly when they are people who are brought here from outside the EU – slavers often find their victims in Nigeria, Albania and Vietnam. We also want to make sure that victims are able to rebuild their lives. Our aspiration is to help these people in the right place – but at present, the provision of support may yet not be.

We are working hard across many fronts already. Operation AIDANT began earlier this year. It is a multi-agency campaign designed to enhance the current intelligence picture around modern slavery and trafficking. Several strands run, focussing on the

key areas where we know organised criminal gangs target and exploit their victims. During just a couple of weeks of the first two phases, over 150 potential victims of modern slavery were identified. The scale of what we are facing is frightening – at latest estimates, it is close to 46 million victims worldwide.

But it is exactly this kind of cooperation between the police, Border Force, the National Crime Agency and others that will be our way of getting at the people traffickers. The Joint Slavery and Trafficking Analysis Centre has just this month become operational. It will provide high quality intelligence analysis to assess the threat posed by modern slavery at a national and regional level, to support an enhanced operational response throughout any investigation. It builds on a model that we have used to successfully improve our understanding of other threats - such as terrorism. Headquartered in the National Crime Agency in Vauxhall, I will be meeting staff later this week. It has specialist analysts, drawn from across six different agencies including HMRC, Border Force and Immigration Enforcement, based in staffing hubs in Birmingham and Warrington. Its first focus will be on adults being sexually exploited. The Centre will enable us to have a co-ordinated push against the organised crime groups that are at the heart of the trade in human beings and human misery. Our message to the perpetrators is clear; we are coming after you, and there is nowhere to hide.

As well as making it clear to the slavers and traffickers that they won't be able to just carry on getting away with their vile crimes, there is another message that I want to send. The Prime Minister - who chairs a dedicated cross-Government taskforce on this issue - has called modern slavery the great human rights issue of our time. She was right, and for any of us to turn a blind eye now would be unforgivable. We have a moral duty to help those who cannot help themselves. So the message I want to give to those trapped in a hideous circle of exploitation and abuse is that they have not been forgotten, they will not stay hidden, and we will find a way to give them back that hope for a better life.