



Ending slavery in Oxfordshire



You may think slavery is an evil from a distant past, something outlawed centuries ago. You may also think that slavery, if it happens at all, only happens in faraway places. But, the truth and the tragedy of modern-day slavery is that it's happening here, right now.

From July 2017-June 2018, 85 people in Oxfordshire were supported to escape slavery through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). These people ranged in age from 14-55. Most were British, but victims also came from abroad. We know that these figures are just the tip of the iceberg and we are working hard to understand the scale of the problem. You can help.

Slavery isn't something so secret that it can't be detected. Often it takes place in plain sight, with individuals working excessively long shifts, obviously undernourished, perhaps in situations that just look exploitative or wrong, even if you're not quite sure why. We all have the power to stop slavery in its tracks if we know what it looks like, and decide to act.

Modern-day slavery has many faces – it includes forced labour, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, and criminal exploitation such as forced begging, shop-lifting, or being forced to grow or sell drugs. It's seen in all sectors from farming to food processing, car washes, construction, care and hospitality. It affects women and men, children and adults. Modern slavery often includes trafficking but not in every case.



Since 1989, Elmore Community Services has been working directly with people falling through the gaps of existing services, supporting them to tackle their problems, improve their lives, and feel part of their communities. We identify gaps in services, work with individuals and systems to address these, and put service users first.

Working with people with multiple and complex needs, we recognise how vulnerable our clients can be to exploitation. So often the defining feature of crime today, the exploitation of vulnerability is at the core of slavery. From 2014-2017, we worked with others to design and pilot an innovative service, the Independent Trauma Advisory (ITA) Service, to address this concern. Funded mainly by the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commission, and evaluated by experts from the University of Bedfordshire, the service was shown to be hugely helpful to victims, cost-effective, and preventative too.

70% of the victims we worked with were women, 90% were UK citizens, and over half were parents.

Elmore's experience of tackling modern-day slavery

From 2015-2017, Elmore's ITA team encountered over 50 victims or suspected victims of slavery, of whom 31 accepted intensive support to escape their exploitative situation.

For some, this involved going into a safe-house in another part of the country, under the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). But many victims did not want to enter the NRM – they wanted support to stay in their own community with protection from their abusers. Whether or not a victim goes into a safe-house, escaping exploitation is just the start of a long journey to a safer, happier life. Our support ranged from a few days to over a year, with most receiving support for about nine months.

Most victims experienced more than one form of exploitation and this does not include other abuses that were committed against them while they were enslaved, including crimes of violence, theft, threats

to their families, and coercion to create drugs dependence.

It's a common misunderstanding that modern day slaves are trafficked; amongst our clients, less than half had experienced any form of trafficking. As the project progressed, we encountered more men and more cases of forced labour. Anti-slavery projects across the country are finding that the more you look, the more you find...

We are now working to uncover a much clearer picture of the nature and extent of slavery, with a research project supported by Oxford City Council. Now we are seeing more *cuckooing* (exploiters taking over someone's home) and more drug slavery involving vulnerable children.

Recognising the challenges facing Oxfordshire, our Chief Executive helped to establish and now chairs the Oxfordshire Anti-Slavery Network, which seeks to make Oxfordshire a county hostile to modern slavery.

The exploitation of vulnerability is at the core of slavery



Naomi

Naomi, a 20 year old college student, made friends with a man who she told us was nice to her; he bought her drinks and sometimes gave her money. One weekend, he took her on a trip to visit his friends in another city. He gave her alcohol and drugs on the way, and when they arrived he told her she must have sex with these men. She was terrified. Afterwards, he threatened to show explicit photographs to her family if she told anyone. It happened the next weekend and the next, and Naomi feared for her life. Naomi was vulnerable; she'd been sexually exploited as a child. She had very little hope that she could escape this situation or trust in authorities to support or protect her. It took us weeks to win her trust and hear the full story. She didn't want to go off to a safe house, she wanted to carry on at college and stay close to her family. With help from the Police, we developed a safety plan with her, provided emotional and practical support, and helped her to obtain secure housing. She was then able to access the physical and mental health care that she needed to start to recover. We encouraged Naomi to take back control over her life; in her own words: "the best revenge is success".

Bill

When Bill approached us for help, he was so ill he could barely walk. He was suffering from malnutrition, and was desperately afraid and anxious. We discovered that Bill had been *cuckooed* – his flat had been taken over by criminals. For months, he had been robbed of money and medication, starved, deprived of sleep and forced to deliver drugs. He had resorted to begging and felt full of shame. We immediately took Bill to a safe place, and with the support of the Police, referred him into the NRM. He was quickly accepted and moved to a safe-house. This was not without its challenges as he struggled to trust the safe-house team, and his obvious vulnerability made him a target in the new area. We kept in touch with Bill throughout his stay and coordinated his move to a new area, including linking him in to local mental health services and other support. He is now in a beautiful rural village, with a much-loved dog whose company and insistence on daily exercise has greatly benefitted Bill. He is eating and sleeping well, and is starting to re-establish contact with his family.

Together, we can spot it, stop it, and drive slavery from Oxfordshire.



Call **08000 121 700** to get help, support a suspicion or seek advice. Or download the free UNSEEN UK modern slavery app - a simple guide to recognising the signs of modern slavery and a way to report concerns in confidence to free more victims of slavery. **Always call 999 in an emergency.**

Based on the learning from the Elmore project, and a similar one in Reading, a Thames Valley-wide service has now been commissioned by the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commission. You can contact them here:

The Victims First: Willow Project

Email: enquiries@vfwillowproject.org.uk or call 0753 824 1045



213 Barns Rd, Oxford OX4 3UT
01865 200130

info@elmorecommunityservices.org.uk

www.elmorecommunityservices.org.uk

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