

Four men charged following operation to tackle human trafficking in West Lothian.



Four men have been charged following an operation to tackle human trafficking and serious organised crime in West Lothian.

Operation Heathyard, led by CID in West Lothian and supported by partners including West Lothian Council, National Crime Agency and Greater Manchester Police, saw a number of warrants executed on Friday 2nd December.

The men were detained at addresses in Livingston, Bathgate and Salford and have now been arrested and charged in connection with human trafficking offences, involvement in serious and organised crime, and a sexual offence.

All four men, aged 35, 26 and two aged 28, are expected to appear before Livingston Sheriff Court on Monday 5th December.

Six further addresses were searched in Livingston, Bathgate and Blackburn and a reception centre was set up to support potential victims of human trafficking.

Detective Chief Inspector Stephen Healy of Lothian & Scottish Borders Police Division said: "In total, twenty-five people have been interviewed as part of this operation and enquiries are ongoing to establish the circumstances surrounding their travel to and from Scotland. In the meantime, they are being offered support and assistance in terms of health and welfare, housing and victim support.

"This operation is the result of a complex and lengthy investigation into serious and organised crime involving foreign nationals centred on West Lothian. A large number of

officers and colleagues from partner agencies have been involved in both the planning and delivery of the action taken and I would like to thank them for their work so far.

“Serious and organised crime can have a significant impact on communities and is a top priority for Police Scotland. Those involved in such groups use violence and intimidation to target vulnerable people and we are constantly working to gather information about their activities and disrupt them, putting those responsible before the courts and removing their assets.

“Human trafficking is one method that these groups use to run their criminal endeavours, and it is important for us to ensure that when we dismantle these networks we work with our partners to protect and safeguard anyone who has been exploited or abused.”

Executive councillor for services for the community, George Paul, commented: “Human trafficking is a heinous crime, and I’m sure that local people will be shocked at these events. However, the sad truth is that West Lothian is not alone as this is an issue which affects all areas and countries.

“West Lothian Council is committed to continuing our partnership with Police Scotland and other agencies as they take action. Along with other public sector partners, West Lothian Council will provide social care support to the victims.”

Chief Inspector Barry Blair, West Lothian Local Area Commander, said: “The activity under Operation Heathyard has been centred on the Latvian communities in West Lothian and we will continue to support all those affected going forward.

“Community Action Team officers helped to carry out the search warrants and ensure everyone found within the properties could be taken to our dedicated place of safety.

“We will have additional officers on patrol in these neighbourhoods over the weekend to provide reassurance and to speak to anyone who may have any further information or who needs any more advice and assistance.

“I would urge anyone with information or concerns about human trafficking or exploitation in their community to speak to police on 101. We will do all we can with our partners to keep people safe.”