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Gangmaster Investigation - Operation Westport

Nine licensed gangmasters were found to be violating standards imposed by the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA).

The gangmasters were supplying hundreds of mainly Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Bulgarian workers to pick daffodils and vegetables in Cornwall.

Multi-agency Operation Westport aimed at protecting the welfare and rights of migrant workers in Cornwall included vehicle stops, accommodation inspections and interviews with up to 80 workers. During the operation, officers unearthed evidence of the violated standards and have since been carrying out further investigations.

Officers found:

- One gangmaster was subcontracting workers from a number of unlicensed gangmasters
- workers employed by one labour provider had not been paid for three weeks
- a weekly £10 'administration fee' charged to workers reduced pay below national minimum wage levels
- agricultural minimum wage was not paid
- a daily £12 transport charge per worker was deducted for a three-mile journey
- excessive accommodation charges
- personal protective equipment had to be purchased by the workers
- faulty minibuses used to transport workers including a faulty tyre, faulty handbrake and a dangerously loose battery
- the drivers of minibuses did not have the correct licences to transport others (D licence and PSV licence).

Chairman of the GLA, Paul Whitehouse, said:

"The GLA is intent on cracking down on illegal work practice to protect workers from exploitation. Following this recent phase of our on-going

enforcement operations, licences will be revoked, the question is how many. We will know more as soon as we have finalised our investigations work.

Labour providers who continue to ignore the rights of workers and exploit the vulnerable should be in no doubt that we will catch them through our unannounced raids and other enforcement activities. Where we find abuses we will apply the maximum sanctions. We will not stand for worker exploitation and we will stamp it out."

Other results of the operation included:

- Three homes of multi occupancy were found to be unfit and/or unsafe and were closed. Where required those workers affected by these closures were assisted to find alternative accommodation
- more than 40 vehicles, mostly mini buses, were stopped and inspected. Vehicle and Operators Services Agency (VOSA) issued 26 prohibition notices after vehicles were found unsafe or the drivers were not properly qualified to drive those vehicles. Included were eight immediate prohibitions (vehicles taken off the road immediately). One vehicle was found to be using "red diesel" and was impounded – Customs and Excise are now dealing with this.

Operation Westport was a West Cornwall Migrant Worker Action Group (MIGWAG) led operation. The Gangmasters Licensing Authority, Kerrier and Penwith District Councils environmental Health Officers, Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, Cornwall County Fire Brigade, Cornwall County Highways, VOSA, Customs and Excise were all involved in the operation.

More than 1,100 gangmasters are now licensed to operate legally in the UK and the GLA has uncovered worker exploitation and illegal activity that led to the revocation of 47 licences.

Notes to editors

1. The Gangmasters Licensing Authority was set up to curb the exploitation of workers in the agriculture, horticulture, shellfish gathering and associated processing and packaging industries. It was set up following the death of 23 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay in 2004.

The majority of workers involved in these industries come from countries such as: Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, India Pakistan and Portugal.

2. There are currently 1155 gangmasters licensed by the GLA

3. A gangmaster is an individual or business who:

- supplies labour to agriculture, horticulture, shellfish gathering and food processing and packaging

- uses labour to provide a service in the regulated sector, eg harvesting or gathering agricultural produce
- uses labour to gather shellfish.

To be granted a GLA licence all businesses must meet the GLA licensing standards and the principle authority of the business must meet 'Fit or Proper' person criteria. Cross government checks are made on all licence applications.

4. It has been an offence to supply labour to the GLA regulated sectors since 1 October 2006, with the maximum penalty being ten years imprisonment and an unlimited fine.

5. All licences that are revoked have the right of appeal including licences revoked with immediate effect.

6. Ian Livsey Chief Executive of the GLA is available for interview requests.

End

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