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THE  TIMES

### Behind the story

Anna Hall

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It turned out to be anything but a routine day at work for Mike Ion, who arrived at Telford Magistrates Court on a chilly morning in December 2009 expecting to deal with the bench's regular diet of petty crimes and minor offenders.

What the magistrate saw, walking into a courtroom that was a sea of colourful veils and shalwar kameez, haunts him to this day.

“It was packed full of families. There were elderly parents, young women, children — it was standing room only. As the charges were read out, people broke down. Some of them shouted out — almost in denial — that it wasn't true. How dare you accuse my son, my husband, of these things?”

This was the moment when horrified families from a small British Pakistani community learnt that some of their men faced multiple charges of raping girls and controlling child prostitution.

From that day, for 400 families from a few streets in the small town of Wellington, near Telford, Shropshire, normal life changed for ever.

Four years later, multiple child-sex convictions have been secured against seven men, who have now been jailed. I've been following this story from the inside for the past three years, documenting for Channel 4 the journey taken by West Mercia Police and the social workers of Telford & Wrekin Council.

The facts are horrific. The case involved multiple rapes and the trafficking of schoolgirls, around restaurants within a market town and to cities across the country. All the girls were from “normal” homes where at least one if not both parents cared for them.

Inspector Richard Langton, based at Wellington police station, has had to manage community tensions. “There's been a lot of shock as people start to realise the exact nature of the offences that have taken place. I've come across people who are distraught and so ashamed.

“There's a real sense that — rather than the defendants being on trial — the whole community has been in the dock, but people want to put their faith in the judicial system. They're ready to condemn behaviour which they see as criminal.”

What became strikingly clear during the police investigation, Operation Chalice, was that work needs to be done at an early age, with primary school children, to change the horizons of the young. Because such crimes have been happening locally, unchallenged, for decades.

Mr Ion, both a magistrate and a local councillor, has been instrumental in setting up a Saturday school to provide extra classes for local children. They aim to raise aspirations and challenge the longstanding under-achievement of Pakistani boys at GCSE

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In addition to helping with numeracy and literacy, the classes seek to boost self-esteem and create good citizens. Police have taken part in some lessons. One child said the officers “gave us courage and confidence”. He thought that “maybe in later life I will join the police as a cadet”.

Mr Ion's hope is that ten years from now no one in Wellington will be discussing “criminality in the British Pakistani community”.

“We've got a long-term aim. We've got to give these kids other role models. When they've only got one role model and that is the role model before the courts, then young people have got nowhere to go.”

·*The Hunt for Britain's Sex Gangs*, directed by Anna Hall, will be shown on Channel 4 at 9pm this evening.

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