

# **PART – G County Lines and Cuckooing**

## **INTRODUCTION**

‘County Lines’ and ‘Cuckooing’ are forms of criminal exploitation involving children and vulnerable adults. They are geographically widespread forms of harm about which currently relatively little is known or recognised by those best placed to spot its potential victims. This chapter is intended to explain the nature of this harm to enable staff to recognise the signs and respond appropriately so that potential victims get the support and help that they need.

## **COUNTY LINES**

County lines is a major, cross-cutting issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and missing persons; and the response to tackle it involves the police, the National Crime Agency, a wide range of Government departments, local government agencies and VCS (voluntary and community sector) organisations.

The UK Government defines county lines as follows:

“County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.”

Those who become involved in county lines will almost undoubtedly be caught up in other safeguarding issues, potentially drugs, criminality, trafficking, modern slavery, sexual exploitation, and gangs. It is extremely important that those involved in safeguarding children and vulnerable adults have an understanding of county lines. A typical county lines scenario is defined by the following components:

- A group (not necessarily affiliated as a gang) establishes a network between an urban hub and county location, into which drugs (primarily heroin and crack cocaine) are supplied;
- A branded mobile phone line is established in the market, to which orders are placed by introduced customers. The line will commonly (but not exclusively) be controlled by a third party, remote from the market;
- The group exploits young or vulnerable persons, to achieve the storage and/or supply of drugs, movement of cash proceeds and to secure the use of dwellings (commonly referred to as cuckooing);
- The group or individuals exploited by them regularly travel between the urban hub and the county market, to replenish stock and deliver cash;
- The group is inclined to use intimidation, violence, and weapons, including knives, corrosives, and firearms.

Some potential indicators of county lines involvement and exploitation are listed below, with those at the top of particular concern:

- persistently going missing from school or home and / or being found out-of-area;
- unexplained acquisition of money, clothes, or mobile phones;
- excessive receipt of texts / phone calls and/or having multiple handsets;
- relationships with controlling / older individuals or groups;
- leaving home / care without explanation;

- suspicion of physical assault / unexplained injuries;
- parental concerns;
- carrying weapons;
- significant decline in school results / performance;
- gang association or isolation from peers or social networks;
- self-harm or significant changes in emotional wellbeing.

One of the key factors found in most cases of county lines exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (e.g. carrying drugs in return for something). Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or clothes) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection). It is important to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs and to remember that the receipt of something by a young person or vulnerable adult does not make them any less of a victim. It is also important to note that the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a young person who engages in county lines activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm his/her family.

The **National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC)** was established in September 2018 with the aim of developing the national intelligence picture of the complexity and scale of the threat, prioritising action against the most serious offenders, and engaging with partners across government, including in the health, welfare and education spheres, in tackling the wider issues.

## **CUCKOOING**

Cuckooing is a practice where people take over a person's home and use the property to facilitate exploitation. The most common form of cuckooing is where drug dealers take over a person's home and use it to store or distribute drugs.

Drug dealers will often target the most vulnerable in society. They are seeking to establish relationships to access the vulnerable person's home. Once they gain control over the victim, whether through drug dependency, debt or as part of their relationship, larger groups will sometimes move in. The threat of violence is often used to control the victim.

It is common for the drug dealers to have access to several cuckooed addresses at once, and to move quickly between them to evade detection. The victims of cuckooing are most commonly class 'A' drug users, but there are cases of victims with learning difficulties, mental health issues and, to a lesser extent, physical disabilities.

Signs that cuckooing may be going on at a property include:

- An increase in people entering and leaving;
- An increase in cars or bikes outside;
- An increase in anti-social behaviour;
- Increasing litter outside;
- People coming and going at strange times;
- Damage to the door/the door propped open;
- Unknown people pressing buzzers to gain access to the building;
- You haven't seen the person who lives there recently or, when you have, they have been anxious or distracted;

If just one of these is taking place in a property, it may not mean anything. But if three or more of them are taking place, it could indicate that the property is being cuckooed.

## **LINKS BETWEEN COUNTY LINES AND CUCKOOING**

‘The cuckooing model was initially used by county lines groups originating from London. County line dealing ‘franchises’ then spread throughout the country, taking the cuckooing model with them. However, due to the success of this method, cuckooing has now been adopted by other drug supply networks.’

National Police Chiefs Council

In 2017, 77% of police forces documented incidents of cuckooing that were associated to county lines activity. Cuckooing clearly remains the dominant method of obtaining access to suitable premises to operate and deal from. Virtually every force that reported the presence of a county line endpoint reported cuckooing. County lines groups will target new premises by pursuing vulnerable individuals who attend recovery groups, dependency units and areas associated with those experiencing problems. They seek to establish relationships with vulnerable individuals for access to their homes. Once they gain control over the victim, whether through drug dependency, debt or as part of their relationship, groups move in. Once this happens the risk of domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, and violence increases. In some instances, drug users may appear to be complicit in allowing their home to be used, however the issue of true consent is questionable, as many drugs users will not necessarily see themselves as being vulnerable.

Cuckooed addresses have been linked to many county lines, with victims of all ages encountered by law enforcement in such properties. There is an emergence of cuckooed addresses being used by multiple county lines groups simultaneously, although there is currently insufficient detail to confirm how complicit or collaborative groups might be. It is also common for county lines networks to have access to several cuckooed addresses at any one time. They will move quickly between vulnerable peoples’ homes and will stay for just a few hours, a couple of days or sometimes longer. This helps groups evade detection, especially as intelligence gathered by law enforcement is often unclear and is quickly out of date.

In Lincolnshire, an increase of violence has been seen. Warrants executed have revealed weapons such as knives and machetes, and intelligence has been received surrounding access to firearms amongst gang members. In 2018, following a spate of knife related assaults in Lincolnshire, arrests were made which led to child trafficking convictions. It was the first time in UK legal history that child trafficking convictions had been secured under the Modern Slavery Act as part of a ‘county lines’ operation.

### **Reporting Concerns about County Lines or Cuckooing**

Anybody subject to this policy may witness, be informed of, or see during the course of their duties, a county lines or cuckooing concern. The duty to refer applies to everybody to whom this policy applies.

Please report and discuss your concerns with the Safeguarding Lead Officer to agree next steps. This may need a referral into Children’s Services, Adult Services or Lincolnshire Police – or for action to be taken through internal case meetings or through multi-agency case management in MACE or VAP.

### **Operation Insignia**

In Lincolnshire there is a multi-agency system for sharing information with Lincolnshire Police to help support vulnerable children and adults when there is no clear route to inform police of information.

This information can help form a picture around a situation and may allow the police to take further action in investigating an issue. This could include but is not limited to information that is indicating;

- Child exploitation (criminal and sexual)
- Human trafficking
- Modern slavery
- County lines
- Cuckooing
- Knife crime

Please report and discuss your concerns with the Safeguarding Lead Officer who can advise on completing a [Partnership Information Report](#).