Home Office

Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance



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Who's this guidance for?

This guidance is primarily aimed at frontline staff who work with children, young people and potentially vulnerable adults.

This includes professionals working in education, health, housing, benefits, law enforcement (police) and related partner organisations.

This guidance is also useful for carers and parents, although they are not the primary audience.

It has been produced by the Home Office in co-operation with other Government Departments, National Crime Agency, Local Government Association, National Police Chiefs' Council, Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime in London.

What's this guidance for?

Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults is a geographically widespread form of harm that is a typical feature of county lines activity. It is a harm which is relatively little known about or recognised by those best placed to spot its potential victims.

This guidance is intended to explain the nature of this harm to enable practitioners to recognise its signs and respond appropriately so that potential victims get the support and help they need.

What is county lines exploitation?

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:

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.

County lines activity and the associated violence, drug dealing and exploitation has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities.

What is Child Criminal Exploitation?

Child criminal exploitation is increasingly used to describe this type of exploitation where children are involved, and is defined as:

Child Criminal Exploitation is common in county lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

Criminal exploitation of children is broader than just county lines, and includes for instance children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft.

Case study 1

(Suffolk Police)

A 16 year old male had been reported as missing from London and was considered at risk due to his age and link to gangs. He had recently failed to appear at court for his alleged involvement in a stabbing. He was found in possession of a 6-inch kitchen knife and 30 wraps of drugs.

Whilst in custody he was found to have significant burns to his body, on his stomach area, consistent with having been burnt by boiling liquid. He would not disclose further details; however it was suspected this may have been caused by those responsible for placing him in Ipswich to deal in class A drugs.



How does it affect young people and vulnerable adults?

Like other forms of abuse and exploitation, county lines exploitation:

- can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years;
- can affect any vulnerable adult over the age of 18 years;
- can still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual;
- can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence;
- can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and young people or adults; and
- is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation. Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources.

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.

Case study 2
(South Wales Police)

At least one vulnerable female has been used by a gang from London to sexually service its members and has been subjected to sexual violence.

As a result of drugs debts they attempted to kidnap her at least twice and it is believed that they have also trafficked her to London in order to pay off a debt through prostitution.



Who is vulnerable to county lines exploitation?

The national picture on county lines continues to develop but there are recorded cases of:

- children as young as 12 years old being exploited or moved by gangs to courier drugs out of their local area; 15-16 years is the most common age range
- both males and females being exploited
- White British children being targeted because gangs perceive they are more likely to evade police detection but a person of any ethnicity or nationality may be exploited
- the use of social media to make initial contact with children and young people
- class A drug users being targeted so that gangs can takeover their homes (known as 'cuckooing').

We do know that county lines exploitation is widespread, with gangs from big cities including London, Manchester and Liverpool operating throughout England, Wales and Scotland. Gangs are known to target vulnerable children and adults; some of the factors that heighten a person's vulnerability include:

- having prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse
- lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example)
- social isolation or social difficulties
- economic vulnerability
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status
- connections with other people involved in gangs
- having a physical or learning disability
- having mental health or substance misuse issues;
- being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories)
- being excluded from mainstream education, in particular attending a Pupil Referral Unit.

Case study 3
(Eastern Region Special Operations Unit)

The [county lines] group were consuming and selling drugs from within the property and prevented the [homeowner] from leaving the address or going to the toilet areas.



Signs to look out for

A young person's involvement in county lines activity often leaves signs. A person might exhibit some of these signs, either as a member or as an associate of a gang dealing drugs. Any sudden changes in a person's lifestyle should be discussed with them.

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 well-being.

What to do if you are concerned

Any practitioner working with a vulnerable person who they think may be at risk of county lines exploitation should follow their local safeguarding guidance and share this information with local authority social services. If you believe a person is in immediate risk of harm, you should **contact the police.**

Use your local safeguarding process, the first step of which is usually to contact your designated safeguarding lead within your organisation. If you don't know who this is, refer to your manager. Your designated safeguarding lead has the responsibility for linking in with your local authority's social services. If you are not satisfied with the local authority's response, you should follow up your concerns by discussing these with your safeguarding lead.

Case study 4 (Humberside Police)

A male's hand was severed and both legs broken. The victim is believed to be part of a county lines network with the offenders being a local drug line. It's suggested to be a punishment attack by the persons the victim was running drugs for, for having used drugs/spent proceeds himself.



If you are aware that a potential victim may have come from / travelled to another area as part of their involvement in county lines, you should include this information in your referral to enable liaison between safeguarding agencies in the different areas.

Further information on safeguarding can be found in the Department for Education's Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance.

If you are worried that a vulnerable person is at immediate risk of harm you should also contact the police: your local public protection officer or, in the case of a child, local children's protection officer.

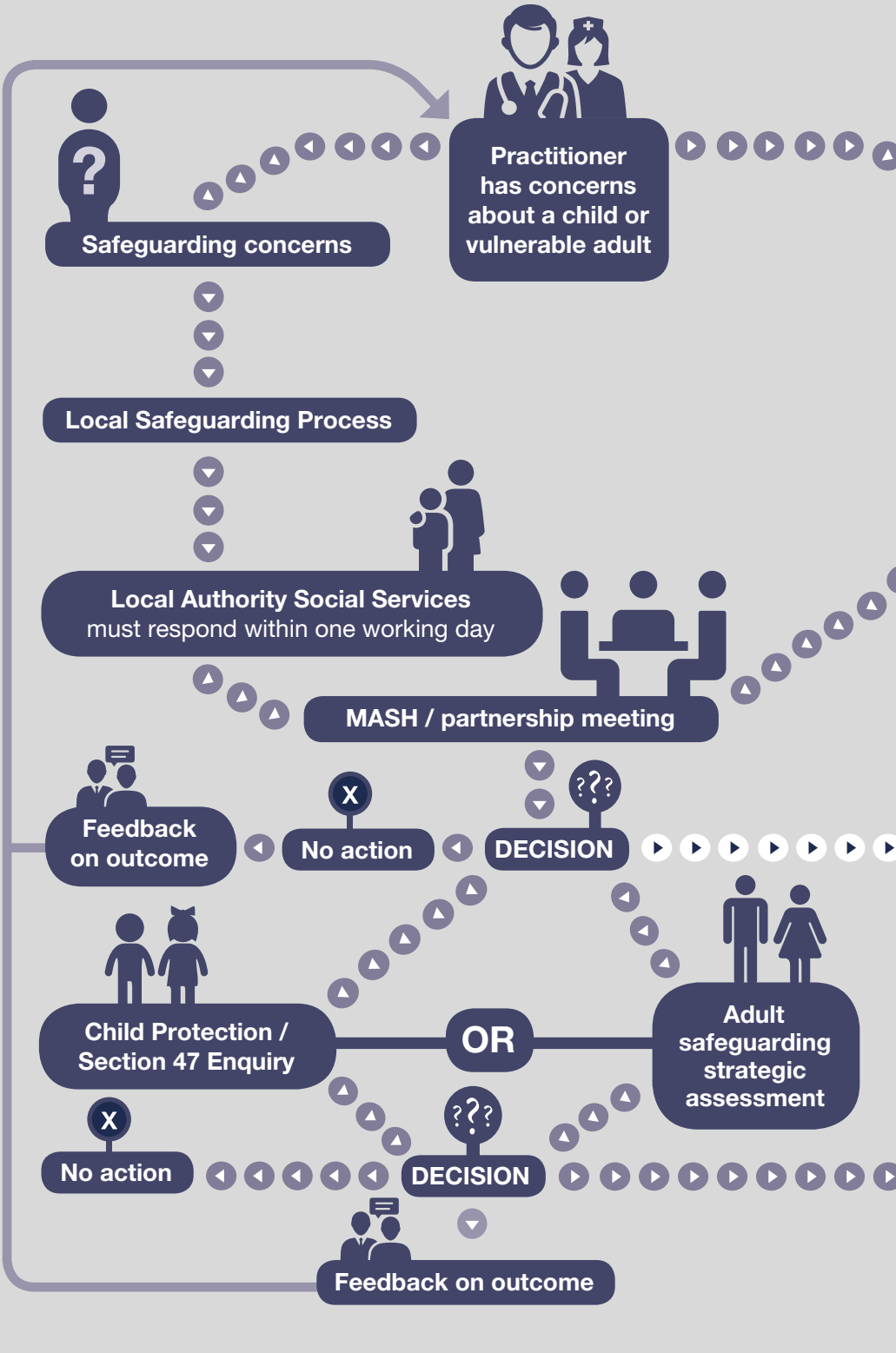
If you are a designated First Responder for the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), you should also consider referring any young person or adult you suspect of being a potential victim of trafficking or modern slavery to the NRM. Any referral should be after appropriate safeguarding steps have been taken and in light of multi-agency discussions.

Further information and guidance on county lines exploitation can be found from The Children's Society. NSPCC and Childline also offer sources of support for young people. Mind is a source of help for those suffering with mental health issues.

Your role

The flowchart below shows what should happen after you raise a concern. White arrows represent additional options to the prescribed process.

Note: Local Authorities are transitioning to new safeguarding arrangements to implement the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and **the flowchart is schematic only**.


Practitioner has concerns about a child or vulnerable adult
Safeguarding concerns
Local Safeguarding Process
Local Authority Social Services must respond within one working day
MASH / partnership meeting
DECISION
No action
Feedback on outcome
Child Protection / Section 47 Enquiry
OR
Adult safeguarding strategic assessment
DECISION
No action
Feedback on outcome

Risk of imminent harm



Local Police Protection Officer / Safer Schools Officer

DECISION

Emergency Protection Order



National Referral Mechanism (NRM) by First Responder

National process for identifying and providing support for potential victims of modern slavery including trafficking. For children, support is provided by local authorities.



Safeguarding or Protection Plan

Notes