

## *South Gloucestershire*



## *Practice Guidance for Social Workers relating to Child Criminal Exploitation*

## Introduction

This practice guidance has been produced to:

- Support staff within South Gloucestershire Children's Services in developing their awareness, knowledge and understanding regarding child criminal exploitation.
- Support staff to spot the signs of child criminal exploitation.
- Support staff to know how to respond when they suspect a child is being criminally exploited.
- Bring together resources and information in one place to support effective practice with children at risk of being criminally exploited or who have been criminally exploited.

## Definitions

### Child Criminal Exploitation

**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. (Home Office, 2018)**

### Organised Crime

**Organised crime is serious crime, planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain. Organised crime groups are organised criminals working together for a particular criminal activity or activities. (National Crime Agency, 2018)**

### County Lines

**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 forms 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. (Home Office, 2018)**

## Cuckooing

**Cuckooing is a form of crime in which drug dealers take over the home of a vulnerable person in order to use it as a base for drug dealing. (National Crime Agency, 2017)**

## Trafficking

**The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child, for the purpose of exploitation. Any child transported for exploitative reasons is considered to be a trafficking victim, whether or not they have been forced or deceived – this is because a child cannot consent to their own exploitation. Children can be trafficked into, within and out of the UK. (DfE and Home Office, 2011)**

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) along with all forms of child exploitation is a form of **child abuse** and a safeguarding response is required. Often the visible symptoms of CCE are responded to, meaning that some children may receive a criminal justice response and their safeguarding needs can be overlooked as a result. (Children's Society, 2017)

### **Child Criminal Exploitation:**

- ✓ can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years;
- ✓ can still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual; (it is impossible for a child to consent to their own exploitation);
- ✓ 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 CCE 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. 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 coercion, control, manipulation and or deceit involved in CCE is achieved through grooming, intimidation, acts of violence and/or debt bondage.

**Debt bondage** is where a child believes they have to work for free to pay off a debt. This debt can be incurred if a child is robbed or arrested and has drugs, money or phones taken. There have been known instances of criminals setting up a robbery to convince a child that they have incurred a debt that they must then work for free to pay it off.

We need to understand how swiftly grooming can be achieved within CCE, and how rapidly a child becomes entrenched in crime and exploitation. This knowledge must shape our response to children believed to be at risk of CCE.

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*CCE is broader than county lines drug dealing, it can include children working on a cannabis farm, storing drugs or firearms or being forced to commit crimes e.g. robbery and also forced labour.*

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### *Overlapping issues*

Children and young people who are criminally exploited often also experience child sexual exploitation and abuse, serious violence and psychological trauma. It is important not to make assumptions based on gender or ethnicity, e.g. that a male is being criminally exploited or that a black child is involved in gang activity. Professionals need to talk to children, ask them about their experiences and be open to the information provided, alongside other signs and potential evidence of what is taking place.

### *What we know about CCE*

**The National Crime Agency believes criminal exploitation is present in some form in all counties in England and Wales**

- Criminal exploitation is typically carried out by organised crime groups and criminal networks. There are significant amounts of money involved in CCE. Children who are being criminally exploited experience particularly high levels of risk to safety and life that differ from other forms of exploitation. This may increase the danger to the child and makes it particularly difficult for them to exit CCE.

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*“Put bluntly, the commodity in CSE is the child, whereas the commodity in county lines is the drugs and money”.*

*(Scoping report, May 18)*

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- There hasn't been the awareness or the acceptance of issues like county lines taking place – this is similar to what was seen regarding CSE several years ago. This has meant the scale of the issue remains unknown as it has been a hidden issue
- Children not in mainstream education or who have been excluded/are not attending their education provision are at increased risk of being criminally exploited

## South Gloucestershire Context

The Consultant Social Workers are the point of contact regarding information relating to CCE across South Gloucestershire. Some information can also be found on the South Gloucestershire Exploitation List which is stored on the K drive.

Although a significant amount of media attention is currently focused on county lines activity and knife crime, professionals need to be alert to other possible forms of CCE. As with CSE where media portrayals have often focused on male Asian gangs as perpetrators of CSE on white females – we know that in reality there are numerous models of grooming and that perpetrators and victims can come from any ethnicity, gender etc.

Within South Gloucestershire we are aware of a number of children who are believed to be being criminally exploited – e.g. children as young as 12 in possession of significant amounts of cannabis that outweighs individual consumption and another child who was believed to be being forced to work.

Within South Gloucestershire we have been keeping information regarding children at risk of CSE for several years. More recently we have taken to keeping information regarding children at risk of other forms of exploitation. At the time of writing (March 19) half of the children on the South Gloucestershire exploitation list were considered to be at high risk of criminal exploitation.

## Trafficking

It is important to consider whether a child who is believed to be being criminally exploited is being trafficked. When thinking about children being trafficked we tend to focus on children being brought into the UK from abroad. It is important that we have knowledge and understanding of **internal trafficking**. Within the UK most children who have been trafficked have been trafficked internally i.e. every element of the trafficking process takes place within the UK. Children can be trafficked into or within the UK for the purposes of criminal and/or sexual exploitation. So a child living within South Gloucestershire who is transported to Bristol to sell drugs, commit crime etc. has been trafficked. If you suspect a child has been trafficked you have a legal obligation to refer the child to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). A [factsheet on child trafficking](#) and the NRM has been produced.

The NRM referral form can be found [here](#)

## *Possible indicators of CCE*

- Persistently going missing or being absent from school or home and/or being found out of area
- Leaving home/care without explanation
- Unexplained bus/train tickets or regularly being transported in taxis or unknown vehicles
- Unexplained acquisition/gifts of money, clothes, or mobile phones
- Excessive receipt of texts/phone calls/use of social media
- Access to numerous phones or regular change of phone
- Relationships with controlling/older individuals or groups
- New “friendships” with people who are not known, gang association or isolation from positive peers or social networks
- Use of unusual terms (such as ‘going country’, cunch)
- Suspicion of physical assault/unexplained injuries
- Parental/Carer concerns
- Carrying weapons or keeping them within the home
- Significant decline in school/college/work performance
- Refusal, resistance to or significant reduction in attendance and/or engagement with services or professional sources of support
- Secretive behaviour
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being

## *Risks to children who are being criminally exploited*

The risk to a young person, and their family and friends, as a result of experiencing criminal exploitation can include but is not limited to:

- Physical injuries: risk of serious violence and death
- Emotional and psychological trauma
- Sexual violence: sexual assault, rape, indecent images being taken and shared as part of initiation/revenge/punishment, internally inserting drugs
- Debt bondage - young person and families being “in debt” to the exploiters; which is used to control the young person.
- Neglect and basic needs not being met
- Living in unclean, dangerous and/or unhygienic environments
- Tiredness and sleep deprivation: child is expected to carry out criminal activities over long periods and through the night
- Poor attendance and/or attainment at school/college/university

## Use of language to describe children at risk of criminal exploitation

As with CSE it is important to use language to describe children which does not “victim blame” and places the responsibility for the exploitation, abuse and harm with perpetrators. Language which indicates a child is complicit or in some way responsible for their exploitation must be avoided. Click this link for a [language guide](#) which covers language to describe children at risk of CSE and CCE.

## What should I do?

- Need to have an understanding of CCE, county lines and trafficking
- Need to be alert to issues of possible exploitation – criminal as well as sexual
- Don't assume it does not happen in South Gloucestershire. There is less evidence of gang activity, knife crime and county lines drug dealing within South Gloucestershire than some of our surrounding areas but we do know children are being criminally exploited in this county. Challenge other professionals if they are making these assumptions
- If you suspect a child is being criminally exploited – refer them to ART/Adult social care if not already open to Social Care e.g. if you have information regarding a vulnerable person's address being cuckooed
- If you become aware a crime has been committed this should be referred to police
- If you have information that a child/adult is at immediate risk of harm refer to the police
- Mapping friendships/associates and keeping track of links between people/locations is often very valuable
- Follow safeguarding procedures - consider if there are any immediate safeguarding issues and if threshold is met for a strategy discussion
- Discuss with Consultant Social Workers (CSW). Inform the CSWs so information can be gathered to inform the wider picture of child exploitation in South Gloucestershire (exploitation list)
- Consider whether there are also concerns of CSE. If there are concerns regarding CSE a SERAF should be completed. If there are no concerns regarding CSE a SERAF is not required
- Analyse any missing episodes and Return Home Interview (RHI) information that has been obtained
- Consider if a child is a possible victim of trafficking. If you suspect the child has been trafficked complete an [NRM referral](#)
- Consider who is in the child's peer group/who has influence over the child and in what way
- If the child is using drugs - where are they getting these from and how are they paying for their use?
- Consider siblings, family members and friends – are they at risk?

- Consider what work will be needed with parents/carers in order for them to understand CCE, the possible risks and what they can do to support and protect their child. [SPACE](#) is an organisation that parents can be signposted to for information and support.
- It is not helpful to talk about children who are “unwilling to engage”, we need to recognise the barriers that may prevent children talking to a social worker or other professional about the abuse they are experiencing
- Barnardo’s pilot programme called ROUTES will work with children who are at risk of perpetrating or being victims of violent crime, in terms of gang involvement or CCE. In order to access this service there must be something which links the child to the central Bristol area
- In order to respond effectively to a child at risk of criminal exploitation a multi-agency plan will be required. No single agency can tackle this issue alone. This will require consideration of the involvement of education, Neighbourhood Police Teams, health professionals, YOS and ASB team. It is important that the response is not just in terms of protecting and supporting the individual child. There must be consideration of how to disrupt the exploitation and practitioners and police need to work together to identify the perpetrators, locations and networks associated to the exploitation and develop plans to disrupt these.  
The Home Office has produced a [disruption toolkit](#) which explains some of the available options to agencies in disrupting perpetrators of child exploitation.
- Ensure that the other agencies involved understand the exploitation involved – this can have a significant bearing on immigration status issues and on criminal proceedings/convictions. This does not mean advocating for children to be “let off” of any crimes that they commit but that you provide advice that the impact of the trafficking and exploitation be taken into consideration when making criminal justice decisions

**Please note that this guidance is based on our current understanding and the evidence picture of criminal exploitation as we currently see it and therefore this document will remain a living document and subject to change.**

## *Resources*

[Children's Society toolkit](#)

[SPACE](#)

[National Referral Mechanism](#)

[Language guide](#)

[Home Office disruption toolkit](#)

## *References*

[National Crime Agency \(2018\) Organised Crime Groups](#)

[Home Office \(2018\), \*Guidance for Frontline Professionals on Dealing with County Lines, Part of the Government's Approach to Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation.\*](#)

[National Crime Agency \(2017\), \*County Lines Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply. National Briefing Report.\*](#)

[Department for Education and Home Office \(2011\), \*Safeguarding Children who may have been Trafficked: Practice Guidance\*](#)