**Digital Communications Strategy for County Lines Awareness Week 8 – 12 February 2021**

**Monday Intranet Article**

This week is part of the regional County Lines Action Week and as part of our awareness raising activity, we will be sharing information on County Lines with you every day until Friday.

You may have heard the phrase ‘County Lines’ before, it’s becoming more well-known and is a form of exploitation that affects children, young people and adults at risk.

Let’s start with what Child Exploitation is, Child Exploitation refers to the exploitation of any child under the age of 18. Exploitation can happen to any child regardless of their age, gender, background, socio economic status, religion or culture. It occurs across all communities in the UK and whilst some children have additional vulnerabilities, any child can be targeted.

Perpetrators can be male or female, from any or all backgrounds, communities and religions.

There is no ‘typical perpetrator’ model and no ‘typical victim’ model.

Child Exploitation can take many forms, such as sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, radicalisation, modern slavery and child trafficking. Often children are subjected to more than one form of exploitation at a time.

County Lines is a form of criminal exploitation that is illegal and classed as child abuse. It’s a term that describes when gangs and organised criminal networks (usually but not always gangs) transport illegal drugs from one area to another using children to take the drugs and money between locations. It’s called County Lines because of the use of mobile phones in taking the drug orders and in co-ordinating the movements of the exploited children. The phones tend to be cheap, easily replaceable and anonymous e.g. any of us could go into a supermarket this weekend (lockdown permitting) and buy a pay as you go mobile phone for £10 without providing any personal details. If you then lose or discard that phone, you can go and replace it in the same way for little cost, hassle or risk. In County Lines these mobile phones are called burner phones and exploited children sometimes have their legitimate personal phone but also carry a burner phone or multiple burner phones.

Children can be exploited in a number of ways in County Lines e.g. used as a courier concealing drugs or cash in clothing or body cavities, street based drug dealing, imprisoned in a property to deal drugs, forced to work due to a drug debt or involved in gun or knife crime and gang activity. County Lines commonly involves significant levels of violence and intimidation towards the exploited children to maintain control of them and to ensure that if these children encounter professionals such as social workers, police officers, hospital staff, school staff and other professionals they cannot tell professionals what’s really happening to them due to the repercussions from the perpetrators of being a ‘grass’ or a ‘snitch’.

Criminals exploit children in County Lines because it means they can remain at a distance from the physical and visible drug dealing so they’re relatively safe, as the children carry most of the day to day street-based risk. Their profits are maximised and the actual children involved are perceived by these criminals as expendable and easily replaceable if the child gets apprehended by the police. One reformed perpetrator said that for every child he ‘employed’, he had 20 more waiting in the wings to replace them.

Come back tomorrow to find out about factors that push and pull children towards County Lines activity.

[2 minute video on County Lines Basic Awareness](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=auoICT45nac)

*Please safeguard your emotional wellbeing when watching this video.*

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**Tuesday Intranet Article**

Welcome back to our week long information series on County Lines. Yesterday we introduced what County Lines is and today we will be sharing with you some of the reasons why children become involved in County Lines.

Firstly, the reason why children are involved in County Lines is because criminals exploit them. Exploited children are victims and contrary to appearances do not always have a free choice about whether to take part in criminal activity. Children may not consider themselves to be victims, they make think that they are consenting to the criminal activity from free will and may not understand that they are being exploited by the individual who said they were their friend, their boyfriend, their girlfriend or their brother. Please remember that children cannot consent to their own exploitation.

County Lines is a very fluid form of exploitation (more on this later in the week) but evidence so far suggests that any child can be targeted and children as young as seven years old are being exploited into County Lines. Although any child can be approached by a perpetrator, these criminals commonly target children who have additional vulnerabilities for example having learning difficulties, experiencing the breakdown of family, struggling at school, living in care homes/being a Looked After Child or experiencing deprivation or poverty at home. Children exploited through County Lines are groomed by perpetrators and part of this process is giving the children cash or gifts as an incentive, e.g. if the child lives in a deprived home where the parents choice is heat or eat and there’s not enough money to live comfortably, then being able to ‘earn’ your own cash for yourself or to give to your parents for food can be a powerful incentive.

Perpetrators are skilled at manipulating children and there is a range of factors called push and pull factors that the targeted child may be unaware of, but that the perpetrator will purposefully use to heap pressure onto the child:

**Push Factors**

Push factors are vulnerabilities that can push the young person away from their home and towards the perpetrator. Please find some examples below:

* Children who have been the victim of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and/or neglect in their home.
* Children from households where domestic violence and abuse between parents has been a feature.
* Children of parents with a high level of vulnerabilities of their own (e.g. drug and/or alcohol misuse, mental illness, learning disability, their own history of an abusive childhood)
* Family breakdown / disrupted family life / problematic parenting
* Children who have physical or learning impairments
* Children who are in, or leaving care
* Bereavement, loss, isolation from peers, low self esteem
* Links to gangs through relatives or peers

**Pull Factors**

Pull factors are the grooming techniques used to gain the child’s attention and admiration that often involves the child’s insecurities or their desire for acceptance. These can include:

* Status or respect that the child hasn’t historically found in their day-to-day life
* The child may seek protection from peers who threaten harm to them or their families, or general protection (e.g. to stop being mugged on the streets for their phone again)
* Friendship, attention or affection, someone making the child feel special, valued, noticed or loved.
* Receiving gifts that the child wants such as drugs, alcohol, money, clothing
* Receiving something the child needs such as a safe place to stay, a sense of belonging or a brotherhood or something to fill spare time (e.g. if the child is excluded from education or has a reduced timetable with nothing else to engage them in school hours)
* Being given lifts, taken to new places, going to parties and meeting exciting new people who tell the child they’re very grown up for their age

When considering these push and pull factors, please take into account that if there no replacements anywhere else for the pull factors they can be difficult for a child to refuse or reject, as they often tap into the child’s deep-seated needs or aspirations.

Come back tomorrow to find out more about the indicators that show a child might be exploited into County Lines.

[4.5. minute video – Evan’s Story](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75s6lKRvjBM)

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**Wednesday Intranet Article**

Welcome back to our week long information series about County Lines, today we will be sharing some signs that may indicate a child has been exploited into County Lines.

County Lines does not stand alone as a form of exploitation by itself, it often intersects with other serious crimes such as sexual exploitation, violence, money laundering, human trafficking and gun and knife crime. It is possible for a child to be exploited in several ways at the same time.

It’s also a fluid form of exploitation that can respond to changing circumstances and mould it’s business model as required. In 2018 the recognised format of County Lines was the movement of drugs from cities and main towns out into the countryside, the rural and coastal areas and the ‘shires’. Although this still does happen and currently there are multiple Coventry children exploited into this activity and who are being found by authorities far away from Coventry, this is not the only County Lines activity that now takes place. Children can be moved from one side of our city to the other, to the town centre and back, to our outlying areas e.g. Warwick, Leamington Spa, Stratford and also between different houses. Child trafficking activity is not just international, it can occur if a child is forced to walk 200 yards down the street to another house to deal drugs.

During the Covid-19 pandemic where children are not able to move freely around the country using the rail network, there is evidence of children being dressed as critical workers to avoid detection and instead of selling drugs on the street, the children have been moved to unsafe houses and tower blocks instead, which brings a new set of risks for them.

The crime of cuckooing or home invasion has increased during the pandemic. Cuckooing typically involves an adult who legitimately owns or rents their home, being approached by a perpetrator who wishes to use their home as a base for their drug economy. This adult is usually an adult at risk who has additional vulnerabilities such as substance misuse, mental or physical health issues, learning disabilities or living in poverty. The criminal promises the individual rewards for letting them use their home e.g. money, free drugs or payment of bills. Exploited children and adults are then imprisoned in these properties to conduct the drug deals when buyers come to the house having phoned the burner phone to put in their drugs order beforehand. One the perpetrators are installed in a property in this way, the legitimate owners/renters are controlled by violence and intimidation and cannot refuse. The property is then used as a base for storing drugs, for packaging drugs and for selling. The exploited children and adults might have no heating, places to sleep or wash and are at constant risk of physical and sexual abuse from buyers arriving at the premises as well as the perpetrators and sometimes each other. Such properties can be known as ‘trap houses’ and if the property is abandoned or derelict, it’s a ‘bando’. Signs of a property being used as a trap house can include an unusual amount of traffic and visitors including late at night visits as well as anti-social behaviour. Activity such as this should be reported to the police on the non-emergency number of 101, unless someone is in immediate danger then its 999.

So how do we know if a child is involved in County Lines activity? There are several indicators that may suggest this is what is happening:

**What are the Indicators of County Lines?**

This is not an exhaustive list, but some common indicators of county lines are:

* Going missing from home or school
* Suddenly having lots of money, new possessions, new clothes or trainers that they cannot or will not account for
* Receiving more calls/texts than usual
* Being very protective of their mobile phone or having multiple phones (burner phones) or SIM cards
* Using new language, words or hand signs
* Changing their appearance, e.g. dressing in a particular way or style, or use of particular colours
* Reluctance or refusal to enter certain areas of the city or certain streets
* Changes in behaviour e.g. being scared, aggressive, distant or angry
* Talking about an individual or group who have a lot of influence over them
* Hanging around with individuals or groups that are older than them and breaking ties with old friends
* Dropping out of positive activities and hobbies
* Unexplained physical injuries and/or refusal to seek or accept medical treatment
* Travelling alone to places far from home or being found by services out of area
* Unexplained bus or train tickets
* Carrying drugs, large amounts of money or weapons
* Self-harming and substance misuse issues

Child Exploitation doesn’t fall into neat boxes, if a child is experiencing some of these indicators then it may be County Lines, or it may be exploitation of a slightly different type or multiple forms happening at once. If you’re concerned about a child then please share your concerns, you don’t need to know exactly what type of exploitation is occurring and you don’t need to have evidence. Agencies who safeguard children would much rather a concern was shared and turned out to be wrong than have a child who needs support, but nobody knows about it.

Childrens Services have regular meetings with multi agency colleagues to share information and have channels to report information to the police to help our police colleagues build a wider picture of what’s happening in the city. If a concern is investigated and nothing is found, then the information filed with the police may become very important at a later date.

Come back tomorrow to read more about language and how it can impact upon how a child is perceived.

[3 minute video – Are You Listening?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=UbY7zCJCi3w&feature=youtu.be)

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**Thursday Intranet Article**

Welcome back to our week long information series about County Lines, we hope you are finding it interesting. Today we would like to discuss language with you from a couple of different angles.

The first is that County Lines has its own terminology and vocabulary meaning that it’s not always easy to understand what exploited children are saying if you overhear it. The Childrens Society have produced a [slang dictionary](https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/35205/the_slang_dictionary_by_the_childrens_society) that includes some common terms

The second is that County Lines and looking at the risks to children outside the family home (Contextual Safeguarding) can be a new lens to look through for many people, as historically agencies have been focused upon harm to children *within* the home. You may be accustomed to the media portrayal of groups of young people hanging around in the street engaging in crime and causing a nuisance and if you use social media you will probably know that people like to add their comments to such news articles too and the comments are usually negative. It is very common for us to see individuals as either criminals or as victims, with no nuance in between and this is particularly true of young people.

However within Child Exploitation it is possible for children to be both a perpetrator AND a victim, but it can be very easy to just see the perpetrator and not consider the child to be a victim at the same time, particularly in violent or upsetting crimes e.g. gun and knife injuries or fatalities. However, as we have seen throughout this information series, some children do not have the choice and are not able to refuse their perpetrators due to the repercussions of harm to them and their families. The sheer level of violence threatened to exploited children is significant and West Midlands Police have confirmed that horrendous crimes such as murder, attempted murder, torture, kidnap and serious assaults have all been linked with gang activity across our region.

As professionals we need to recognise why children sometimes commit these crimes. We need to acknowledge that children can be under tremendous pressure and threat from perpetrators to act in the ways they do and that sometimes for them, it feels like there is no choice.

In order to recognise this, sometimes our language that we use needs to take this into account. Phrases such as ‘selling herself for drugs’, ‘child prostitute’, ‘putting himself at risk’ ‘promiscuous’, ‘drug running’, ‘choosing the gang lifestyle’ all convey that the child has a choice about their actions and does not reflect the level of coercion that the child might be experiencing. Such victim blaming language minimises the lived experience of exploited children and can lead to a child being considered responsible for what has happened to them. Such language can be recorded in case notes or in formal meetings and possibly even in court where the perpetrator is on trial.

Please take the time to reflect upon your language when discussing exploited children and make any necessary changes. The NPCC and Victim Support have produced this [Appropriate Language Guidance for Professionals](https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/35203/appropriate_language_guidance_for_professionals) that you may find useful.

Remember! Children cannot consent to their own exploitation.

Please come back and join us tomorrow for our final day where we will be sharing some messages and thoughts that we hope you will take away with you.

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**Friday Intranet Article**

Welcome the last in our information series on County Lines, since Monday we have shared with you what County Lines is, some push and pull factors that a child might be experiencing, indicators that a child might be involved in County Lines and the language that we as professionals use when discussing exploited children.

We hope you have found this week useful and interesting and would like to leave you with some thoughts to take into the coming weeks and beyond.

Remember! Children and young people:

* May not understand or recognise they are being exploited
* Need to feel safe and heard in order to talk
* Will often distrust the police and other adults in authority
* May have committed offences as part of their exploitation
* May behave aggressively as this is a common response to trauma
* May not always look vulnerable or act how we expect a victim should act
* Can be frightened of what might happen to them next
* Needs people to look beyond the obvious to protect them from harm

County Lines is not going to disappear, there are at least 16 County Lines operating out of Coventry and the way they continue to operate will flex and mould according to the changing of the pandemic rules. County Lines is a business that makes a lot of money for criminals who do not care about the lives of the children they exploit and abuse.

Please remember that children exploited in County Lines are victims of child abuse, and if you’re worried about a child, to share your concern.

[8 minute video - Trapped](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=sgM6ju2Xi-0)

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