

HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD: 11 JULY 2019

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES,
LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

COUNTY LINES AND CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Board with an overview of child criminal exploitation (CCE) within the County, including county lines.

Link to the local Health and Care System

2. The Vulnerability Executive, a sub group of the Strategic Partnership Board, provides the strategic leadership and governance for the work on county lines and child criminal exploitation.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that the Health and Wellbeing Board notes the contents of the report.

Background

County Lines

4. The term County Lines is a term used to describe situations where young people may be internally trafficked for the purposes of criminal exploitation. The current County Lines criminal business model thrives on the exploitation of vulnerable adults and children to move, hold, package and deliver drugs. This enables perpetrators to maximise their profits and reduce the risk of links to criminal activity as it distances them from the supply and distribution transactions.
5. There is a correlation between missing children and criminal activity, it is believed that children are being used as runners, cutting and bagging drugs, collecting debts and cuckooing premises (a crime in which drug dealers take over the home of a vulnerable person in order to use it as a base for drug dealing). Criminal exploitation interlinks with a number of multiple vulnerabilities and offences including exposure to physical and emotional violence; neglect and sexual abuse.
6. Drug users looking to buy drugs place orders by ringing a County Line number which is distributed via word of mouth, social media advertising and business cards. High level Serious Organised Crime Groups (SOC) hold the "County

Line “ number taking orders, promoting deals and under cutting other local dealers.

7. Young children are regarded as “clean skins” as they often have yet to come to the attention of the courts, receive lesser sentences and are easier to groom, isolate, manipulate and encourage into debt bondage (where a person's services are used as security for the repayment for a debt)The sense of belonging and “family” is used to manipulate the children.
8. The indicators and vulnerabilities in respect of criminal exploitation are not dissimilar to the identification of the signs of Child Sexual Exploitation. Missing from home, arrested in possession of drugs, carrying a weapon, unexplained injuries, and additional phones, found in a “Cuckooed” address, family conflict and not in education.
9. In a report published earlier in the year, Keeping Kids Safe: improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation, the Children’s Commissioner warned *‘of an epidemic of drug gangs being responsible for a child protection crisis; not dissimilar to the grooming scandals that have blighted many towns and Cities. In every area of the Country vulnerable children are being recruited into county lines activity. This is a national priority, many local authorities unaware of the scale and number of children affected.’*
10. According to the National Crime Agency there are 5,866 mapped Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) groups in the UK; with an estimated membership of 39,414 young individuals.
11. The use of violence including sexual violence isn’t uncommon. The most vulnerable children will be targeted who have often suffered trauma early in life; many being victims themselves, or witnessing domestic abuse, older siblings or parent’s being actively involved or associated by debt bondage to Organised Crime Groups.
12. Potentially a child involved with serious youth violence could be both a victim and a perpetrator. This requires professionals to assess and support his/her welfare and wellbeing needs at the same time as assessing and responding in both a safeguarding and criminal justice capacity.
13. The impact of CCE is devastating leaving families isolated, unable to protect their child and in fear of reprisal. Implications for mental health are profound, anxiety disorders, antisocial personality disorder; self-harm including suicide attempts are not uncommon.

Leicestershire

14. There are currently five confirmed county lines which are either active or have been active in the past six months in Leicestershire. Two further lines have recently been identified linked to London. County lines work in both directions

with drugs coming into and leaving the LLR area with confirmed links to West Midlands, Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and London.

15. Nationally, methods of transportation vary, however the rail network and hire cars are extensively used. In Leicestershire the market towns of Loughborough, Hinckley, Market Harborough and Coalville have been affected. The true scale of criminal exploitation in LLR is not yet known.
16. The analysis of Leicestershire data shows that boys are reported missing more frequently than girls, the most prevalent age for both is 12-15 years. The three boys this quarter who are reported as the Counties most frequent mispers are all believed to be involved in County Line activity. Multi agency working is a priority to develop local national picture around drug supply, current trends and criminality.

Leicestershire's Response

17. Leicestershire Children and Family Services have worked well with partners to raise the profile of and tackle CSE and Missing. Exploitation of children is now being recognised in a wider context; whilst not losing sight of children who are going missing and being sexually exploited. CSE is now seen through a broader understanding of child exploitation, encompassing criminal exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and other forms of adolescent vulnerability.
18. In Leicestershire, the Authority strives to continuously improve its response; understanding contextual safeguarding issues that mean there are child protection concerns from beyond the family. This is increased for adolescents who are influenced by their peers. Therefore, understanding and reducing the risk of harm outside the family home is imperative.
19. Operation Lionheart commenced on 9th April which culminated in three weeks of intensive police activity. 124 warrants were executed with 87 people arrested, 82 of which were charged. 15 vulnerable adults were identified and 15 vulnerable children were found to be engaged in some form of criminal activity.
20. Children and Family Services have recruited to a second Service Manager post in First Response with a portfolio that includes operational responsibility for CCE, CSE, Missing and consolidates this with a successful domestic abuse pilot co-located within the CSE hub at Wigston Police Station. Responsibility for the Out of Hours service is also included and has recently successfully co-located to the hub at Wigston. This will offer the additional resource of a dedicated phone line to respond to missing children. The post will strengthen an integrated front door and partnership approach to CCE across Leicestershire.
21. This will embed an integrated approach to all forms of child exploitation, led by the First Response Service providing an effective response to all forms of criminal exploitation including youth violence, exposure to drug activity and sexual abuse.

22. The Service's staff and partners have received training in identification of CCE, and the "Gang association Tool" has been introduced; the county continue to receive a consistently higher proportion of referrals compared to the city. Work has also taken place to raise awareness with schools, GPs and the community safety partnerships. A key issue locally is ensuring that partners and professionals are able to spot the signs of criminal exploitation and to support the identification of vulnerable young people.
23. Regionally Leicestershire are leaders in the development of a regional response to tackle CCE and develop improved information sharing across borders. A CCE pathway to services and resources is currently being developed.
24. The CSE hub works closely with both specialist detectives within the hub, neighbourhood police teams and the force intelligence bureau. There are a number of criminal investigations underway, and as a key partner agency we are sharing information working alongside the police to develop intelligence, association mappings, risk assessments and safety plans for children who are involved in this activity.
25. The monthly strategic partnership CSE Meetings also creates an opportunity for the police to share information around enforcement; social care can then develop a partnership response to targeted intervention and support any victims or witnesses that may be involved.
26. County Lines is identified as one of three priority vulnerabilities in the Serious and Organised Crime Profile assessed a high priority. The recommendations in the profile for county lines are:-
 - Examine the correlation between repeat missing children, looked after children, those excluded from school and being criminally exploited in county lines markets
 - Raise awareness across all public sector agencies regarding the signs of criminal exploitation in people involved in county lines
 - Raise awareness with the wider public in LLR of the signs of criminal exploitation of people involved in county lines
 - Ensure criminal exploitation is recognised as a vulnerability in young people which is an equivalent risk as other neglect and abuse.
27. The work on county lines is governed through the Vulnerability Executive that reports to the Strategic Partnership Board.

Background papers

Keeping Kids Safe: improving safeguarding responses to gang violence and criminal exploitation

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf>

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Relevant Impact Assessments**Equality and Human Rights Implications**

The children and young people involved with County Lines and Criminal Exploitation are highly vulnerable, therefore every effort needs to be made to identify these vulnerabilities and ensure support is provided to reduce and mitigate the risk.

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