

County Lines Network Policy

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Reviewing Panel: Standards, Staffing and Curriculum

Safeguarding Children and Young People At Risk of County Lines or Gang Involvement

County Lines Network

County Lines supply class A drugs (primarily crack cocaine and heroin) from an urban hub into rural towns or county locations. This is facilitated by a group who may not necessarily be affiliated as a gang, but who have developed networks across geographical boundaries to access and exploit existing drug markets in these areas. (County Lines, Violence, Exploitation and Drug Supply, National Crime Agency 2017). CLN operate as drug dealing businesses and are motivated by profit.

Urban Street Gangs

Are defined as a relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:

- (1) See themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group,
- (2) Engage in a range of criminal activity and violence
- (3) Identify with or lay claim over territory
- (4) Have some form of identifying structural feature and;
- (5) Are in conflict with other, similar gangs (Dying to Belong, 2009)

Peer Groups

A peer group can be defined as:

“a relatively small, unorganised and transient group composed of peers who share the same space and a common history. Involvement in crime will be mostly non-serious in nature and not integral to the identity of the group”.

(Taken from: Safeguarding Young People at Risk from Gang Activity, HM Government. Adapted from Hallsworth S and Young T (2004) Getting Real about Gangs, Criminal Justice Matters (55) 123).

Peer groups are not within the scope of this guidance

Criminal Exploitation (CE)

The exploitation of children and vulnerable adults by CLN is known as criminal exploitation (CE) or child criminal exploitation (CCE).

It involves exploitative situations, contexts, and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive ‘something’ (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, friendship, status, gifts, money) when they complete a task on behalf of another individual or group; this task is usually of a criminal nature. A child who is being criminally exploited will usually not recognise that this is the case and may believe that they are in control of the situation. Those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources.

Violence, coercion, and intimidation are common. Involvement in exploitative relationships is characterised by the child or young person’s limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability. (Adapted from Knowsley Safeguarding Board)

Who is at Risk (Groups and Locations)?

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) (2015) identified individual risk factors for youth violence and gang membership. More information can be found at Early Intervention Foundation (Stephanie Waddell) 2015- Preventing gang and Youth Violence: Spotting Signals of Risk and Supporting Children and Young People an Overview <http://www.eif.org.uk/publication/preventing-gang-and-yough-violence/>. The study found that there were few strong predictors for gang membership on its own and considerable overlap with predictors for youth violence.

Groups who are at increased risk

Boys and young men aged between 12-18 are the most common group involved although younger children, girls and young women may also be recruited.

CLN networks deliberately target **children and young people who appear to be easier to exploit** because of existing vulnerabilities or who they believe will escape detection. Those with learning difficulties, mental health and/or substance misuse problems, or those who have experienced family conflict/breakdown or trauma may be at increased risk.

Children in Care, in the Youth Justice System and those not in mainstream education or excluded from school are at increased risk as are those who have older siblings and/or parents or partners who are actively involved or associated with either CLN or USGs or live in communities affected by USG activity.

Locations where groups of vulnerable young people are found such as children's homes, pupil referral units (PRUs), special education needs provisions and supported lodgings may also be targeted for recruitment.

Children and Young people from other areas who are already gang involved are sometimes placed in Essex by their home local authority. This can be because they are at risk in their home area, as a part of a gang exit strategy or as a way of managing their risky behaviour. They may remain engaged in or resume the behaviour that led to them being placed out of their home area in the first place.

Some recent immigrant populations may also be at risk due to previous exposure to violence, high levels of deprivation and being socially isolated.

In some cases, children with **no obvious vulnerabilities** and no previous criminal or anti-social involvement will be targeted as they are considered less likely to attract the attention of authorities. They are sometimes known as 'clean'.

Grooming and coercion

Children and young people involved in CLN and USGs are exposed to grooming tactics where promises including money, status, designer clothing and protection draw the child or young person in and threats of violence and retribution are used to keep them involved. Children and young people groomed in this way may not see themselves as exploited, particularly when they believe they will be rewarded with large sums of money or a higher status in the group. The process of grooming has been compared to that used by perpetrators of organised CSE.

Peer grooming often takes place in schools, via social media, and in the local community. Music videos on YouTube glamourise the lifestyle and entice children from wider social and geographical areas. The methods used can lead a child to believe they have made an active choice to become involved. At the same time, the situation leaves them feeling frightened, unable to see a way out, and unable to refuse to do what they are told.

Threats, coercion, and violence may be used to force children to do what the gang or CLN wants. They may be punished for making mistakes or failing to meet drugs sales targets, losing phones, SIM cards and/or cash. These punishments can be violent; stabbing, injuries (i.e. burns) and the use of acid for example.

Debt Bondage

The use of debt bondage is a regular feature in the exploitation of children and young people by gangs. The young person may be groomed by a member of the group who will give them money/gifts. They will then be told that they need to do something in return for the money/gifts before being threatened and then forced to participate in drug dealing to repay the debt. In addition, whilst in possession of drugs, children and young people may be victims of staged offences, set up to enable those in charge to maintain a hold over the young person who is then told they must work for free to replace the cost of the stolen drugs/lost item. The debt may also be owed by a family member and this debt is then used to control the young person.

Crime and Violence

CLN and USG involvement are a risk factor for children and young people becoming involved in youth violence and knife crime. Young people involved in county lines or gangs may be expected to commit violent acts and refusal to do so can result in them becoming victims. Involvement tends to accelerate a shift to more serious and more lucrative crime. Violence (including sexual violence) may also become normalised to a point where the threshold for tolerance is raised higher as the child or young person becomes desensitised to its impact. Violence is then used by them as a prevention and self-defence mechanism to maintain their own safety.

Children and young people can become hyper-vigilant and may carry a weapon for protection. They will constantly need to risk assess situations because of a pervasive fear of retribution leading to a high level of stress ultimately impacting on their mental health and well-being.

They may also be at risk of serious violence and even death.

Sexual Violence

Young people may be at risk of sexual violence: sexual assault, rape, indecent images being taken and shared as part of initiation, revenge or punishment.

In gangs, sexual violence may be used as an initiation activity. It is often peer on peer and boys or young men may be pressured into acts of sexual aggression by others in the gang (e.g. boy in a gang forced to rape a girl as a punishment to her). Young people may also be coerced into performing sexual acts to repay drug debts owed to dealers following loss through arrest, robbery or personal use. Exposure to sexual violence can cause multi-layered long-lasting effects including: depression, low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, panic and anxiety disorders, and self-harm and increased suicide risk.

When a professional suspects that a child or young person is at risk of CSE within a gang context they should refer to the LSCB Child Sexual Exploitation Toolkit and follow their own agency's safeguarding procedures.

Missing Episodes

There is a connection between some children and young people going missing and involvement in county lines drug dealing.

Health and Mental Health

Children and young people involved in USGs and CLN activity may use “plugging” (concealing drugs internally). Historically, this method has been used to transport drugs between export hubs (like London) and the rural market. However, it is now more commonly used for storing drugs. “This poses significant health risks, as those concealing the drugs will often do so for extended periods of time”. (National Crime Agency 2017). Children and young people may insert and carry drugs in their rectum or vagina and may store “wrapped” drugs in their cheeks which they can swallow if approached by police.

Children and young people involved in CLN or USGs face a high burden of mental illness. They are at increased risk of conduct disorder, anti-social personality disorder, anxiety psychosis, and substance misuse compared to other young people in the criminal justice system.

Long-term exposure to violence is a risk factor for depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Unmet basic needs

Children and young people internally trafficked as part of county lines drug dealing operations may live in dangerous and unhygienic environments whilst dealing. They may also suffer tiredness and sleep deprivation due to their illegal activities and are likely to have poor attendance and attainment in education.

Cuckooing

The home or premises of a vulnerable adult (often a drug user) is taken over and used to deal drugs. The vulnerable adult may be prevented from leaving and have little or no control over what happens within their home. Violence and intimidation may be used to obtain and retain access and control the property. Vulnerable females have also been targeted by men who form a ‘relationship’ with them in order to use their property to deal drugs.

Children and young people who are based in cuckooed premises may also be at risk from the person in whose premises they are placed and their associates.

Barriers to Disclosing and Getting Help

Approach

Not responding to CCE as a safeguarding concern can put up barriers. Children and young people may have shared their story many times with professionals and be unwilling to do so again. Workers and agencies need to be positive, consistent and persistent in their approach.

Reprisals

Children and young people are unlikely to report gang related crime committed against them including sexual violence. They may fear retaliation against them or their families and have a lack of confidence in the authorities’ ability to protect them.

Control by others

They may also be guided by adult or higher status young people in the CLN or USG about what they should say and how they should say it to professionals or agencies. They may also present to agencies with unrelated adults whose role is to ensure they do not disclosed what is happening to

them. There is some evidence that young people involved in CLN have been coached on what to say if they are picked up by the police, for example making 'no comment' interviews.

Consequences for them

They may be fearful about what will happen to them if they do disclose, for example getting into trouble with the police or breaching a court order.

Mistrust of services

Children and young people with a history of trauma including previous abuse maybe mistrustful of adults and services.

Shame

They may be ashamed or embarrassed by what they have done.

Perceptions

They may not see themselves as exploited. On the contrary they may feel a sense of loyalty to those who are exploiting them. They may believe that the CLN or USG is looking after and supporting them. They may also see themselves as an autonomous drug dealer.

Money and status

The child or young person may have money or rewards that they have not had before. They may feel they have status and power.

Structural inequalities

Such as race, gender, ethnicity, class, culture and education can also be barriers to getting help.

Other Information

Aliases and Street Names

Young people involved with USG or CLN, often have an alias or 'street name'. They will refer to their real name as their 'government name' and peers will generally only refer to them by their alias not knowing what the individual's real name is.

Girls and Young Women

Young women and girls may be involved with gangs and be both victims and perpetrators of violence. "The MOPAC Knife Crime Strategy highlights that 10 per cent of knife crime offenders are girls or young women. The involvement of girls as offenders as well as victims must be recognised and a differentiated approach should be taken to responding to knife crime amongst this cohort". (ALDCS the response of London Children's Services to serious youth violence and knife crime, May 18). They may become associated with USGs/CLNs through known members including family members and partners who are already involved. Their identity and role may be fluid and females may be used, protected and mistrusted by other gang members. They may also be used to attract rival males into danger, for hiding and carrying weapons, cash, and drugs and for sexual exploitation and the exploitation of others (recruitment).

Social Media

“The links between young people’s use of social media and face-to-face violence are most pronounced for young people involved in gangs... For many young people, their self-esteem is increasingly based not on what they think about themselves but on what others think about them’. (Social Media as a Catalyst for Youth Violence, The Dawes Unit 2017)

The status activities and rivalry of gangs are often played out over various social media forums. Social networking sites offer gangs a way of enhancing their reputation, status and branding while diminishing the standing of rival groups through negative commenting, posting provocative videos and direct threats of harm. This activity can also facilitate recruitment of other young people seeking to feel part of something and enticed by the excitement and glamour of what is being presented to them online.

HMI Probation 2017 report on the inspection of the Work of YOTs to Protect the Public found that social media was directly related to the offence in one of four cases it looked at and had been a catalyst for some of the most serious and violent offences particularly in relation to gang involvement.

Local young people associated with gangs and county lines activity have produced and publicised music videos on YouTube. While these videos were initially filmed in the local community and openly referred to drug dealing they have evolved over time to include references to other rival individuals, mention weapons and violence, and have been filmed in ‘trap hours’ with the visible ‘cooking up’ of substances taking place in the background.

The development of hidden forms of media such as ‘WhatsApp’ and ‘Snapchat’ allow posting of videos which quickly disappear.

Warning Signs

As well as **risk factors** which make an individual or group more vulnerable to involvements in CLN and USG there are also **warning signs** that can be used to alert professionals to the fact that a child or young person may be involved or becoming involved. The checklist below highlights some signs to look out for and can support decision making and indicate whether a further assessment is required. **It does not replace the need for professional judgement or full assessment in any individual case.** The reasons behind any warning signs that are identified should be explored with the child or young person.

Strong Signs

- Arrested/Charged/Convicted of possession with the intent to supply Class A drugs (particularly heroin and crack cocaine) or with large amounts of drugs
- Arrested away from own home area
- Arrested/found at an address which appears to be ‘cuckooed’
- Arrested/found with or accompanied by older non-related males and females believed to be involved in drug dealing
- Unexplained physical injuries for which reluctant/unwilling to seek/receive medical treatment. Or disclosure of assault which is then withdrawn
- Arrested/ found with a weapon, particularly a knife
- Close association with pro-criminal peers who are involved in CLN or USG activity and/or associating with known dealers/adults involved in CLN/USG
- Multiple mobiles/changing phones frequently and/or significant increase in phone calls/texts/messages from unknown numbers which they are unwilling to explain

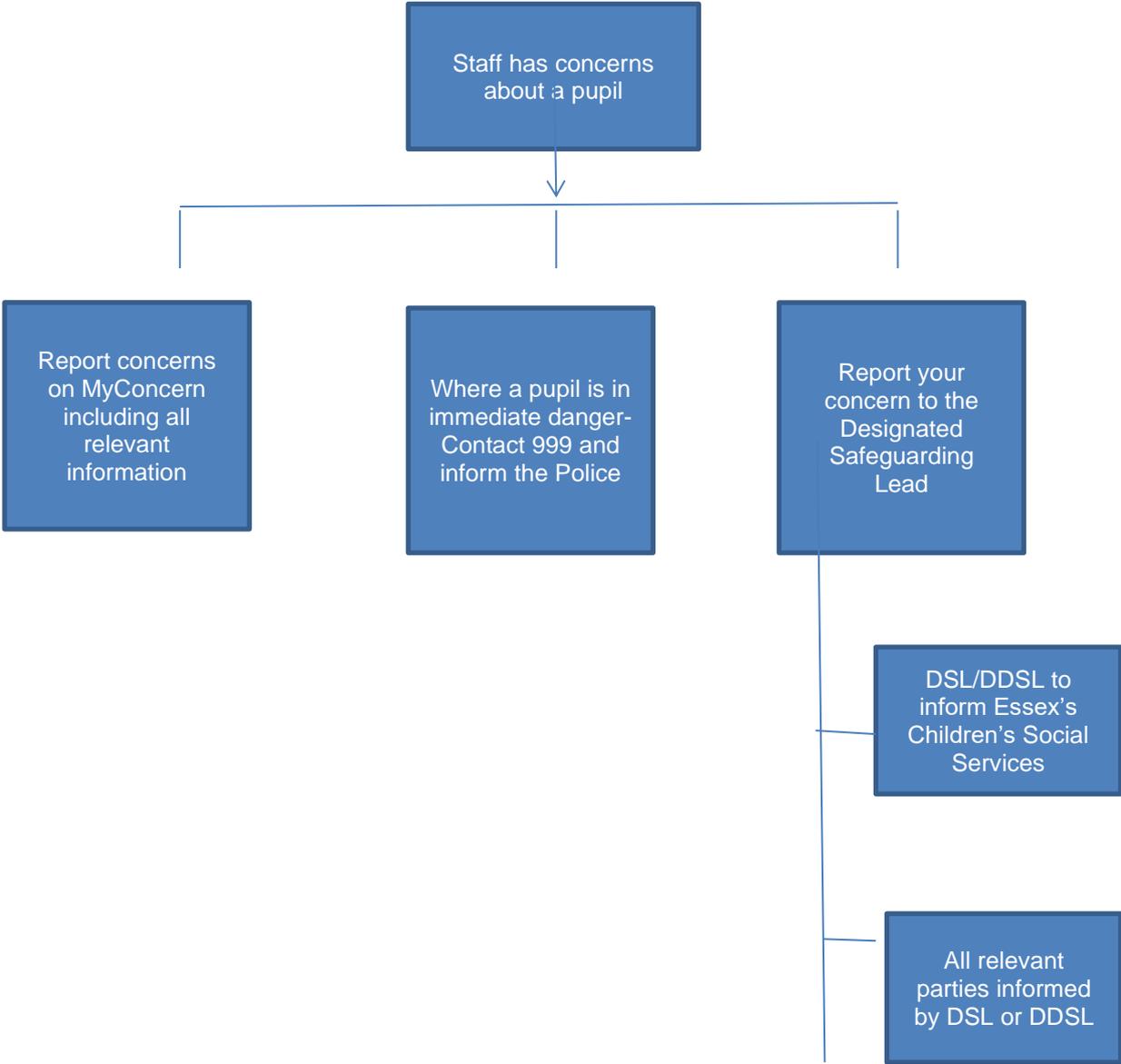
- Goes missing from home or school, sometimes for prolonged periods
- Has experienced abduction or forced imprisonment
- Appears in YouTube videos with known gang members
- Frequent train or other travel/in possession of lots of train tickets or similar with no obvious explanation or means of paying for travel
- Agencies unable to engage young person

Moderate signs

- Increase in aggressive behaviour/use of intimidation or threats
- Unexplained money or possessions/increased interest in money
- Parental/carer concerns
- Increased use of drugs and or alcohol
- Expressions around invincibility and not caring
- Changed friendship groups and no contact with old friends
- Concerned by the presence of unknown youths in their neighbourhoods
- Loss of interest in school, decline in attendance or achievement
- Suspected possession of knife or other weapon
- Identification with USG or CLN. Including appearing to look up to or respect those involved or being friends or claiming friendship with those involved
- Dropped out of positive activities
- Refuses/scared to enter certain geographical areas

Procedure following concerns for a child

Report any concerns to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)/Deputy DSL (DDSL) immediately using MyConcern. If concerns are serious and in your opinion there is an immediate/imminent risk to the safety of an individual, please speak to the DSL/DDSL immediately before recording the concern on MyConcern.



Signed: 
Head Teacher

Dated: 6th June 2022

Signed: 
Chair of Trustees

Dated: 6th June 2022