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# Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum

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This report is about the findings from three joint targeted area inspections, carried out in the spring of 2018 that examined 'the multi-agency response to child exploitation and children missing from home, care or education'. It is an addendum to our 2016 report: 'Time to listen' – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children'.

This report considers the most significant learning from three inspections of local authority areas with a focus on criminal exploitation of children. The inspections were carried out jointly by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. The inspections reviewed practice in children's social care, education, health services, the police, youth offending services and probation services.

The report recognises that much has been done by agencies to address child sexual exploitation, but it calls for agencies to learn the lessons of the past in responding to criminal exploitation of children and county lines. All children are vulnerable to exploitation, and agencies, locally and nationally, do not yet fully understand the scale or level of risk to children. Family-focused services are not always appropriate for dealing with the exploitation of children outside of a family setting – agencies need to be flexible and respond quickly to changing risks.

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## Introduction

The programme of joint targeted area inspections (JTAs) began in January 2016 and brings together four inspectorates – Ofsted, Care Quality Commission (CQC), HMI Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and HMI Probation (HMIP) – to ‘examine how well agencies are working together in a local area to help and protect children’. Each set of JTAs focuses in depth on a particular issue.

We conducted these JTAs as part of our process of re-visiting previous deep dive themes. We wanted to focus again on child sexual exploitation and children missing but also extend the scope of the inspections to include criminal exploitation. We know that many children who are criminally exploited are also sexually abused and/or exploited. This report should be read as an addendum to our 2016 report: ‘Time to listen’ – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children<sup>1</sup>.

This report is based on inspections of three local areas: Greenwich, Southend-On-Sea and Dorset.

This report is an opportunity to share the most significant learning from these inspections to help drive improvements in practice, knowledge and understanding around identifying and responding to the exploitation of children. The report should **not** be read as a summary of all of the findings from the three inspections. A letter that provides an overview of all the findings has been published for each inspection.

These JTAs, beginning in February 2018, examined the multi-agency response to **child exploitation, including criminal exploitation**. The Home Office defines child criminal exploitation as:

‘Child Criminal Exploitation... 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... includes for instance children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Time to listen – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children; Ofsted, 2016; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-inspections-of-child-sexual-exploitation-and-missing-children](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-inspections-of-child-sexual-exploitation-and-missing-children).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults’, Home Office, 2018; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines).



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As we reported in 2016, understanding exploitation of children 'is not simply about identifying the characteristics of children who are vulnerable to abuse... it requires a wider perspective and understanding of the contexts, situations and relationships in which exploitation [of children] is likely to manifest'.<sup>3</sup>

There is a real need for urgency in this work. In these inspections, we found that there were children who were criminally and sexually exploited in all the areas visited. We found that some agencies were identifying risks to children and responding well to those children who were being criminally exploited. However, some agencies were too late in recognising the scale or the extent of the problem in their local area. For some children, this meant that risk was not addressed quickly enough.

Children who are being exploited cannot wait for agencies that are lagging behind or failing to recognise this issue. We must ensure that the mistakes that some partners made in being slow to recognise the risk of child sexual exploitation in their local areas are not repeated in response to other forms of exploitation, including criminal.

In this report, we have included examples of the good work we have seen across all agencies, as well as areas for improvement in addressing the exploitation of children.

All case examples have been anonymised. We have not identified which areas the children were living in. We have also changed the details and characteristics of the children and cases so that they cannot be identified.

## Background

Criminal exploitation has received considerable media coverage in the last year and there is a particular focus on the risks of county lines activity. This is when individuals or gangs use vulnerable children and adults to transport and sell Class A drugs, primarily from urban areas into market or coastal towns or rural areas to establish new drug markets or take over existing ones. They also use children to transport and hide weapons and to secure dwellings of vulnerable people in the area, so that they can use them as a base from which to sell drugs.

County lines is about modern slavery, human trafficking and exploitation, alongside drug supply and violent crime.

It is a highly lucrative illegal business model. Those who are running county lines can earn thousands of pounds per day. The adults running these networks are removed from the frontline activity of dealing – they exploit children who are at high risk transporting and selling drugs often many miles from home.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Carlene Firmin, 'Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation and associated vulnerabilities: A briefing for inspectorates', University of Bedfordshire, The International Centre Researching Child Sexual Exploitation, Violence and Trafficking;  
[www.beds.ac.uk/ic/publications/briefings](http://www.beds.ac.uk/ic/publications/briefings).

There are high levels of violence and intimidation linked to this activity. Children are often groomed and/or tricked into working before they recognise the dangers. We have seen during these inspections that children can be very quickly groomed into criminal activity often before parents or professionals realise what is happening.

Jake came from a loving, caring and supportive family. Until the age of 13 he was doing very well at school and was described as a caring and active child who played basketball and represented his school team in national competitions.

Over a few weeks, his behaviour changed rapidly and he became aggressive, abusive and dishonest. He disengaged from his family and from school. His mother thought initially that he might be being bullied at school and kept asking him about this. In fact, Jake had been introduced to some men by boys at his school. At first, he was approached and asked to take a package to a local house and offered £30 to do so. He did this a few times but was then given train tickets and packages of drugs to transport to a house in a town 100 miles away and promised much more money. It was only when he arrived at the house that he found it was full of adults taking drugs, including injecting heroin, and he realised he was at risk and had become involved in something beyond his control.

Jake was, for a time, not able to leave that house and while he was there he was not given food and found the adults to be very aggressive. One of them stole some of the drugs he was carrying and because of this he was now indebted to the dealer and forced to 'work' for free and threatened with violence if he did not continue to do so.

As such, he frequently went missing from home and was found repeatedly in houses across the country living in very neglectful conditions. He was forced by his dealer to carry drugs internally and on one occasion when he lost some of the drugs he was carrying he was brutally attacked by other boys involved in county lines. Jake would often return home suffering with injuries, such as stab wounds, as a result of the violence linked to county lines.

Jake was eventually taken into care with the agreement of his parents due to concerns about his safety and the safety of his siblings. However, while in care, he moved many times, frequently went missing and his mother feared for his life as he was still subject to threats of extreme violence, as were his family. His mother has lost her job, experienced depression and there has been a severe impact on the well-being and sense of safety for all the family, including his brothers and sisters.





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Some children are forced to carry the drugs in harmful ways that are abusive and could result in their death. For example, 'plugging' is commonly used, which is when children can be forced by an adult or another child to insert and carry drugs in their rectum or vagina.

This is a common feature of county lines activity and a clear example of child sexual abuse. We also found in our inspections many children who were both criminally and sexually exploited by the gangs or individual running the county line. We also found examples where sexual violence was used as a form of punishment.

Children may be sent to another area of the country to live with a vulnerable adult whose home has been taken over by the gang in exchange for a continued supply of drugs. This is known as 'cuckooing'.

While living in a vulnerable adult's home, far away from their own home, children may be required to set up or be part of a new drug market or expand an existing one. This involves children putting themselves in extremely dangerous situations with vulnerable adults who are strangers who want to buy Class A drugs from them. Other dealers in the area may also target these children to prevent them taking over their 'patch'. Some children have been stabbed and killed by rival gangs or dealers. Often, the first time that the police become aware of county lines activity in their area is as a result of a significant increase in knife crime and youth violence.

County lines may involve the commission of the offences of 'slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour' and 'human trafficking' as defined by the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Children's travel may be 'arranged and facilitated by a person, with the view to them being exploited', which amounts to human trafficking according to section 2 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Children may then be forced to work for the drug dealer, often held in the vulnerable adult's home against their will and under the force of threat if they do not do as they are told. This meets the definition of 'slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour' in section 1 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Tactics used by perpetrators include staging a fake robbery where the drugs and money concealed on the child are stolen by their own gang. In these cases, the child believes they have lost money, drugs or phone contacts that are valuable to those running the county lines and that they must work for free to repay the debt. Gangs might also threaten the safety of their family or parents, including directly at their homes.

Younger siblings are often recruited through fear, violence and intimidation against the family of older exploited children. All criminally exploited children are at risk of neglect, emotional harm, sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as substance misuse and extreme forms of violence. The trauma caused by intimidation, violence, witnessing drug use or overdoses and continued threats to themselves or to family members leads to significant mental and physical ill-health of exploited children.

While being exploited, sent away from home or becoming a victim of modern slavery and/or human trafficking, those around the child may know something is wrong but not know what. These children will go missing, perhaps infrequently at first but over time for longer and longer periods. Their mental health will suffer and they may become withdrawn, or display aggressive or violent behaviours. Children who were once captain of their school football team, musically gifted or academically excelling may lose interest in activities that were once very important to them. Recognising the signs of criminal exploitation is crucial.

County lines activity is a problem across England. In a report from the National Crime Agency, 88% (of the 38 police forces that responded to a survey) reported county lines activity.<sup>4</sup>

The National Crime Agency recently assessed that there are more than 1,500 lines operating nationally, with evidence of increasing levels of violence. County lines activity affects many areas of the country, including market and seaside towns and areas of relative affluence, such as Tunbridge Wells and Cheltenham, that we might not naturally associate with organised crime.

A recent case in Gloucestershire illustrates the extent of county lines and the risks to children and vulnerable adults.

In September this year, drug-dealing gangs were given jail sentences of more than 200 years. The police launched 'Operation Tarak' in 2016, which has seen more than 200 arrests linked to county lines. Adult offenders receiving sentences were from London, Birmingham, Cheltenham, Hertfordshire, Coventry, Lincolnshire and Surrey. Thirty-seven children were involved, some as young as 13.

Two high-profile murders in 2016 brought county lines to the police's attention. These were of a 17-year-old child who was exploited to sell drugs in Cheltenham and a vulnerable adult murdered by two teenagers who had taken over his house in Gloucester to use as a drugs base.

## Findings

- All children are vulnerable to exploitation, not just specific groups.
- Children's needs and safety must come first. Well-trained practitioners need to respond to the range of risks they face and 'stay with' the child.
- Not all agencies in local areas are sharing their intelligence to enable them to recognise, understand and respond to the risks of exploitation to children.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/1247-latest-threat-update-estimates-at-least-720-county-lines-drug-dealing-lines](http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/1247-latest-threat-update-estimates-at-least-720-county-lines-drug-dealing-lines).

- Agencies should learn from, and build on, successful multi-agency work to respond to child sexual exploitation while also developing best practice on wider exploitation.

## Part 1: Protecting exploited children

### All children are vulnerable to exploitation

All children are vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation, not just specific groups. The scale and nature of child exploitation in England in the 21st century are shocking. The impact is devastating for the children, their families and their communities. Professionals and parents should not assume that the most vulnerable children are the only vulnerable children.

Children targeted for the purpose of county lines come from a wide range of backgrounds. Local children can be groomed into selling drugs, as well as children from outside the area. County lines activity is dynamic and perpetrators will change their method of exploitation quickly, such as by targeting new groups of children to exploit in order to avoid detection.

Examples include:

- grooming affluent children attending public school, who are less likely to be identified as 'drug running' by the police
- targeting vulnerable older children, such as those who are neglected and less likely to be reported missing by parents
- targeting other groups of children who may be particularly vulnerable, such as those who have special educational needs, looked after children, children with poor mental health and children not in full-time education.

Exploited children come from a wide range of backgrounds. For some, their homes will be a place of safety and security; for others this will not be the case.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the child's home circumstances, the risks from exploitation spread beyond risks to the child. Their families may also be threatened or be highly vulnerable to violence from the perpetrators of criminal exploitation.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Growing up neglected: a multi-agency response to older children', Ofsted, July 2018; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/growing-up-neglected-a-multi-agency-response-to-older-children](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/growing-up-neglected-a-multi-agency-response-to-older-children).



We saw variable practice in how partnerships worked together with families in protecting and supporting children, including some examples of strong and effective practice.

In one area, families are consistently included in interventions and support to exploited children. Professionals do not work with children in isolation.

We heard how professionals consistently support parents to keep children safe by, for example, helping them to put clear boundaries and structures in place for children who frequently go missing from home. In some cases, this support from professionals was very flexible, such as home visits at the weekends and in the evenings to monitor a child's safety.

## Raising awareness

A whole-system approach is required to address the perpetrators and to protect and support victims. It requires engagement across:

- the whole council
- children's and adults' social care
- police
- probation services
- youth offending teams
- health
- education
- housing
- transport
- community safety
- the local safeguarding partners
- local businesses.

A whole-system approach needs to not only protect and support children but to try to prevent exploitation through raising awareness in the community and disrupting criminal activity.

This requires agencies and professionals to work together with parents and children to alert them to the signs of grooming, exploitation and county lines. When children begin to go missing, have mood swings, become secretive or quiet or display other unusual behaviours, parents who do not know that county lines exist, or the effects it has on children, are not able to protect them.

There needs to be a multi-agency coordinated approach to awareness-raising with children, parents and the wider local community, as well as disruption and prevention of those perpetrating exploitation.

In Greenwich, the police, the youth offending service and partners regularly deliver awareness-raising sessions in schools about the realities of gang affiliations.

This innovative work is aimed at Years 8 and 9, because research and data have shown that this age group is especially vulnerable to being targeted by gangs.

Children in this borough also benefit from a youth service that offers a range of activities to divert children away from involvement in gangs and risks of exploitation.

The local voluntary sector organisations in Greenwich commissioned to work with vulnerable older children play an important role because they understand the very fast pace at which children can be groomed into exploitation and have a thorough knowledge of local gangs and how they operate.

Partnerships also need to think of ways of promoting awareness and understanding about child exploitation within and across agencies and with other professionals. Multi-agency systems need to respond quickly, building specialist knowledge that they can then share across services.

In Dorset, named GPs are working to prevent child sexual exploitation. They lead effective programmes of continuous improvement to equip local primary care practitioners with the knowledge and tools required to protect children at risk of exploitation.

## **'Stay with' children who do not want to engage**

Children's needs and safety must come first. This means that professionals need to work flexibly and continue to 'stay with the child', even when they are unwilling to engage. Many of the current systems to manage individual children within the child protection system are based around risk in the family. They are not always the most effective means of meeting the needs of children who experience abuse outside of the family, including exploited children.

For example, a system that uses monthly reviews may not be appropriate for exploited children because their risks can quickly change. Some areas have put processes in place to address the specific needs of vulnerable children who are at risk of exploitation.

Partners in Greenwich have set up weekly adolescent risk, safeguarding and prevention meetings. The aim of the meeting is to enable partners to track and monitor changing risks and needs of children through timely information-sharing. They can then identify the changing nature of the risk and provide real-time responses to emerging concerns.

However, having the right system is not enough. These arrangements are only effective when a wide range of agencies are represented and able to share relevant, up-to-date information. Multi-agency meetings must result in clear action planning, coordination of work across agencies and close monitoring of plans so that children are protected and supported.

Services need to be coordinated and easily accessible if children, particularly those who have been exploited and may be reluctant to engage, are to use them and access help and support when needed.

In our inspections, we found that sexual health and school nurse services are well placed to identify exploited children, but children need to be able to contact professionals quickly and easily when they need help.

Children in Greenwich can access these health services by text. We found that this provided a prompt and easy method of contact, which meant that children could get help quickly. It supported staff to identify children at risk of exploitation.

Further, having a range of services in one place can support exploited children who may have complex needs. 'The Point', a young person's drop-in centre in Greenwich, provides a welcoming space for children to share concerns and seek help from youth and health services. A lead professional works sensitively with the child to manage the help they may need.

## Seeing and 'staying with' the child

We need to change how we see and understand vulnerable older children. Some areas and agencies need to do more to recognise the complexity of some children's lives. The behaviours that children present with, such as offending or violence, may result from exploitation outside the home and/or from abuse at home. Any interventions need to take into account all risks and needs. We must all understand that children who have been criminally exploited are the victims of crime.

All agencies working with children need to understand that children's behaviours, such as offending behaviour, should be seen in the wider context of other vulnerabilities such as criminal and sexual exploitation.

Unless agencies understand the context of the child's behaviour as well as the impact (for example, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health issues or substance misuse), it will not be possible for multi-agency partners to respond effectively. This means that they cannot meet the child's needs nor prevent future risk and abuse. This is particularly relevant for children exploited through county lines activity.

In our recent JTAIs on neglect,<sup>6</sup> we found that older neglected children often have multiple experiences of abuse: both neglect in the home and exploitation outside of the home. They had been let down by adults many times and were therefore less likely to want to engage with professionals. In addition, children who have been exploited may not recognise that they need help.

The value of building trusting relationships with children who have been exploited was evident in the exploitation JTAI inspections. Relationships between children and professionals that were based on consistency, stability and respectful communication were having the most impact in supporting effective interventions with exploited children.

Some of the services we visited in the JTAIs were using this approach, including some youth offending teams. Most youth offending teams that we inspected seemed well prepared to identify risk and work with exploited children. Staff were trained on the impact of exploitation. Children were engaging well with staff and building positive relationships. Staff understood the significance of pieces of information that children might share with them, for example signs of exploitation such as children being given drugs for free and then being indebted to dealers who use this to manipulate them.

In Southend, signs of exploitation are recognised early. This means that children can receive early intervention from the youth offending team to prevent risk escalating.

Also in Southend, we saw many examples of professionals 'going the extra mile' to keep young people engaged, for instance staying in touch by text when young people were missing.

We saw that young people had positive relationships with a key professional and were supported by a consistent group professionals. Building trust and stability is vital to bringing about change with this vulnerable group. We saw young people contacting their trusted workers when they were at risk to seek advice and support.

Staff in Greenwich received training on trauma-informed practice to underpin their approaches to interventions. This helped youth offending workers, youth workers, and health and specialist support workers to better understand the needs of exploited children.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Growing up neglected: a multi-agency response to older children', Ofsted, July 2018; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/growing-up-neglected-a-multi-agency-response-to-older-children](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/growing-up-neglected-a-multi-agency-response-to-older-children).

Staff understood the value of investing time and effort to establish meaningful relationships with children who will have been let down and abused by adults.

We saw many agencies engaging well with children at risk of exploitation. However, we still found some cases when children's social care teams closed children's cases prematurely because children did not engage with professionals, even when there was clear evidence of exploitation and high levels of risk. Professionals need to understand the impact of exploitation and patterns of engagement and disengagement of older vulnerable children. They need to 'stay with' the child.

## Part 2: Working in partnership

### Working together in local partnerships

First, all agencies need to get the basics right. Ensuring that there are clear systems in place at the 'front door' of services is essential, so that children at risk of exploitation are identified and receive a prompt and appropriate response.<sup>7</sup>

Greenwich uses a shared protocol for mandatory reporting on concerns about the risk of gangs, child sexual and criminal exploitation and repeat episodes of children going missing. This means that all agencies are clear on what to do if they identify risks to a child.

Staff within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and early help and duty teams understand the high risks these children face and the need to promptly coordinate a multi-agency response. Practitioners in the MASH train other staff about the methods that perpetrators use to groom children so that they can identify the signs.

The different stages of development and performance in each agency inevitably impact on how effective the partnership is. This is thrown into sharp relief when new, complex risks emerge for children in need of a coordinated multi-agency response.

In one area, we found that only the police had fully recognised the fact that children were being criminally exploited. The lack of an adequate response from other agencies meant that the police were left to use innovative tactics to work with children themselves when other partners failed to safeguard the children.

Other agencies in the partnership had not been curious enough about this group of children. They had not shared and interrogated the intelligence they had about highly vulnerable children that would have helped them to

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<sup>7</sup> 'Creating an effective 'front door'', Ofsted, 2017; [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-monthly-commentary-march-2017](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/social-care-monthly-commentary-march-2017).



see patterns of exploitation. Not only did they not recognise and respond to the risks to local children but they did not adequately safeguard children who had come into the area and showed signs that they may have been trafficked and were at risk of possible criminal exploitation.

Local partnerships cannot run the risk of thinking: 'this does not happen in our area'. They cannot respond ineffectively to children coming in from other areas who have been missing from home and have the signs of involvement in county lines. The dangers of delayed responses to any child who may have been criminally or sexually exploited can have very serious consequences for the child, and other children linked to them.

Schools and colleges are essential partners in the whole-system approach. Some schools are working hard to understand, reduce and prevent the risks of county lines. However, this awareness needs to be developed and supported across the country.

There are well-documented links between children missing education and safeguarding risks, including the risk of exploitation. Even being absent from school for a short time, such as being missing for part of the school day, can increase the risk of both sexual and criminal exploitation.

Recent Home Office guidance for professionals on county lines identified children excluded from mainstream school as one group that gangs may target for exploitation.<sup>8</sup> In our inspections, we found that children who were not in regular education or who were missing from school were at heightened risk. They had more time on their hands and were vulnerable to abuse. This is a particular concern given the recent figures on school exclusions.<sup>9</sup> It is essential, therefore, that when schools are considering exclusions they also consider the safeguarding risks to the child.<sup>10</sup>

### **Using intelligence and information well to understand local risk**

We have highlighted many times how important it is to have effective systems for collating and sharing information, both strategically and in response to individual children. Sharing intelligence and information is crucial when developing multi-agency approaches to preventing criminal exploitation.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults', Home Office, 2018; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines).

<sup>9</sup> Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2016 to 2017, Department for Education, 2016/17; [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2016-to-2017](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2016-to-2017).

<sup>10</sup> 'Keeping children safe in education', Department for Education, 2018; [www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2).

Patterns of criminal exploitation in a local area will vary and the impact of county lines may be different from one region to another. In developing a response, it is crucial that partners understand the risks in their area.

We saw how children can be very quickly groomed into county lines activity and are then at risk of neglect, extreme physical violence, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Therefore, the partnership needs to use all resources available to exchange and analyse information quickly if it is to keep pace with the changing risks to, and needs of, exploited children. Having dedicated resources, such as an analyst who has access to a range of relevant information, can make a real difference to agencies' abilities to identify risk and respond quickly.

The exploitation JTAs showed that not all areas had the capacity to develop multi-agency intelligence on local risk. In Dorset, we found that the police had developed detailed local profiles. These informed a more sophisticated understanding of the prevalence, nature and scale of criminal exploitation and county lines activity, alongside similar profiles for sexual exploitation and children missing. The police use the profiles to prioritise their activity to ensure that those who are most at risk receive a timely response. However, other agencies were not using this intelligence to plan and develop a response to exploitation. In one other area, we saw a lack of analytical capability and no police 'problem profile' of child exploitation.

### **Working together strategically across regions**

Large urban areas need to link strategically and operationally with regions into which children are trafficked to sell drugs.

If a child goes missing from, for example, Manchester and the police find them in a seaside resort in another county in possession of Class A drugs, there needs to be good communication and information-sharing between the police and children's social care in both areas. This will support planning to protect the child, help to identify any other children in need of protection and support any criminal investigation.

We found that this work was not happening in all of the areas we visited.

In one area, we found that children's social care teams did not have enough professional curiosity to understand the risks and needs of missing children found locally who had come from other areas.

This meant that staff did not recognise the risk of criminal exploitation, information was not shared and children's need for help and protection not adequately met.

The recently established National County Lines Coordination Centre<sup>11</sup> will support a more sophisticated understanding of national intelligence. This should then inform a more coordinated approach to disrupt and prevent county lines. It will help support local areas to develop a multi-agency response to local risk and need. The centre has only just been established, so it is still vital that local, regional and national police forces share information on known risks, work together across boundaries and work with other agencies to fully understand the extent and nature of criminal exploitation.

### **Training and information for professionals**

Working with children at high risk of exploitation and who are reluctant to engage can be challenging. Children need professionals who are well trained, skilled and persistent and who recognise the risks.

Greenwich has a dedicated project officer for youth violence, vulnerability and gangs who works closely with the police, community safety, children's services and schools. The officer gives advice to frontline staff across agencies, gathering and analysing information to continually update the overview of gang dynamics in the local area and the related risks. They share this with partners to inform decisions on operational tactics, service development and how to commission services to meet local need.

We saw other examples, however, of health professionals in frontline services, including some GPs and staff at emergency and accident departments, who did not always recognise the signs of exploitation or share critical information with other professionals. For example, they did not share information about children known to be at risk of exploitation having injuries as a result of an assault or about children's underlying health concerns that put children involved in county lines exploitation at increased risk. Staff working in the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Companies do not always have a full understanding of the many ways in which young people can be exploited. As a consequence, staff do not always recognise and respond when children are at risk of exploitation.

Police forces should be working to develop a more consistent approach, using modern slavery and trafficking legislation to target gangs, individuals and groups that exploit children to transport and sell drugs. Understanding the links across child exploitation, modern slavery and trafficking will help all agencies to respond more effectively to support children but also to work together to identify perpetrators. Earlier this year, well-informed and well-trained police officers were able to secure the first conviction of a drug dealer for human trafficking of a child.

In October 2018, Zakaria Mohammed was jailed for 14 years, having admitted to trafficking children. This is the first time a drug dealer has

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<sup>11</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/news/national-county-lines-coordination-centre-to-crack-down-on-drug-gangs](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-county-lines-coordination-centre-to-crack-down-on-drug-gangs).

been convicted under the Modern Slavery Act and is seen as a landmark case.

He admitted to using two boys aged 15 and a 14-year-old girl to deal drugs on his behalf from a flat in Lincoln occupied by two heroin users. The police said he made profits of £500 a day while the children were found 'drawn, tired and hungry', living alongside two hard-drug users and 'surrounded by used syringes'.

Staff who work with children should be aware of the National Referral Mechanism,<sup>12</sup> which is the framework for identifying victims of human trafficking and modern slavery and ensuring that they receive the right support. They should be clear about when it is appropriate to refer a child and the mechanism for referral.

In Southend, the police have recently amended their missing person's policy so that children who frequently go missing are considered for referral to the National Referral Mechanism because of the potential for trafficking.

## Learning the lessons from the past

Agencies need to apply the lessons they have learned from the response to child sexual exploitation. All organisations that work with children need to ensure that frontline staff recognise the signs of criminal exploitation and understand that a child may be being criminally exploited, even if the activity appears consensual.

In reality, this presents challenges to agencies, not least the police. It is clear from our JTAs that police officers need training and support to recognise the signs of modern slavery in the context of criminal exploitation.

Not all frontline police officers will have had the training to help them identify a vulnerable child, although any child coming into custody should be treated as vulnerable. When they find a young person in possession of weapons and drugs, they need to:

- ask 'is this a vulnerable child?' and 'has this child been criminally exploited?'
- assess the risk of exploitation when considering whether to charge the young person

This is where we need a shift in culture, similar to what we saw in relation to child sexual exploitation. Clearly, a child in possession of Class A drugs or a weapon presents a child protection issue.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/about-us/what-we-do/specialist-capabilities/uk-human-trafficking-centre/national-referral-mechanism](http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/about-us/what-we-do/specialist-capabilities/uk-human-trafficking-centre/national-referral-mechanism).

In areas we inspected, police had made some progress in recognising the context of criminal exploitation when identifying children who were found in possession of drugs. In most cases, this enabled them to recognise the fact that children who were perpetrating crimes were, in fact, victims of crime. All police forces admitted, however, that it was still possible that a child who has committed an offence may still be prosecuted despite clear evidence of exploitation.

It is essential that frontline health professionals, particularly GPs, staff at A&E departments, sexual health staff and schools nurses, are equipped to recognise the signs of exploitation. They need to ask the right questions when they meet a child who is depressed, self-harming or misusing substances and/or who has an injury. They also need to recognise that both boys and girls can be the victims of criminal and sexual exploitation.

While there are different challenges, there are lessons to be learned from multi-agency models that are working well in many areas to prevent and reduce child sexual exploitation.

In Southend, we found that some agencies have learned valuable lessons from a specific operation to prevent and reduce child exploitation.

The police and the local authority had to respond quickly to emerging and increasing risks of county lines activity in their area. They consulted other police forces and national organisations that had developed expertise. They developed a range of work to respond to the impact of county lines on individual children and the local community.

They shared learning from this joint operation with other agencies, both at a strategic and operational level, to improve practice.

As a result, they enlarged and made permanent the multi-agency team that was established to work with the exploited children. The team was building expertise in engaging with and working with vulnerable exploited children – skills that could be transferred to work with other vulnerable older children.

## Working with the police to disrupt exploitation

Disrupting and preventing the criminal exploitation of children are real challenges. However, we saw some positive progress in some of the areas we visited.

The National Working Group<sup>13</sup> has recognised Southend community policing team's work in supporting vulnerable young people as a model of good practice. The team's work includes positive outreach and disruption between the police and the street engagement service, which involves identifying streets and houses used for county

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<sup>13</sup> [www.nwgnetwork.org](http://www.nwgnetwork.org).



lines activity. The police make good use of civil orders, such as community protection notices and child abduction warning notices, to safeguard vulnerable children.

In Dorset, the police have weekly meetings focusing on intelligence-gathering on county lines activity. They use this to plan disruption and investigation activity. Incidents posing the most threat result in a response from the neighbourhood patrol teams. Regional police resources then disrupt criminal activity. This strong police response means that the police can identify risks early and disrupt exploitation.

## Conclusion

Preventing and responding to child criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation are big challenges for agencies and professionals nationally and locally. It can be done, but agencies must ensure that they have the building blocks in place to work effectively and quickly.

All agencies need to get the basics right. Effective and efficient 'front door' services that prioritise training on exploitation for staff are crucial in the identification of children who are being exploited. When a child presents with offending, or other concerning behaviour, professionals need to be curious and compassionate and ask: what is happening in this child's life that is causing them to behave this way?

Agencies should not wait until they uncover a high-scale operation to respond to criminal exploitation. If they have not already done so, partners need to work together to plan how to respond to criminal exploitation. Everyone involved must understand local issues of exploitation and gangs so that responses can be carefully coordinated to meet local need. Partnerships need to not only identify and respond to the risk of exploitation, but work with children, parents and local communities to prevent exploitation through awareness-raising.

When children are identified as being exploited, professionals need to 'stay with' the child. These children have been groomed and threatened and might not recognise that they are being exploited. Professionals must not give up on children or their families. Both are in danger and need their help, support and protection.

The only way of responding to and preventing highly organised criminal operations that exploit children is to have a highly coordinated multi-agency and whole-council approach. Local partnerships need to be aware of the risks of exploitation in their local area. They must be curious at a strategic and operational level about what is happening in their locality. We must ensure that the mistakes that some partners made in being slow to recognise the risk of child sexual exploitation are not repeated.



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