

Working Together to tackle Vulnerability, Violence & Exploitation (VVE) in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire

This briefing has been prepared by Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Children Board and Staffordshire Safeguarding Children Board.

What do we mean by Vulnerability, Violence and Exploitation (VVE)?

Violence, Vulnerability and Exploitation (VVE) describes what happens when **County Lines** drug dealers, who are gangs involved in organised crime, use children and other vulnerable people through **Criminal Exploitation, Sexual Exploitation and Cuckooing**. The children or vulnerable adults may be from the same area as the gang, or could be local, and may be exploited to carry out criminal acts to reduce the gang members risk of getting caught or as an end in itself. They are often moved around locally or nationally for this purpose, a form of **Modern Slavery & Trafficking**. The risks to them are significant, but they may not see this, or may feel trapped in the situation.

This briefing explains some of these safeguarding issues in a little more detail, describes the risks, tells you what to look for and, critically, advises what to do if you think you see it happening.

County Lines, 'going country' and criminal exploitation

County Lines takes the form of urban gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas and market and coastal towns using mobile phone lines or "deal lines". It involves criminal exploitation with gangs who use children and vulnerable adults to move drugs (primarily heroin and crack cocaine) and money. It involves violence, intimidation and the offer of money or drugs.

Sexual Exploitation

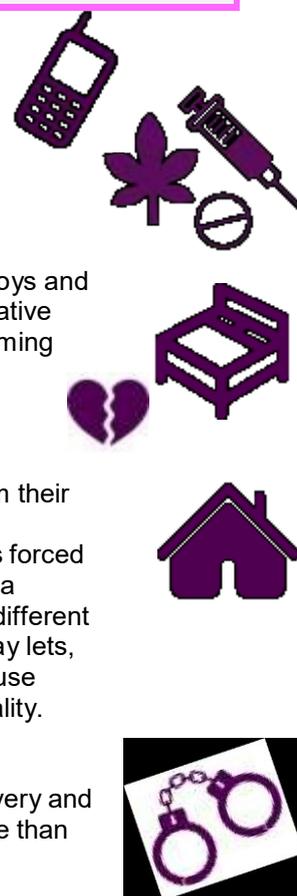
Girls and women who are exploited along county lines are at increased risk of sexual exploitation. Boys and men may also be sexually exploited. Sexual exploitation is a type of sexual abuse. People in exploitative situations and relationships receive something such as gifts, money or affection as a result of performing sexual activities or others performing sexual activities on them. People may be tricked into believing they're in a loving, consensual relationship.

Cuckooing

This is the process whereby criminal gangs target the homes of vulnerable people to deal drugs from their premises. Many of the victims are vulnerable and may be drug users themselves. They are often approached by dealers offering them free drugs in exchange for use of their home or are sometimes forced by threats and intimidation to deal on their behalf. Cuckooing means the criminals can operate from a property rather than on the street, making them less easy to identify, and often they move between different properties to cover their activities. County lines groups also make use of serviced apartments, holiday lets, budget hotels and caravan parks. County lines groups prefer to pay cash where possible and often use network associates to arrange these facilities, as a means of distancing themselves from the criminality.

Modern Slavery & Trafficking

As well as sexual exploitation, county lines cuts across a range of threats, including modern day slavery and human trafficking. People are being exploited using the county lines model to transport and sell more than drugs. Weapons, sex and money are also being traded in this way.



What are the risks?

People affected by county lines activity are at risk of criminal and / or sexual exploitation, serious violence, as well as risk of significant harm through physical, sexual and emotional abuse

Exploitation can:

- affect any child or young person under the age of 18 years
- affect any vulnerable adult over the age of 18 years
- still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual
- involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence
- be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and young people or adults and is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation

Some people may be more vulnerable than others:



Looked after children are particularly vulnerable, especially young people who have been placed in local authority care out of area



Girls may be groomed at school using drugs and alcohol, which act as disinhibitors and create dependency, and encourage / coerce them to recruit other girls through school / social networks.



There is national evidence that residential children's care homes and pupil referral units are targeted

What signs / indicators should I be looking out for?

Here are some signs to look out for that can suggest that someone you know might be involved in County Lines:

- Are they **going missing** from school or home?
- Do they suddenly have lots of **money/new clothes/ new mobile phones**?
- Are they receiving **more calls or texts** than usual?
- Are they being very **protective of their phone**/ reluctant to let it out of sight or off their person? (may act violently or be visibly scared if their phone is lost or confiscated)
- Are they using **new or unknown slang** words
- Do they have a **new nickname**?
- Have they suddenly **changed their appearance** – dressing in a particular style or 'uniform' similar to that of other young people they hang around with, including a particular colour
- Have they started using certain **codes of group behaviour** e.g. ways of talking and hand signs
- Do they seem **emotionally 'switched off'**, but also containing frustration / rage?
- Do they seem very reserved or seem like they have **something to hide**?
- Do they seem **scared**?
- Are they constantly talking about another person who seems to have a lot of **influence** over them?
- Have they started to break away from old friends and hanging around with someone/people that are **older and controlling**?
- Have they **dropped out of positive activities and their hobbies**?
- Are they **no longer engaging** with services / young people?
- Do they have **unexplained physical** injuries, and / or refusal to seek / receive medical treatment for injuries? Are they limping (from 'warning stabs' to legs and buttocks)
- Are they **travelling alone** to places far away from home?
- Are they carrying or selling **drugs**?
- Are they **carrying weapons** or know people that have access to weapons?

Cuckooing

Here are some things that can indicate 'cuckooing':



- It usually takes place in a multi-occupancy or social housing property
- More comings and goings, including people you haven't seen before, throughout the day and night, often visiting for only short periods of time
- New or an increase in the number of vehicles outside the property, including taxis or hire cars
- Bags of clothing or bedding around the property,
- An increase in crime and anti-social behaviour in and around the property reported to services, including the accumulation and storage of stolen pedal cycles
- Evidence of drug use such as deal bags, discarded syringes, weighing scales, foil and cling film, in and around the property.

Victims of cuckooing may disengage with support services, and be unwilling to discuss what is happening at their property when the subject is raised with them.

What should I do if I am concerned?

If you are worried that someone is at immediate risk of harm contact 999.



If you are worried about a **child or young person in Stoke-on-Trent** contact Safeguarding Referral Team on 01782 235100 or out of hours 01782 234234

If you are worried about a **child or young person in Staffordshire** contact First Response on: 0800 1313 126 (Monday to Thursday, 8:30am-5:00pm and Friday 8:30am-4:30pm)

In an emergency outside office hours, please phone 0345 6042 886 (0345 6042 889)

If you are worried about an **adult** contact the Police on **101**

