



Safer Communities and Children & Young  
People Services Overview & Scrutiny Panels

# Spotlight Review of County Lines Issues within St Helens

February 2020

## **Task Group**

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## Chair's Foreword and Acknowledgements



**Councillor Michelle Sweeney:  
Chair of the County Lines Task Group**

County lines is a serious criminal issue across the whole country. It is not unique to any single area or demographic. It is not an issue that can be tackled by any individual council, police force or partner-agency and requires a multi-agency/multi-disciplinary approach to share skills, knowledge, experience and best practice to tackle what is becoming an issue across the country, not just St Helens.

The Home Office Serious Violence Strategy acknowledges that dealing with increases in knife crime, County lines and homicide depends on partnerships across a number of agencies and sectors including education, health, social services, housing, youth services and victim services as well as the work of law enforcement and criminal justice.

County lines and related crime and violence involves the exploitation of vulnerable people by the real criminals who take advantage vulnerabilities so they can stay under the radar of the police and other agencies. Whilst these criminals also target vulnerable adults (e.g. through cuckooing), the main focus of this Task Group has been on the exploitation of children because, as corporate parents, it is a Councillor's duty to protect our children from any harm and help them to have the opportunity to live a safe and happy life.

Child criminal exploitation is a growing issue but still something very few members of the public will be aware of or would ever consider as an issue that could happen to a child or young person they know. The Government's Serious Violence Strategy calls for a national campaign of awareness raising communication activity about the threats of county lines to young people and how to avoid becoming involved and exploited by gangs. It is really important that St Helens Council plays its part in raising the awareness of residents.

Whilst we've been reassured through the process of the review that Council Officers and Partners are doing all they can to improve the way we tackle county lines and protect young people, more needs to be done to reduce the risk of exploitation. Although this issue has been thrown into the spotlight with national media it needs to remain a priority in the long term and not fade into the background once the media attention has died down.

As Chair of the Safer Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel and Chair of the County Lines Task Group, I would like to thank all Councillors who participated and contributed to the review for their ongoing-commitment to this piece of work, and all officers and partner agencies who have contributed through the provision of information and attendance at meetings.

## Introduction and Terms of Reference

- 1.1 The Safer Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel added this issue to its work programme following a report by the BBC in August 2019 which highlighted County Lines issues in St Helens involving children in care being exploited by criminal gangs to deal drugs in North Wales. The BBC's report had raised many concerns in the public so the Panel conducted the review to gain assurances that responsible agencies were doing everything they could to protect/safeguard vulnerable young people in St Helens from exploitation by criminal gangs involved in county lines offences.
- 1.2 As the main focus of this review was on protecting vulnerable young people from criminal exploitation it was agreed that the County Lines Task Group should be a joint scrutiny task and finish group between the Safer Communities and Children and Young People Services (CYPS) Overview and Scrutiny Panels, with Councillors from each of the Panels invited to take part. Each of the Panels was represented as follows:
  - Councillor Sweeney – Chair of Safer Communities Panel
  - Councillor Trisha Long – Chair of CYPS Panel
  - Councillor Sims – CYPS Panel
  - Councillor Charlie Preston – CYPS Panel
  - Councillor Gill – Safer Communities Panel
  - Councillor Mussell – both Panels (prior to December 2019)
  - Councillor Lisa Preston
- 1.3 Although this is a joint task group, the Safer Communities Panel remains the lead Panel and is required to approve the report for it to be submitted to the responsible bodies.
- 1.4 The objectives for the review agreed by the Task Group were:
  - To assess the prevalence of issues with county lines in St Helens and surrounding areas
  - To understand the potential reasons for these issues existing in St Helens compared with other areas
  - To understand what relevant partner agencies were doing both individually and in partnership with each other to tackle the issue
  - To consider what more could be done and the barriers to achieving better outcomes
- 1.5 To carry out the review the Task Group received information about Government strategies, guidance and policies in relation to County Lines. The Task Group also held a meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2020 to meet with officers from the following services to receive information about current work being undertaken to tackle Organised Crime Gangs (OCGs) involved in County Lines and protect the young people that they were targeting.
- 1.6 This report details the findings of the Task Group's work and its conclusions and recommendations. This report will be submitted to Cabinet and the Merseyside Police and Crime Commissioner's office for consideration with a request for a response to the recommendations.

## Background

### What is County Lines?

- 2.1 According to the National Crime Agency's website<sup>1</sup>, "County Lines' is a term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs. These dealers will use dedicated mobile phone lines, known as 'deal lines', to take orders from drug users. Heroin, cocaine and crack cocaine are the most common drugs being supplied and ordered. In most instances, the users or customers will live in a different area to where the dealers and networks are based, so drug runners are needed to transport the drugs and collect payment."
- 2.2 "A common feature in county lines drug supply is the exploitation of young and vulnerable people. The dealers will frequently target children and adults - often with mental health or addiction problems - to act as drug runners or move cash so they can stay under the radar of law enforcement.
- 2.3 "In some cases the dealers will take over a local property, normally belonging to a vulnerable person, and use it to operate their criminal activity from. This is known as 'cuckooing'.
- 2.4 "People exploited in this way will quite often be exposed to physical, mental and sexual abuse, and in some instances will be trafficked to areas a long way from home as part of the network's drug dealing business.
- 2.5 "As we have seen in child sexual exploitation, children often don't see themselves as victims or realise they have been groomed to get involved in criminality. So it's important that we all play our part to understand county lines and speak out if we have concerns."

### What is Child Criminal Exploitation?

- 2.6 In the Government's Serious Violence Strategy<sup>2</sup>, The Home Office defines Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) as occurring "...where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control and manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18; it does not always involve physical contact and can also occur through the use of technology; and it is broader than just county lines, including children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft."

### BBC Report in August 2019

- 2.7 On 12<sup>th</sup> August 2019 the BBC published a video report<sup>3</sup> regarding County Lines that covered specific issues within St Helens. The BBC's report filmed

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>

<sup>2</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-49321950/liverpool-to-north-wales-up-close-with-a-county-line>

Officers from Merseyside Police searching for missing children, predominantly 14 to 15 years old, from St Helens, most of whom were suspected to be linked to County Lines drug dealing in North Wales. In the video the Police Officers suggested that searching for children missing from care was now a daily routine and that the children were criminally exploited by drug gangs targeting vulnerable young people.

- 2.8 The BBC's report also stated that across the UK 10,000 children were involved in County Lines related criminal activity. The report suggested that authorities had no idea how many young people were currently involved in County Lines in St Helens and that so far no one had been prosecuted in relation to exploiting ("trafficking") those young people.
- 2.9 On 18<sup>th</sup> August 2019, a further extended video of the report<sup>4</sup> from the BBC was published. This included responses from Sarah O'Brien, the Council's Strategic Director of People Services, as lead for Child Safeguarding in St Helens, and Chris Green, Assistant Chief Constable of Merseyside Police.
- 2.10 The Council response to the findings of the report was that, nationally and not just in St Helens, the criminal exploitation of children is a crisis and that funding wasn't good enough. It was noted that Mental Health Services, Schools, Social Care were all at breaking point and needed more resources putting in and that as a society we need to protect our vulnerable young children.

## Government Serious Violence Strategy

- 2.11 In April 2018, the Home Office published the Serious Violence Strategy<sup>5</sup>. The Strategy was the Government's response to serious violence and recent increases in knife crime, gun crime and homicide. The Strategy states that while law enforcement is a very important part, success depends on partnerships across a number of sectors such as education, health, social services, housing, youth services, and victim services.
- 2.12 Action in the strategy is framed on 4 main themes:
- tackling county lines and misuse of drugs
  - early intervention and prevention
  - supporting communities and local partnerships
  - law enforcement and the criminal justice response
- 2.13 Chapter 3 of the Strategy is specific to County Lines and misuse of drugs. This Chapter focuses on the activity proposed to reduce violence, exploitation and abuse associated with County Lines activity within the Government's broader programme of work to tackle drugs and serious and organised crime.
- 2.14 The Strategy states that "Police forces are taking a range of action against criminal gangs and organised crime groups involved in county lines drug dealing with an approach focused on both disrupting and prosecuting offenders but also, crucially, identifying and safeguarding those caught up in the model... Once caught up in county lines, exploited individuals are at risk of extreme physical and/or sexual violence, gang recriminations and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-49389392/county-lines-criminal-gangs-targeting-children>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy>

trafficking.”

- 2.15 The Strategy refers to a working group set up by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) which identified the need for a platform to share information and co-ordinate the policing response to county lines. This led to a new National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) being established to help bring the law enforcement effort together.
- 2.16 The NCLCC became operational in September 2018<sup>6</sup>. It is a multi-agency team of 38 experts from the National Crime Agency (NCA), police officers and regional organised crime units who work together to develop the national intelligence picture of the complexity and scale of the threat of county lines, prioritise action against the most serious offenders, and engage with partners across government, including health, welfare and education spheres, to tackle the wider issues.
- 2.17 Chapter 3 of the Strategy also calls for nationwide awareness-raising communication activity about the threat of county lines targeted to young and vulnerable people and how to avoid becoming involved and exploited by gangs. The activity is designed to deliver a range of communications and engagement activities in collaboration with the NPCC and Crimestoppers. The activity is being delivered through a range of tailored communications materials including posters and online content<sup>7</sup>. The communications material raises awareness of the signs to spot of a young person who is being exploited as part of county lines activity, and it signposts anonymous reporting via Crimestoppers.
- 2.18 Chapter 4 of the Strategy is about early intervention and prevention which includes, among other things, proposals to provide funding for PCC and CSPs to put initiatives in place which provide alternatives for young people to steer them away from gangs. Chapter 5 is about supporting communities and local partnerships to develop resilient communities that can help to identify crime and by working with Community Safety Partnerships and Police and Crime Commissioners.

## Home Office County Lines Pilot Project

- 2.19 In 2017/18, the Home Office funded a pilot service, undertaken by two charities, St Giles Trust and Missing People, to provide support to young people exploited through county lines in order to divert them from further involvement in crime or gang activity. The pilot support service was for exploited young victims caught up in county lines drugs running between London and Kent<sup>8</sup>. The pilot service included offering: one-to-one support to young and vulnerable drug carriers through St Giles Trust workers; specialist support interviews with children who have returned from being missing while being used as a drug carrier and support for their parents/carers, provided by Missing People; and research into the services available to help young people

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-county-lines-coordination-centre-to-crack-down-on-drug-gangs>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/county-lines-criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/latest-news/968-funding-to-support-exploited-children-running-drugs-in-county-lines.html>

exit county lines involvement to identify any gaps of support.

- 2.20 In January 2019, St Giles Trust published a report<sup>9</sup> regarding the outcomes of the pilot project. The objectives of the pilot included: reducing the number of children involved in county lines activity; improve the lifestyles and life chances of those who exit county lines activity; understand how interventions can work effectively together to help children affected by county lines; develop a model that effectively tackles the issue of child exploitation in county lines; and facilitate enhanced intelligence and partnership working across agencies involved in crime, social services, safeguarding, health and other key agencies.
- 2.21 During the pilot 38 children and their families were engaged with 85% recorded as having positive outcomes. 11 children had exited county lines activity, 19 decreased risk and were in the process of exiting activity, five reengaged with education and three had moved into employment. Most of the children cited improved relationships with positive family members, had decreased or ceased offending and going missing, had improved their health (by reducing/ceasing alcohol and drug use, improved eating and sleeping and had better mental health), and developed greater stability and resilience.
- 2.22 The report did note that three of the children they engaged had gone into custodial sentences for their involvement in county lines and were currently in youth offending institutions. It was hoped however, that during their time in custody caseworkers could continue to their relationships with them and help them rehabilitate.
- 2.23 The pilot project highlighted the benefits of engaging people with lived experiences and/or cultural competence (i.e. part of/knowing the culture of the children's backgrounds) in being caseworkers was essential to developing relationships and trust with the children. The children were more likely to engage with someone they felt genuinely understood them and their mindset. The report did however report that caseworkers were stretched by the workload and more resources would have been useful to meet demand.
- 2.24 The report suggested that the cost benefit of the pilot project included savings to the Police in less time spent on missing children cases and savings to the local authorities when statutory care was avoided. It was suggested that the caseworkers were effective in engaging children in education although stated that alternative education providers were continuing to struggle with the challenges of engaging children involved in county lines and being a place targeted by county lines recruiters.
- 2.25 The report recommended that any commissioners looking to put something similar to the pilot in place should consider how projects could be resourced long term as this project had suffered because of the uncertainty during the pilot regarding future funding. It also suggested training for all statutory sector officers on what county lines is and how kids get involved should be rolled out. Finally, it recommended that Alternative and Mainstream education provision be urgently reviewed to understand how it can better meet the needs of all children placed in it, including those involved in county lines activity.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/our-impact/evaluations-into-our-work>

## Crimestoppers and other Charities

- 2.26 Crimestoppers<sup>10</sup> is an independent UK registered charity that operates the anonymous 0800 555 111 phone number as well as a Secure Online form on their website for anyone with information about crime who for whatever reason does not want to go to the Police.
- 2.27 'Fearless' is the Crimestoppers brand for young people<sup>11</sup>. The brand has been set up as the main way that young people will be introduced to the valuable service that Crimestoppers provides. Developed through consultation with young people, Crimestoppers has been repackaged to make it more credible, accessible and trustworthy for a younger generation. Fearless Education Resource on County Lines<sup>12</sup> is an educational resource for professionals working with young people throughout the UK. It provides exercises on a range of crime types that professionals can use to challenge young people's perceptions, stimulate debate and encourage good citizenship.
- 2.28 Catch 22<sup>13</sup> is a not for profit business with a social mission. They help to design and deliver services that build resilience and aspiration in people and communities. Catch 22 provide the Pan Merseyside Child Exploitation Service and the St Helens Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation Service (Commissioned by the Council) as explained in paragraphs 2.28 and 2.29.
- 2.29 Safe4Me<sup>14</sup> is a website providing teachers, professionals and parents with information and resources to help educate young people about keeping safe and making responsible choices. The website has a county lines page<sup>15</sup> that provides information about what county lines is, who is vulnerable to exploitation, what signs to look out for and what to do if concerned as well as links to other resources including ones specific to education such as the Fearless Education Resource mentioned above.
- 2.30 St Giles Trust<sup>16</sup> is a charity which specialises in using expertise and real-life past experiences of its volunteers to empower people who are not getting the help they need. Their work targets people held back by poverty, exploited, abused, dealing with addiction or mental health problems, caught up in crime or a combination of these issues and others. The range of needs supported includes help for vulnerable young people involved in or at risk of criminal exploitation.
- 2.31 Missing People<sup>17</sup> is a charity dedicated to helping find missing people. They offer online and telephone support to children and adults who are thinking of going missing or looking to return home after being missing. They also help families look for missing loved ones and work with them to support their person when their return home.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/>

<sup>11</sup> [www.fearless.org](http://www.fearless.org)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.safe4me.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Fearless\\_CountyLinesResource\\_18pp\\_V2\\_online.pdf](https://www.safe4me.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Fearless_CountyLinesResource_18pp_V2_online.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.safe4me.co.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.safe4me.co.uk/portfolio/child-criminal-exploitation-county-lines/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/>

## Local Context

- 2.32 In January 2019, the NCA published an Intelligence Assessment of County Lines Drug Supply, Vulnerability and Harm during 2018. It stated that analysis, suggested there were currently over 2000 individual deal lines numbers in the UK, linked to approximately 1000 branded county lines. The report also said that Merseyside had the third highest number of county lines (7% - 140) and was an exporting area (i.e. drugs and the dealers originated in the county and drugs were taken for sale outside of the county). When the Task Group held its meeting the number of county lines coming out of Merseyside was reported to be 300. North Wales was the main place these drugs were being exported to however the Police informed the group that the links with the Isle of Mann were also in issue.
- 2.33 In Merseyside the Police have taken part in NCLCC action and is working with local authorities and other partners to tackle the county lines issue as it pertains to each area. In October 2019 the NCLCC co-ordinated a week of action focused on pursuing offenders, safeguarding and protecting vulnerable, reducing the number of effective County Lines, seizing proceeds of crime, and educating professionals. By October 2019<sup>18</sup>, Merseyside Police had made 32 arrests, identified and engaged with more than 100 vulnerable people and seized drugs and weapons. Along with arrests and safeguarding of those believed to be involved, officers across the force and their housing and other partners had been carrying out talks in schools, visits to care home providers, taxi companies and foster carers to continue raising knowledge amongst those who may encounter those who are at risk of exploitation.
- 2.34 The Pan Merseyside Child Exploitation Service<sup>19</sup>, provided by Catch22, works with young people across Merseyside who are experiencing or at risk of child criminal or sexual exploitation. The service uses both one to one and group work with young people in partnership with Merseyside Police and Local Safeguarding Children Boards. Catch22 staff also attending multi-agency meetings. The Service forms part of Victim Care Merseyside which is funded by Merseyside's Police and Crime Commissioner.
- 2.35 Catch 22 conducts comprehensive screening and assessments of young people to identify CSE or CCE risk and incidence, followed by programmes of intervention over the long-term ensuring that the young people are fully supported to recover and reduce any further risk. The service also supports young people to exit gangs and operates a dedicated helpline for those who need advice (including family and friends who are concerned about runaways and exploitation). The service offers training to groups of young people (preventative and targeted) as well as professional training to members of the children and young people's workforce.
- 2.36 The St Helens Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation Service<sup>20</sup> (Commissioned by St Helens Council) works with young people across St Helens who are missing from home or care or who are experiencing or at risk of child sexual exploitation. Catch22 works alongside young people, their families, the Council's social care services and Merseyside Police to find out

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.merseyside.police.uk/news/merseyside/news/2019/october/county-lines-week-of-action-in-merseyside-sees-arrests-safeguarding-and-seizures/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/services/merseyside-child-sexual-exploitation-service/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/services/st-helens-missing-child-sexual-exploitation-service/>

what has caused them to run away and to seek to prevent them from running away again in future.

2.37 In St Helens, figures provided to the Task Group stated that between 1st April 2018 and 14th March 2019:

- There were 111 CSE victims in St Helens;
- There were 78 CCE victims in St Helens;
- There were 1382 cases of young people (U'18) missing in St Helens;
  - These missing episodes were shared between 312 individuals;
  - 15 young people came to physical harm during their missing episode, 2 were victims of a sexual offence, 16 committed a crime and 1 self-harmed;
  - 2 of the young people were under the age of 8; 8 were aged 8 – 10; 156 (11.3%) aged 11 – 13; 532 (38.5%) aged 14 – 15 and 684 (49.5%) aged 16 – 17;
  - 1009 (73%) of the young people were in care.

## Findings

3.1 At its meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2020 the Task Group invited officers from various Council services and the Police. Officers who attended the meeting were:

- Stephen Tracey – Senior Assistant Director for Housing and Recreation
- Sam Murray – Assistant Director for Community Safety
- Linda Evans – Senior Assistant Director for Social Work and Community
- Jo Bibby – Service Manager for EDT<sup>21</sup>, MASH<sup>22</sup>, Duty Team & Complex Safeguarding
- Trish Monaghan – Complex Safeguarding Lead
- Darren Taylor – Detective Sergeant, Merseyside Police
- Heather Addison – Safeguarding Children in Education Co-ordinator

3.2 During the meeting, the officers provided an overview of their role and how their services worked to protect young people and members of the Task Group asked questions. This section details the points that were raised during the meeting.

### Who Is Vulnerable to Criminal Exploitation?

3.3 It was reported that criminals were most frequently targeting those young people who were most vulnerable because of their personal circumstances. Typically, some young people who have been caught up in county lines have had distressing upbringings with many having been a victim of or witnessed domestic abuse, have volatile family relationships, and been in and out of care. In these cases, young people may not have developed attachments to others as would normally be expected. They may be ostracised from peer groups and bullied by other pupils in school. Due to the lack of attachments and low self-esteem, these young people are vulnerable to being groomed into criminality and gangs. The groomers would suggest they are offering a sense of belonging, an identity to a group, but this is part of the grooming process which adds to the trauma overall. Groomers will tempt young people

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<sup>21</sup> Emergency Duty Team

<sup>22</sup> Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub

by modes of alcohol, money, drugs, gifts amongst others however these come with a price, often it's at the cost of losing the young person's family relationships.

- 3.4 It was suggested that in many cases, the young people involved in county lines didn't realise they were vulnerable or being exploited. In some cases, the young person might be "the eldest in a family of five kids with no father figure and a mother that didn't work and they saw themselves as the main bread winner through their illegal activities".
- 3.5 Many of those young people who are excluded from school, in alternative education or on reduced school hours are more at risk of exploitation because when not in school there may be no one checking where they are and they go to these places where they exposed to criminality and become exploited.
- 3.6 It was however pointed out that the most vulnerable young people are not the only ones at risk and there have been cases where young people from more stable or affluent backgrounds have also become involved in county lines drug dealing. These young people can be at risk because those around them such as family and teachers would never suspect that they would be involved in criminality. Young People from these backgrounds can become involved due to drug debts and coerced into criminality as way to pay off the debt. They may also suffer from a lack of self-esteem (particularly young girls at risk of sexual exploitation) or be looking for an escape from the pressures of life. Many young people identified as being exploited have mental health/trauma related issues.
- 3.7 It was suggested to the Task Group that the number of children referred to services as at risk could be three times higher than those in Knowsley however those young people in Knowsley were involved in much higher volumes of drugs and money. Officers were unclear as to why St Helens had higher numbers than Knowsley however one reason might have been that services in St Helens were more able to identify vulnerable young people that may require interventions.

### How Do Criminals Operate?

- 3.8 The Task Group was informed that the criminals exploiting young people were skilled manipulators and understood how the young people were vulnerable and how to target that vulnerability to build a relationship with them and coerce them into criminality. CCE and county lines had developed over time as a tactic for distributing drugs. CCE separates drug dealers from those actual selling the drugs, putting vulnerable people at risk of arrest and not the criminals. It is widely accepted young people at risk or are involved in CCE are victims and should be considered as such, this should also factor into a safety plan which protects them from further harm.
- 3.9 The Police have come to recognise that exploitation and manipulation methods used in CCE were the same type used by terrorist groups to radicalise people. It was explained that manipulation of vulnerable people wasn't often via threatening methods and usually criminals would use gifts and soft exploitation to engage young people initially. The Police used the acronym TRAP (Take Risk and Prosper) as a way to describe the approach used by criminals to convince young people that the risk of committing the

crimes was worth the rewards.

- 3.10 One of the issues with trying to tackle the tactics used by county lines gangs was that they evolved quickly and new ways to coerce and exploit children were being deployed all the time. It was mentioned that one of the reasons that young people from more affluent areas were being targeted was that awareness of the risks to children in care meant that authorities were watching these young people closer and were more likely to spot them being involved (however this group still remained the most at risk). Merseyside Police were trying to target 10-15 cases per month to develop their understanding of the issues in the county and engaged with the NCLCC to share intelligence. They also tried to work with those convicted of crimes who were willing to share information about how organised crime groups were operating and the tactics they used to target young people.

### How are Services Reacting?

- 3.11 The Task Group was informed that there had been a number of changes to the way services were being delivered recently. Children's Social Care Services were prioritising early help and had recently received additional funding to develop support for families showing early indicators of challenges to work with them to avoid issues escalating. It was suggested that all services (such as schools, nurseries, children's centres etc.) had a responsibility to work with families at early stage. Officers were being trained to recognise the signs of issues in families and know where to signpost them for particular issues. It was suggested that the number of families being identified as requiring early help was growing which made early intervention even more crucial to taking pressure off statutory services.
- 3.12 During 2018 a review of Children Services was conducted to assess how the county lines issue was being addressed. The findings were that service practice was variable and the understanding of the issue among social care work force was inconsistent and officers weren't always engaging in multiagency work. This led to variable and inconsistent outcomes and improvements needed to be made.
- 3.13 Following the review, in July 2019 Cabinet approved funding for the Complex Safeguarding Hub (CSH) which came into place in August 2019. This had led to better tracking of cases and more a consistent approach as well as better partnership working. Officers stated that the work of the hub is under continuous review to ensure it keeps pace with understanding the changes criminals make to the way they try to exploit young people.
- 3.14 The Task Group was informed that the Complex Safeguarding Team had made improvements to its effectiveness but there was still more work to be done. New and existing pathways were being developed to ensure a consistent approach by officers and managers were involved in the pan Merseyside work and working with a local care group.
- 3.15 To ensure a cross service approach, there are daily multi-agency meetings (Chaired by Complex Safeguarding), in which Catch 22, Safer Communities, Health and the Police attend, with satellite support from Youth Offending Services and Young People Drug and Alcohol Addiction Team.

- 3.16 It was explained that any young person at risk of exploitation is reviewed within five days. Advanced practitioners were trained to identify what CCE is with support from Police. Catch 22 was the commissioned provider for missing children and return interviews for those children and intervention with high risk young people. Officers from various services were co-located as a hub to improve communications. For those partners who weren't able to attend meetings because of location, a phone in facility was being established.
- 3.17 The Task Group was informed that the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) was currently working with 66 young people known to service, of whom 15 were high risk (10 boys, 5 girls), 29 were medium risk (21 boys, 8 girls) and 12 were low risk. There were no specific criteria to identify high medium and low risk so the process was quite subjective. Services had access to a toolkit, used pan Merseyside CE protocol, to support the assessment process. Levels of vulnerability, police intelligence and other information were used to establish risk for each child.
- 3.18 Community Safety had also been working on developing its relationships with other children's services. The Council was currently reviewing strategic governance arrangements for the Community Safety Partnership via the People's Board to ensure better links between agencies. The Home Office has provided £3.3m to Merseyside Police to deliver a programme of action through a Violence Reduction Partnership to deal with serious violence; some of this funding was being used to provide diversionary activities for young people to take them away from criminal groups and reduce risk of exploitation. The Community Safety Partnership also received funding from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) to support local priorities to reduce crime and disorder.
- 3.19 Within the Youth Offending Service, officers were highlighting the vulnerabilities of young offenders to CCE and were champions of raising awareness of criminal exploitation. The Task Group was informed that consideration was being given, local and nationally, to how legislation related to modern day slavery could be used to frame the young people YOS dealt with as victims of exploitation rather than offenders.
- 3.20 Officers informed the Task Group that they were passionate about dealing with county lines issues and were dedicated to getting a handle on the current situation by developing the workforce needed to deal with the issues and level of demand. It was suggested that austerity had impacted Council services' and partners' abilities to provide the level of support required to meet current demand and there was difficult to do more with less resources however services were rising to the challenge.

### What is Happening Across Merseyside?

- 3.21 The Task Group was informed that the Council was working with partners and other local authorities across Merseyside to develop a more consistent and uniform approach to tackling county lines. Until recently each local authority area had their own arrangements in place and Merseyside Police worked with each local authority in different ways. Partners were currently developing standardised thresholds for referrals for young people at risk as well as a consistent referrals process and way of managing pathways for young people

through services. The Task Group was also informed that the Police were looking to standardise their processes across the area based teams working with different local authorities by 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020.

### What are Education Settings doing?

- 3.22 Their experiences at school were considered to be an important part of what made young people vulnerable to exploitation and school staff were seen as a valuable resource in helping to identify risk factors within vulnerable young people early so that services could intervene at an early stage and prevent problems of criminality. The Task Group was informed that Head Teachers, Safeguarding Leads and Governors at Schools across the Borough were being provided with training on Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).
- 3.23 As stated previously there appeared to be a higher risk of exploitation to pupils who were excluded or on reduce hours in schools; potentially because they were spending more time in environments that can lead to them being exploited rather than in school. Officers were working with schools on the attendance of pupils and growing an awareness within schools of hot spots and trends (i.e. where young people were hanging out outside of school, what they were doing when not in school). As mentioned within Section 2 of this report, alternative education settings are often targets for criminals looking to exploit vulnerable young people and this was also the case in St Helens.
- 3.24 The Task Group was informed that schools were required to inform the Council of those pupils receiving part time education. It was suggested that the culture was changing around understanding that schools need to keep children on full time schedule as far as possible to protect their best interests.
- 3.25 The support provided by services was holistic across schools and colleges. Officers were also worked in sixth forms at Cowley International College and Rainford High School as well as St Helens College. As an example of work done with older children, the Task Group was informed about a St Helens College performance/session on knife crime specific to pupils (particular male pupils that are vulnerable to being involved in knife crime).
- 3.26 It was suggested that more work needed to be done with those who were NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) or those in work where their routine made them vulnerable to exploitation. Due to the lack of opportunities and the low self-esteem that could come with being NEET, these young people were more vulnerable than those in work or education.

### Interventions in the Community

- 3.27 The work carried out by the Violence Reduction Partnership has identified that local community is often best placed to provide services to vulnerable people than bigger organisations. It was suggested that different communities had different needs that could be best met by locals who understood those needs. As mentioned previously, the Violence Reduction Partnership, through funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) however it was unclear whether there would be long term funding for some initiatives and services were working with community groups to bid for funding.

- 3.28 Members of the Task Group pointed to specific examples of work going on in the communities they were aware of and agreed that trying to channel the skills of young people into more positive and productive things would help to steer them away from criminality.
- 3.29 In relation to raising awareness of CCE and helping people to learn how to spot potential issues and how to raise them with the right people, services had set up a social media campaign using the hashtag #Stop which had been promoted through local radio and television. Services also reached out to local businesses to make them aware of how to recognise the signs of criminality and exploitation in their local area. The Police had set up a local campaign called 'Tell Us' which enabled people to send the Police intelligence about crimes online; this was being promoted across Merseyside. It was also mentioned that Crimestoppers provided ways to provide information to the Police anonymously.

### Other Opportunities

- 3.30 As previously mentioned, the charity St Giles Trust works with young people to take them away from criminality by using caseworkers who have life experience with that issue. Some members of the Task Group were aware of the work of this charity prior to the review having attended events led by Junior Smart, the Founder of St Giles Trust's SOS+ Project<sup>23</sup>. The SOS+ Project delivers early intervention work in educational settings, through preventative sessions on violence, vulnerability and exploitation. Uses trained professionals with lived experience of the criminal justice system to de-glamorise gang involvement and expose the harsh realities of crime and violence. As they know these issues first-hand, the trained professionals can speak from their own experiences and have high levels of engagement from the young people.
- 3.31 The SOS+ Project offers Gangs and County Lines training sessions aimed at professionals. The presentation consists of speakers utilising their lived experience within the criminal justice system to unpack and explore the realities and consequences of county lines drug smuggling, gang involvement, criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. Perspectives from previous perpetrators, combined with relevant case studies, aid audiences in gaining an understanding of the issue. The presentation also covers signs and indicators; motives and purposes; perspectives of both victims and perpetrators; common misconceptions amongst professionals; and various intervention strategies/ suggestions for long-term solution.
- 3.32 It was suggested that peer to peer work would be effective in getting young people to take on the messages being given. Young People/Young Adults sharing their stories with other children was likely to have more impact as young people didn't necessarily take on messages from adults who they felt couldn't relate to them and how they felt. Although the natural instinct of services was to protect a child that has been a victim of exploitation and not expose them to talking about their issues openly it was suggested that using their voice would help other vulnerable young people avoid the damaging effects of criminality.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/the-sos-project>

## Risks of Unregistered and Unregulated Private Children's Care Homes

- 3.33 Members of the Task Group expressed concerns about the potential risks to children from out of borough placed in private homes in St Helens and asked whether services had identified any vulnerable children in these homes. Members referred to a Parliamentary Select Committee review which found that Government hadn't given any powers to local authorities to deal with the issue of unregulated private homes.
- 3.34 It was explained that out of borough placements from other local authorities were a challenge for services in St Helens. There were protocols in place requiring Directors of Children Services (DCS) for each local authority to inform other local authorities when children were being placed in their area and informing them of the risk factors associated with each child. However, it was reported that this wasn't happening consistently for children sent to St Helens and was problem nationally. It was stated that the Association of DCSs had prioritised this issue for consideration to ensure improvements were made.
- 3.35 The Task Group was informed that a pan Merseyside working group, chaired by a representative of the Police, was looking at the private homes in the Merseyside region and the placement of children in those homes. It was explained that any children's home providing care must be regulated by Ofsted. However, homes providing accommodation only for older children (i.e. 16-17) who didn't require care were not required to be regulated by Ofsted. It was mentioned that Ofsted was challenging whether or not these unregulated homes should be regulated as a number of them were causing serious risks to the safety of young people across the county. The Task Group was informed that Ofsted are working with Police to prosecute those running care homes which had not been registered as it was illegal not to register a children's care home.
- 3.36 The Task Group was informed that the growth in numbers of residential establishments in St Helens was an issue. It was explained that it was cheaper to provide this type of accommodation in North than South of England so local authorities in the south were placing children here. Until recently there had been 29 of these unregulated homes however there were now 55. It was mentioned that the Council didn't have powers under Planning Legislation to object to these homes opening when planning applications were submitted.

## Conclusions

- 4.1 The Task Group is concerned that Child Criminal Exploitation is a major issue, not just for St Helens as a borough, but Merseyside and the Country as a whole. It has been a challenge for local services to understand how best to tackle this issue which has a major impact on the lives of some of our most vulnerable children and their families.
- 4.2 The Task Group is reassured, however, that this issue is a priority for services and that improvements have been made to the way services are taking a partnership approach to tackle the issue. Despite the good work that has been done so far officers have acknowledged that there is still a significant amount still to do. The Task Group has confidence in officers to be able reach

the point where services are tackling county lines issues as effectively as possible. The Task Group believes that the Council's Scrutiny Function should continue monitoring this issue and holding services to account to ensure improvements continue to be made as this issue needs to be a long term priority.

- 4.3 The Task Group supports the early intervention and prevention approach that is being taken to tackling vulnerability and reducing the risk of exploitation for our young people. The Task Group agrees that local community groups are well placed to understand the issues the young people in their area face and can be supported to put community initiatives in place to build resilience. It was clear that funding is an issue in this area however the Task Group believes that services and commissioners should recognise the value these community initiatives have and the benefits they bring to them as service providers and support community groups by sharing the funding burden.
- 4.4 The Task Group was pleased that there appears to be good understanding among partners of the types of characteristics that can make children vulnerable to criminal exploitation as this understanding will hopefully help services to target those at risk earlier before the damage of criminality is done. However, the Task Group does feel that there appears to be a gap in providing vulnerable young people with peer to peer support and enabling young people who have been victims of exploitation to help others avoid the same fate.
- 4.5 The Task Group is keen to learn more about the work done by St Giles Trust, in particular the SOS+ Project and the way people with specific life experience of the issues young people are facing can be used to more effectively engage with them. The Task Group believes that it would be of value for the Safer Communities Panel to contact Mr Smart to arrange for him to come and speak with Councillors and Officers about the work that his project might do to help young people in St Helens.
- 4.6 The Task Group was also pleased that intelligence regarding the tactics criminals use to target vulnerable young people is improving however acknowledges the difficulty of keeping up with how criminals are changing the ways they operate. The Task Group recognises that a wide range of young people from all backgrounds, not just those statistically more at risk, can be susceptible to exploitation through the tactics criminals are employing and suggests that communities and families need to be aware of the signs that someone they know may be a risk of exploitation and not just assume that it couldn't happen to them or in their community.
- 4.7 The Task Group emphasises the importance of increasing public awareness of the issues and educating people, parents and carers in particular, about recognising the signs. Schools, neighbours and community groups can all play a role in spotting when a young person might be vulnerable. Nationally it is recognised that there is still not a lot of public awareness about county lines and there are a lot of resources being made available to try to increase understanding as a way of tackling the issue. The Council should ensure that it does its part to get the messages out to residents through its communication channels and networks. Councillors should also do their part to promote the issue within their communities.

- 4.8 As well as using the communications materials available to raise awareness of county lines, the Council should ensure officers and councillors are provided with specialist training to ensure they are properly equipped to recognise the signs of county lines risks in places and vulnerable people. The Task Group is pleased that training is being provided in schools as they are key to protecting young people and identifying the signs of vulnerability. The Task Group encourages all schools in the Borough to engage with the training being provided.
- 4.9 The Task Group believes that schools play a vital role in protecting young people and should be on the front line in being able to identify vulnerable young people at risk of exploitation. It is suggested that the Safer Communities Panel consult directly with schools to ask what their experiences of dealing with children vulnerable to exploitation are.
- 4.10 The Task Group is keen to learn more about the Violence Reduction Partnership and believes that the Safer Communities Panel should arrange a visit for Councillors to see how services are working in person.

## **Recommendations**

The Task and Finish Group recommends that:

- 5.1 That all Councillors receive training on CCE to enable them to share messages with residents and recognise potential issues in their wards.
- 5.2 That all schools be encouraged to ensure their staff and governors receive CCE training.
- 5.3 Regular updates on progress by services be reported to the Safer Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel to ensure continued improvements in tackling Child Criminal Exploitation. Updates to the Panel should include data regarding the number of young people at risk to enable the Panel to assess the effectiveness of efforts to reduce CCE.
- 5.4 That the Chair of the Safer Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel write to all Councillors who are school governors to ask them to raise the issue of County Lines and CCE with their Governing Bodies to ask them what they're doing support pupils who may be vulnerable to exploitation.
- 5.5 That members of the Task Group conduct a site visit to the Violence Reduction Partnership to see the work being done there.
- 5.6 That the Safer Communities Scrutiny Panel contact the St Giles Trust to invite Junior Smart to a future Panel meeting to discuss his work with community groups to steer vulnerable young people away from crime.
- 5.7 That the Council's Communications Team engage with Children's Services about promoting the NCA guidance about spotting potential CCE and how to report it.
- 5.8 That this report be circulated to all members of the St Helens Council Children's Improvement Board for information.

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Rec No	Recommendation	Responsible Officer	Agreed Action and Date of Implementation
1	That all Councillors receive training on CCE to enable them to share messages with residents and recognise potential issues in their wards.		
2	That all schools be encouraged to ensure their staff and governors receive CCE training.		
3	Regular updates on progress by services be reported to the Safer Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel to ensure continued improvements in tackling Child Criminal Exploitation. Updates to the Panel should include data regarding the number of young people at risk to enable the Panel to assess the effectiveness of efforts to reduce CCE.		
4	That the Chair of the Safer Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel write to all Councillors who are school governors to ask them to raise the issue of County Lines and CCE with their Governing Bodies to ask them what they're doing support pupils who may be vulnerable to exploitation.		
5	That members of the Task Group conduct a site visit to the Violence Reduction Partnership to see the work being done there. This visit should take place prior to the local elections in May 2020.		
6	That the Safer Communities Scrutiny Panel contact the St Giles Trust to invite Junior		

## County Lines Task Group

	Smart to a future Panel meeting to discuss his work with community groups to steer vulnerable young people away from crime.		
7	That the Council's Communications Team engage with Children's Services about promoting the NCA guidance about spotting potential CCE and how to report it.		
8	That this report be circulated to all members of the St Helens Council Children's Improvement Board for information.		