

# Lived Experiences

of County Lines, gangs and criminal exploitation in Essex

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Essex Youth Offending research and evaluation project 2019

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# FOREWARD by Tanya Gillett, Head of Service.

## **Overview of the project. My thoughts and hopes for the research**

The idea for the project came from a desire in the YOS to hear from Essex young people, their families and their professional networks about the impact of County Lines for them. There is a growing literature bank on what a county line is but not on what it **really means for the wider system impacted by this model.**

The YOS is part of a system – we are all – and so understanding what the system as a **whole** thinks about County Lines was a key driver behind this project. The other important element was the involvement of front-line practitioners in the YOS as the action researchers. They know their young people well and they also understand who in the system is important to them. We get a number of requests to participate in academic research around the involvement of young people in County Lines but there is sometimes a fatigue among practitioners about their involvement in someone's else's research with seemingly little impact on their day to day world. I know we have **outstanding** practitioners in the YOS and so wanted to maximise their skills in seeking the views of their young people, their families and the professional networks around them.

We sought interested practitioners from across the five YOT teams and came together with the **Involvement Service** to design the project, think about the practicalities of how we would do the research (including informed consent and Information Governance) and the questions/themes we would explore. Extended interviews were done as part of the usual case work – i.e. no artificial focus groups – with the project team coming together to sense check the approach and emerging findings. In all there were 30 extended interviews - 10 involving young people and the rest a mixture of families and professionals.

We knew from the outset that we wanted to use the material to create a bespoke and impactful training resource to be used across the multi agency network ( participants knew this was the point) and also that wanted to translate the stories, thoughts and fears into an animation to really drive home what we were being told. So, after extensive transcribing (by one very busy acting

Team Manager) we found a **brilliant animation company** who worked closely with us to pick up what we really wanted from the transcribed interviews - not always easy with a group of excited strong personalities in the same room but they did it.

I want to say a huge thank you to all of the practitioners and managers involved in this:

- Jane Ryan – Acting ISS Team Manager and driving force
- Charlotte Day – Practice Supervisor, ISS Team
- Natalie Robertson, Social Worker, West YOT
- Naomi Simmons, ASYE Social Worker, West YOT
- Rhys Baker, ISS Practitioner
- Jenni Allen, YOS Practitioner, South YOT
- Jane Bernardes, Senior Practitioner Mid YOT
- Sheila Woodward, Community Involvement and Engagement Service Manager
- Chrissie Gavriel, Senior Insight and Evaluation Analyst

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tony Hume". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T' and 'H'.

# Getting involved

Triggers into criminal exploitation are numerous and can be a culmination of multiple factors that “snowball” out of control. Those most commonly identified include a sense of isolation or exclusion from school, family and friends.

**Schools** are in a unique and informed position to be able to identify early warning signs of grooming and exploitation in young people, whereas families are more likely to normalise changes in behaviour or attribute changes to other factors, such as changing peer groups. Young people who have been criminally exploited often feel isolated in school, struggle socially with their peers, experience bullying and are often underachieving academically which may be underpinned by unmet learning needs. Many feel that the starting point of young people’s involvement in criminal

exploitation is being excluded from school and one of the challenges highlighted by professionals, including teachers and headteachers, is that schools need to better balance safeguarding and protection of a young person where there is a risk of grooming or exploitation, against the needs of other pupils in school who may be affected. Many feel that once a child is in alternative education with reduced or part time tables it is much



easier for gangs to manipulate young people’s time for their gain. It is also important to consider, as one teacher observed, that school may be the only place that a young person being exploited by gangs can feel safe. One of the common issues raised about what should have been done differently to help these young people is that more effort should have been placed in keeping the child engaged in school; not focussing necessarily on their academic achievements or behaviours, instead focusing on what they enjoy and what or who they will engage with.

“Schools I feel can almost wash their hands of kids and don’t want them in the school because they bring their stats down and disrupt the lessons. Quite rightly they don’t want the other kids in education to be affected so if they are out and about or doing one or two hours in an alternative education setting then they are out of their hair and you would hope they haven’t been left to their own devices, but that’s probably the way” (police officer)

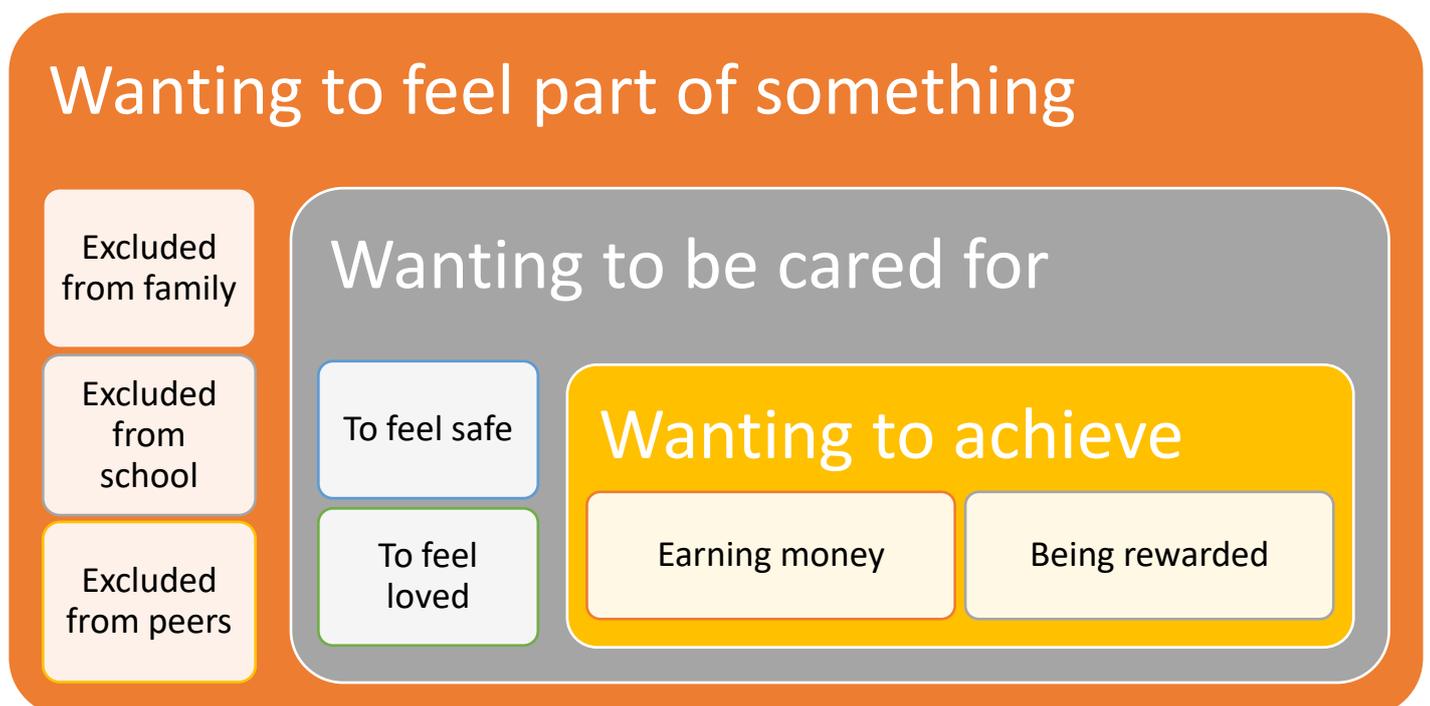
**Difficulties at home** with family or being in care is a familiar part of the background of young people being exploited. Absent or working parents, difficult family relationships, family member deaths, financial difficulties, living in unsuitable accommodation, inconsistent care or neglect, domestic abuse and existing family links to gangs and drug dealing are all factors that contribute to young people feeling isolated and uncared for. Gaps which county lines gang members are able to fill. Young people in care experiencing instability are particularly vulnerable to adults offering attachment and support.



“People who can be groomed into it are looking for a bit of family, a bit of love and just want to belong to someone or something. That’s how it tends to start” (police officer)

**Money and status** can also be motivating drivers for getting involved in county lines according to professionals; living in poverty, wanting to earn money and buy new things, wanting to impress peers, to be important, to be proud, and to have a reputation are often out of reach for some young people.

*Motivating reasons for young people getting involved in gangs and criminal exploitation:*



# Signs of exploitation

Day to day life of county lines is described by young people as exhausting; drug dealing is hard work with an expectation that young people are available 24:7, complying with the demands of their boss, and, at the same time, young people have to keep one step ahead of the police, keep on top of missing reports, deal with family concerns and satisfy professionals expectations. The threat of violence for young people is very real; being threatened with harm, being assaulted, getting robbed, making enemies and managing threats to family members is emotionally exhausting and young people describe feeling used and controlled by gang members.

“It was hard work. I would be up at 7am in the morning and wouldn’t stop working until 7am the next morning. I would be meeting drug users for 24 hours. It was up to them (gang members) when I turned the phone off and slept. As soon as they wanted me to turn the phone back on, I was up and working. I barely got any sleep but I enjoyed the money. I would get around £700 a week, but this could be up to £1,000” (young person)

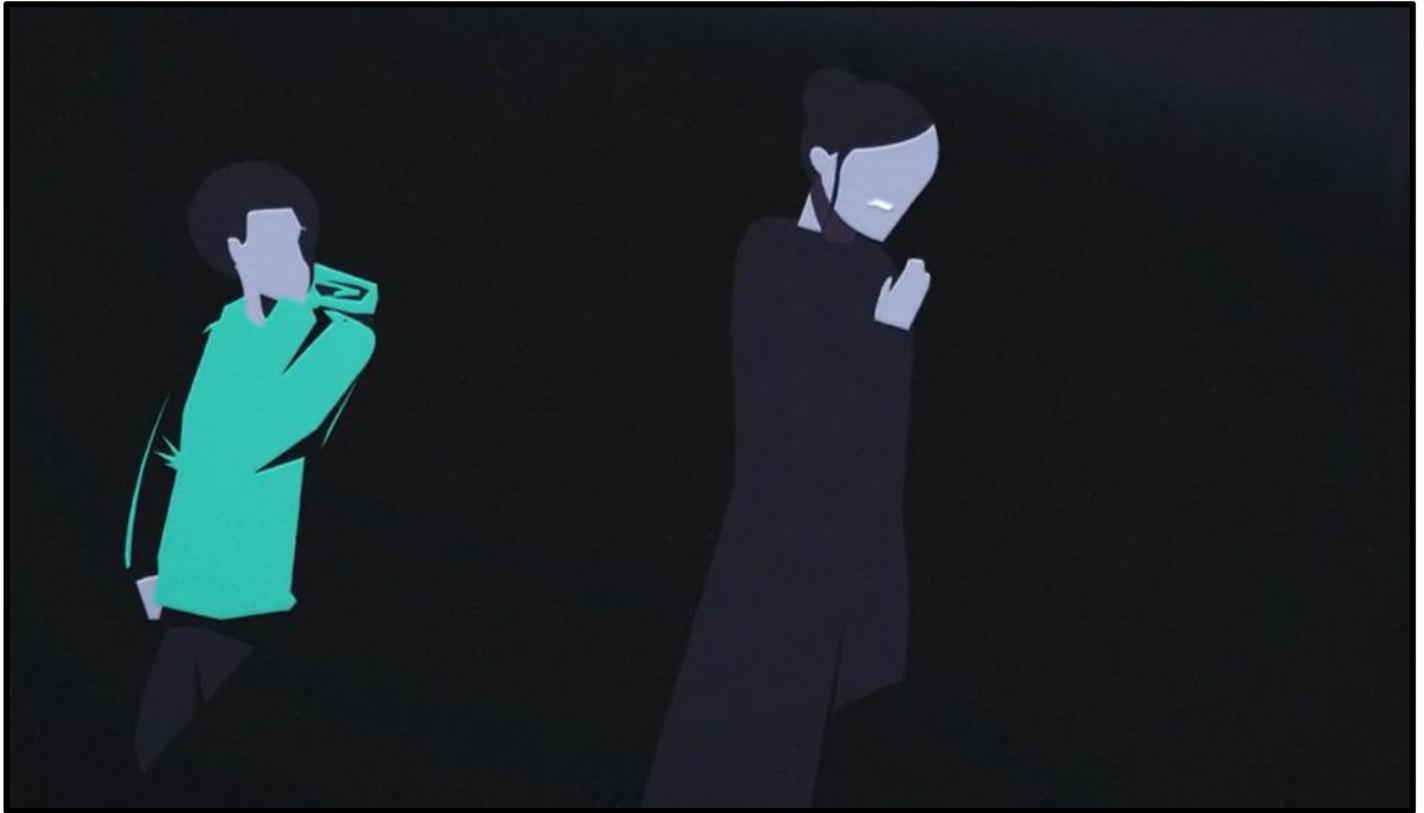
The positives of the lifestyle for young people include making money, having freedom, feeling valued and respected, being praised, having friends, and feeling and being treated like an adult.

The most common sign of a young person being exploited in county lines is that they go missing from home and from education. Both young people and their parents describe how they were “out all the time and never at home”, that they were out all night and only came home in the early hours of the morning, and sometimes were away for days. Parents described their children as wanting to be out constantly, not knowing where they were, not being told where they were going, and coming back home later than agreed. Some young people felt that their parents chose to ignore these important warning signs.

“My family noticed a change in how I was acting. I was staying out for days at a time, going out at dumb hours in the morning. I had money and I wasn’t asking to borrow any. My family noticed, but just accepted the excuses I was giving them” (young person)

Young people were able to identify changes in their own behaviours and recognise that adults around them should have been concerned about the changes; and whilst some felt that adults did not notice, many felt that family and school did notice but chose to ignore what was happening or not take action. Some parents attribute their child’s changing behaviours to normal teenage behaviours, such as changing appearances, peer groups, stopping physical and emotional

displays of affection, such as hugging and talking to them at home. Other parents describe feeling concerned and scared; not knowing where their children were or who they were with.



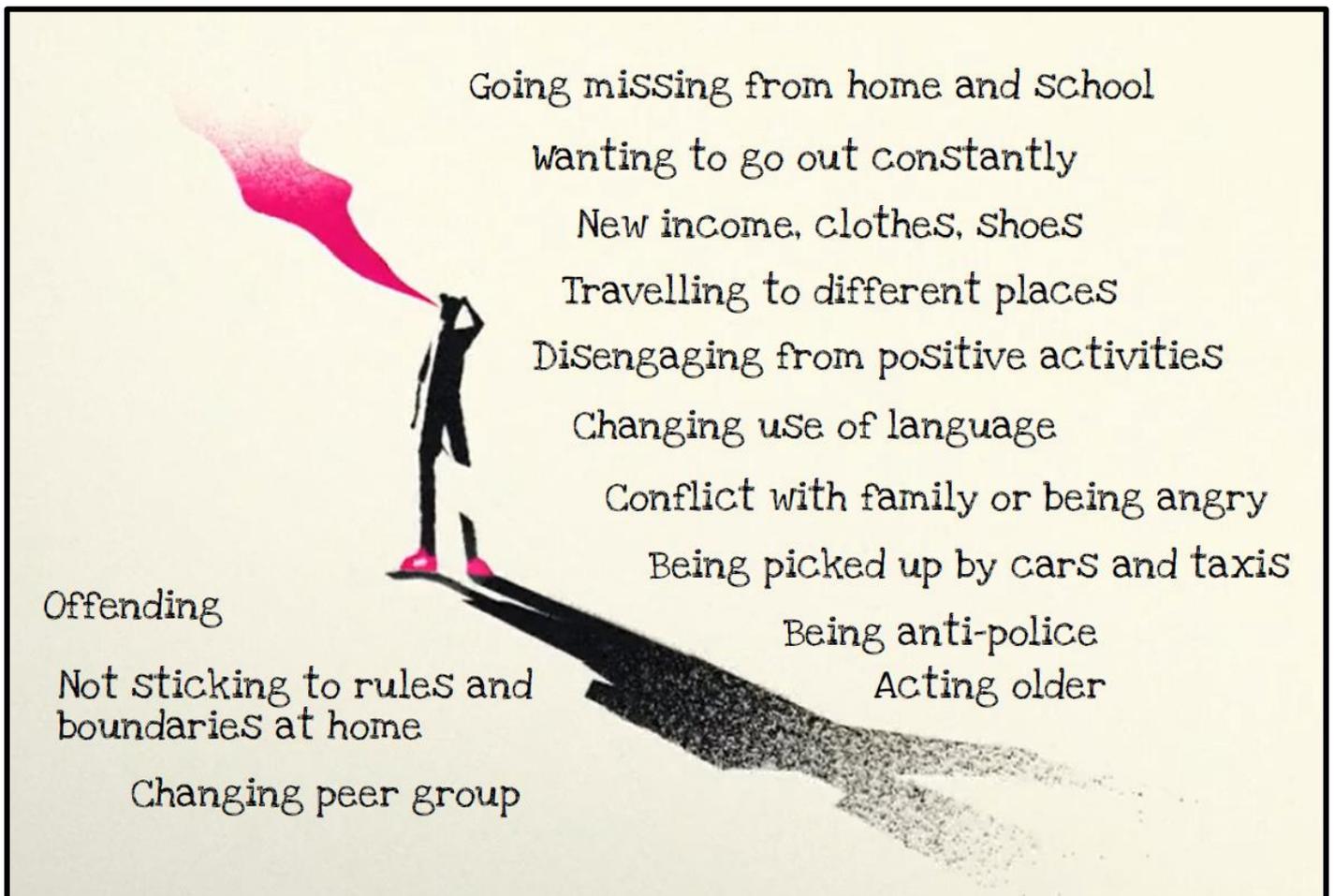
“For four days I didn’t hear from my son. It’s a living nightmare” (parent)

Disengaging from school and going missing from school is a common change in behaviour and both young people and professionals observe missed opportunities for early intervention from schools. However, at the same time some educational settings were criticised by professionals as being too quick to “over react” and that they need to be better informed of risks and warning signs (this criticism also extends to other services being too quick to label a young person as being in a gang when they are not involved and the negative consequences this can have for the individual). This presents challenges for schools responding to conflicting messages; being criticised for being too quick to judge and lacking knowledge and confidence to intervene early.

“There were warning signs that appear to have been missed. Both were a similar age when they became involved in a gang lifestyle (12/13 years). They began to miss the odd day here and there at school and then started having new items such as clothing, trainers and small amounts of disposable money upon their return. Given their young ages, is it not unusual that children of this age would go missing and not be noticed? They then started getting taxis and providing for their siblings” (ISS)

Having an income is a key sign of being exploited into county lines; having money, new clothes, trainers, and phones all indicate that a young person is earning or being 'rewarded' for their involvement. So too is being collected by cars or taxis, travelling distances, offending and being very anti police.

Other less obvious changes include changing or leaving peer groups, disengaging from sports or other positive activities, becoming isolated from their family, changing how they talk, pushing back on rules and boundaries at home, being angry, and acting older than they are.



# Relationships

Building a good relationship with the young person is identified as the most important and effective intervention. Most professionals describe some level of anxiety in working with a young person who they cannot engage with, however in their advice to others, professionals emphasise the importance of not giving up and being persistent. Young people say the same: the people who make a difference are those who do not give up.

“You had my back. I feel I let you down and you still came back for more”  
(young person talking about youth offending worker)

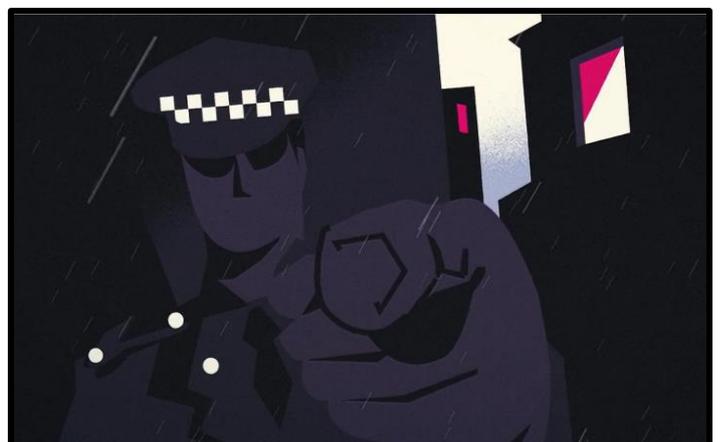
Most professionals describe a difficult relationship with young people at the start of their journey together. They describe young people who they cannot engage, who do not trust professionals, (particularly the police), some who have been let down too many times and have had too many professionals come and go in their lives.

The relationship between young people and the police is a particularly challenging one to build, with many barriers. Whilst one officer feels that there is often a good start to relationships which then break down when young people realise that the information they share is passed on, most others feel that young people’s views of the police from the off are very low and anti-police, which may or may not be a result of grooming.

“I think he trusts me to a certain degree and in the back of his mind he knows I’m a police officer. He has been exploited from a young age and they will install that fear in them of the police. He will always have that fear a little that I am a police officer and I have the power to arrest him” (police officer)

Young people feel that the police expect them to tell them everything which is unlikely given the lack of time invested in the relationship and given the fear that young people carry of potential consequences from “elder” gang members.

“The police don’t do anything right. They arrest you and they’re just laughing at you. They expect you to go in an interview and tell them everything but if you do then everyone will know you’ve said something. The police will go out and arrest them... once they get released, you’re fucked”. (young person)



Young people's expectations of the police are that they are there to arrest and police officers work hard to challenge and mitigate against this perception. However, two police officers involved in the research go on to stress how police work is too heavily focussed on criminality and not enough on safeguarding and protection. The officers describe police objectives and outcomes as the numbers of arrests, warrants, and seizures of knives and drugs.

"There are no measures around how many kids have we saved, how many people have we prevented being cuckooed, how much proactive work have we done around trying to get this family out of the area and safeguarding them, how much time has gone into one individual to make sure he doesn't come back into county lines, none of that is measured... their priorities are arrest, arrest, warrant, warrant, drugs, drugs, knives. Nobody is asking how many kids we safeguarded this week. It's not a question that's asked". (police officer)

Police need to have a better understanding of trauma informed practice to help improve relationships with young people and families.

"I think we have a long way to go in terms of understanding the trauma informed practices. We don't, as an organisation, understand that properly. We don't spend enough time with them to sit down with them to go through what they experience. In the last 5 weeks they could have been gang raped, could have been physically or mentally abused, they could be wearing the same clothes they were wearing 5 weeks ago... the safeguarding bit in general is not the thing the police are interested in. The bit the police are interested in is are they a suspect or not" (police officer)

Difficult relationships extend to those between young people and their social workers who are described as not helpful and out of touch with what's happening. Social work professionals perceptively describe one relationship as "not very genuine" and another as "superficial".

Young people speak highly of their Youth Offending Team (YOT) workers, and those who spoke about school staff also spoke well of them, but it is the YOT workers who really make an impact. Young people describe their YOT worker as showing concern and care, not judging, being honest, being



consistent and persistent. In addition to these qualities young people describe YOT workers as educators; helping and wanting the young person to change, "steering" them on the right path, and

helping them make better decisions. Youth Offending was also observed by professionals to be good at working in partnership with other organisations, particularly the police and social care.

“You did not give up and were on me from day one. You were on me more than my boss and this made a difference. You were harder to shake and have a way of making me feel that the right choice was to do your stuff and sessions. There came a point where it twisted and pleasing you became more important than pleasing my boss. My boss only wanted me for what I could do for him, you wanted me to help me do things for me” (young person)

*What makes a strong relationship between young person and professional:*

## Persistency and consistency

Being non-judgemental

Being caring and nurturing

Building honesty and trust

Breaking down power imbalances

Investing time in the relationship

Believing in young people

Creating a safe space

It is clear that most parents of young people being exploited are in real need of support from services. Many professionals feel that parents are desperate and some will take matters into their own hands to protect their children. Some young people have told their families about the risks of harm they face if they engage with the police and those risks can be very real for families.

Gaining families' trust is a real issue; with all professionals, but particularly with the police. Police again struggle to break down barriers and police processes and priorities can hinder building trusting relationships. There remains negative associations with social care, youth offending and the police and continued effort is needed to challenge families' perceptions of what each service is there to do (and more importantly not do). Some parents feel isolated in their experiences and would value support from other parents in similar situations.

# The Partnership

County lines is a complex issue which can involve drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery and missing persons, and the response to tackling it requires the support of multiple agencies. One professional's advice to another places emphasis on how this work cannot be done in isolation; different professionals and services need to be involved to protect a young person being exploited. Professional feedback is generally very positive about how different organisations work in partnership and that those relationships are formed on individuals who describe good working relationships with their colleagues. However, just beneath the surface there are criticisms and areas for improvement in working together:

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Pace</b>              | Schools in particular find the slow pace of work a challenge and feel that by the time services (the police and social care) take intervention steps that they have already 'lost' the young person in terms of their education.   |
| <b>Meetings</b>          | It is difficult to get people together with different working patterns, shift work and part time hours, which can also slow progress down.   |
| <b>Sharing insight</b>   | Lack of shared insight (particularly from the police) is a challenge for many. Police acknowledge this themselves; that there is not enough trust in other organisations to share useful information. This relates not only to case by case insight, but also intelligence at a local area level.<br><br>One professional observed how multi-agency teams working from the same building would improve insight and communication. This approach may also improve pace of progress. |
| <b>Key stakeholder</b>   | Many highlighted that the partnership would be more effective with a key stakeholder driving forward planning for the young person. It is noted that this is often, informally, Youth Offending which can work effectively. Having a responsible lead could help to improve pace/timeliness of work.   |
| <b>Shared approach</b>   | Some professionals feel that a better understanding of each other's approach and processes would be beneficial and aid a closer working relationship. At the same time, the partnership needs a consistent and shared message for young people, parents and families. This approach will help families better understand the aims and objectives of each professional involved, manage expectations and help young people and their families hold professionals to account.        |
| <b>Targeted services</b> | Many feel that the county is missing a specific gangs orientated service.  |

Criticisms of particular organisations within the partnership include:

- Social care thresholds for support are too high and cases are closed too quickly (this is also reflected in a parent interview who felt that when they first approached social care for help nothing was offered). Suitability of some care placements is also questioned.
- Schools are too quick to exclude young people and it is felt that being in education might be one of the most important ways to help and safeguard the child.
- Police being too focussed on criminality and not on safeguarding and protection.

Feedback from young people and parents was similarly mixed with some saying there was good communication between services, whilst others felt not. Generally they felt they understood the role and responsibilities of each professional. Parents also emphasised the importance of having one lead stakeholder to take responsibility.

“I think all the professional help was good. I think it was key that someone coordinated it all” (parent)

# The Challenges

The county lines offending model involving gangs and organised criminal networks remains highly adaptable and one of the challenges faced by professionals is that they feel they are “always two paces behind” gang members in an exhaustive network.

“There’s about 20 lines in Colchester alone and so they (police officers) will be busy, busy... they know that if they leave an area alone for a day, each line is going to be taking 5 grand, but they can’t be everywhere all of the time. Of course then when they do make arrests and they have a big job which takes time inside the station or whatever, building the files, do the research and make the calls... that is time off the streets. So you could multiply their team size by 10 and you still wouldn’t be able to keep up with it” (police officer)

Declining funding in public services goes hand in hand with the challenges of keeping up with such a complex and vast criminal network and professionals repeatedly raise the need for investment in services. Diminished funding shifts organisational priorities and changes the approach and practice of public services which has a knock on effect on individuals’ day to day workloads and capacity. Professionals often describe workloads which are difficult to manage and wanting more time to spend with young people.

“There used to be, certainly when I joined, that you’d go out and do pro-active work, and you’d sit on vehicles, you’d know the areas, you’d know the people in the areas, you’d generally know who had done what and you could spend time doing investigative work... But now it’s almost like for some officers nowadays they are there to record crime” (police officer)

Professionals describe how overwhelming it can be supporting young people who have such high risk of harm and how it can impact on anxiety and stress. Good and regular supervision can help the workforce reflect on practice, reinforce the progress they are making and positive impact on young people’s lives, however whilst most describe having good supervision, not all described their supervision or management support as good. Professionals emphasise that one person cannot take sole responsibility for protecting a young person from this model of exploitation; multiple professionals from multiple agencies carry responsibility together. Professional advice to others working in this field is not to carry such high expectations and that young people do not always end up with positive outcomes; several describe their young people in prison or still offending or breaching.



"I was worried and I still am to a certain extent. Its life changing if you get it wrong. These people's lives are on the line and it's really important that you don't mess up" (police officer)

A lack of training for professionals can add to anxieties. Some describe not having had any training on child exploitation at all and whilst most professionals agree that sharing best practice is a more effective way of learning, there is a clear need for training on criminal exploitation, gangs and county lines for all of the workforce. Furthermore, all professionals need to be trained in trauma informed practice, particularly the police and teaching staff.

Alongside workforce learning and development is a gap in educating parents, communities and young people about how to identify the warning signs of exploitation and how to access advice, support and guidance if concerns arise. [This may indicate that the Essex Safeguarding Children Board's child exploitation awareness raising campaign or similar may need to continue.] Any awareness raising activities need to be carefully considered and balanced so as not to raise anxiety levels and fear and risk raising perceptions that county lines is a far bigger problem than it actually is. Parents need to be signposted to parental support groups. Young people need to be educated on the realities, risks, consequences of county line, and whilst professionals acknowledge there are some excellent programmes of work, schools are the first to admit that they do not have the budget to buy in targeted programmes.

Professionals describe lots of barriers in supporting young people to adopt positive goals for their future which includes a lack of education and confidence, money and helping young people see the value in working legal employment for less money, convictions and seeking employment. What planning tools do professionals have to work with young people and are they suitable for multiple agencies to use in partnership?

# Next steps

One of the main objectives of the project is to develop a learning programme for professionals working with young people at risk of criminal exploitation for Essex. The views presented in this report will help shape training that enables professionals to have a better understanding of the needs, views and experiences of young people; helping professionals understand how it feels to be exploited, challenge stereotypes and understand what can really make a difference to the lives of young people and their families. This learning tool will encourage discussion and debate to help professionals explore how they and others can best respond to these views and affect change. The key focus of the learning programme will include:

- Understanding, identifying and assessing risk
- Recognising signs of exploitation
- Understanding trauma
- Understanding the need to build better relationships
- Developing mechanisms to support workers to help reduce anxiety and stress
- Understand the importance of facilitating young people's learning to enable them to plan for their future

This report raises some important questions for the partnership to consider. The information will be presented to a number of relevant strategic Boards to enable review and think about systemic responses and to ask ourselves some challenging questions on how much of an impact we have really had so far. Some possible questions could be:

- Is there a joint outcomes framework for young people being exploited by gangs?
- Is there a multi-agency information sharing protocol and is it applied to working with young people being criminally exploited?
- How do the partnerships share best practice effectively?
- How can the partnerships better understand each other's processes and approach?
- How can different organisations practically work better closer together; multi agency teams; shared workspace, joint working protocols?
- A specific gang orientated service?
- Who can take lead responsibility for coordinating a support programme for young people (YOT already seems to informally)?