



Child Criminal Exploitation: Safe and Effective Exit

Introduction

It is well documented that children who are exploited into county lines activity are at significant risk of harm. These children can be drawn into harmful situations that can have devastating and lifelong consequences for them and their families. Each child will have their own unique experience, therefore making the ending of the exploitation a complex task, with no set formula. There is a lack of research that identifies evidenced informed ways to stop the exploitation of children. However, there are clues about what could be helpful. We have therefore looked at a range of disciplines and sources to help us to pull together some of the learning. We have also spoken to a small number of young adults with lived experience and a small number of professionals, to cross reference our findings with their views and have located these within an ecological, systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It must be noted that much of the literature focuses on white adolescent males and therefore excludes the specific needs of those who fall outside of this group. We have listed some of the core barriers and then considered what agencies could do to overcome the different obstacles.

This briefing paper can be used to:

- Raise awareness for professionals who are new to this area of practice.
- Provide a helpful refresher to more experienced professionals
- Consider the learning and reflect on individual children and families

We would advise that this briefing paper is read in conjunction with the other work completed by the Pathfinder. This can be found on the Youth Justice Board's Effective Practice Hub.

Barriers that stop a child being able to exit

Children who are criminally exploited by county lines, may struggle to accept help, or leave a county line for different reasons:

Isolation: Exploiters will seek to disrupt a child's relationship with their family, friends, institutions (for example schools) and professionals (for example Children 's Social Care Services). This can prevent the child seeking help when they begin to recognise that the behaviours are abusive and want them to stop. Children can feel isolated from former peer groups and unable to connect with them due a breakdown in the relationship. The breakdown can occur as those around the child may struggle to understand the exploitation and how this can affect the child's behaviour. Isolation can lead to a child becoming extremely dependent on their exploiter, feeling as if they are being protected from those who either do not care for them, or services that do not support them. This reduces the number of positive peer and adult relationships a child has access to.

Danger and Fear: The child is fearful of harm that could be caused to them or their loved ones if they attempt to remove themselves. Children may not feel safe to acknowledge that something is happening, let alone able to disclose what is happening to them. The levels of harm (perceived or actual) a child (or their loved ones) could face should not be underestimated. There is a growing body of Learning Reviews that lay out the harm that may occur when a child is criminally exploited. For example, children have been fatally stabbed following their exploitation. Children may not believe that professionals or agencies can keep them safe, even if they do ask for help.

Shame, embarrassment, or denial: Some perpetrators will be charming and manipulative. This can prevent the child recognising the abuse and struggling to accept what has happened. The child may be in denial about the exploitation, believing that the exploiter is their friend. Other perpetrators will be menacing and violent. This can lead to children being too scared to speak up for fear of reprisals. Exploiters will present in different ways to children, and this can lead to children feeling confused. Children who are exploited and abused can develop connections to their exploiter, despite the relationship being harmful to them.

Trauma and low confidence: Children involved in county lines activity are often traumatised by their experiences. Serious case reviews, reports and research demonstrate that children's trauma is not only misunderstood but, in some cases, overlooked. Practitioners sometimes miss that a child is showing aggression, violence, ambivalence, or anxiety as a response to trauma. A child can also experience low confidence due to the isolation and the messages they have experienced which tell them they are worthless. These messages could come from the emotional abuse, harassment and humiliation inflicted by the perpetrator. They start to believe that there is no way out and they are powerless to change things.

Practical reasons: Exploiters often control many aspects of a child's life – making it difficult for the exploitation to stop. By controlling their access to food, money and putting them into debt (or perceived debt), the child is unable to leave. They may also have lost family, friends, and access to safe adults. Some children may also be exploited due to poverty and therefore they have little agency or choice.

How agencies can help stop a child being exploited

Child First (CF) is a set of principles that guides how children who come into contact with the youth justice system, should be understood and supported. The Youth Justice Board has adopted these principles in their Strategic Plan (2021 – 2024) setting out the vision for the youth justice system. There are four tenets that underpin CF:

1. **See children as children:** Prioritise the best interests of children, recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights, and potential. All work is child-focused and developmentally informed.
2. **Develop pro-social identity for positive child outcomes:** Promote children's individual strengths and capacities as a means of developing their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society
3. **Collaboration with children:** Encourage children's active participation, engagement, and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers
4. **Promote diversion:** Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion, and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

These evidence-based tenets should underpin all youth justice practice. This could present a challenge for youth justice colleagues who will need to navigate a landscape that is not clearly defined in terms of what Child First will look like in practice. This has the potential to be further compounded by the sheer volume of stakeholders with an interest in exploited children, who will need to understand the principles of this approach. Aligning families, communities, agencies, and institutions to hold and endorse these principles, will take time and persistence. However, the evidence is clear, this approach is grounded in a vast collection of research and should be embraced by the other parts of the system that have an interest in exploited children. The following questions are helpful when thinking about the response to children exploited by county lines:

- Does it see children as children?
- Does it prioritise their rights as children?
- Is it developmentally informed?
- Does it develop individual pro-social identity?
- Is it future focused, not backward/deficit focused?
- Does it focus on positive child outcomes, not managing offender outcomes?
- Are children meaningfully involved in its development?
- Does it promote engagement and social inclusion?
- Does it divert away from the system, not draw in?
- Does it minimise stigma from contact with the system?

How to work with the individual child

Identity: How a child sees themselves and their future is critical. Children need to believe that things can change. Children who are exploited are often isolated from support networks (who can provide a sense of who they were), and so helping them to rediscover their identity is important. New opportunities such as training, employment, or a new partner can also help towards an identity change. New opportunities (or old activities they have previously enjoyed) can lead to a change in thinking and behaviour. Without these opportunities and a shift in how children see themselves and their futures, exit will be difficult. To learn more about identity shift, click [here](#). Agencies and professionals must hold in mind that children take on the negative labels that can be assigned to them. Negative interactions can lead a child to have a sense of shame, such as feeling that something is wrong with them. This can prevent agencies offering help and the child accepting it.

Self-Awareness: Many children will not recognise that they are being exploited or that they are in need of help. This could affect their ability to engage and should not be viewed as a child being complicit. Having the space and opportunity to reflect is important. Holding a trauma response in mind, children need stability, and a sense of safety and protection to make the most of these moments of reflection. This can lead to children re-evaluating their lives. Having goals, aspirations and being able to see a worthwhile future can assist towards a child accepting help to develop a new identity. Reachable / teachable moments can act as a trigger for someone to accept help and support to stop the exploitation. Pain and fear are what often motivate these, and agencies should be on high alert during these times to ensure they offer practical help. The offer of help may need to be repeated many times before a child is in a position where they are able to accept.

Maturity / Thinking skills Children who are exploited need to navigate highly complex situations. It is well understood that children will develop into fully functioning adults at different times. As a child begins to mature, we can start to see less impulsive behaviours and a greater sense of responsibility. A child maturing will develop skills that support desistance. It is often more helpful to support children how to think, rather than what to think. Problem solving, critical thinking, relationship and identity skills enable a child to develop independent thinking, which may assist with reducing exploitation. This can lead to the child considering alternative ways to live that they may wish to pursue. Children can develop a new sense of who they are through maturing this process. Investing in building trust with children and providing them opportunities to gain responsibilities are ways that can help them achieve their goals.

Empowerment: It is not uncommon to see children left feeling disempowered. This is often due to the abuse associated with county lines and through services taking a deficit-based approach. This can act as a barrier to the child making or taking other opportunities available to them. Opportunities to build on the child's strengths should be taken, even if they have historically been used in negative ways. For example, a child may have a talent for math following their involvement in drug supply. Opportunities to develop a child's self-esteem should be maximised on every occasion. Children should feel in control of their futures (through decision making) and co-creating their plans will be a key part of this. This will support children to develop the skills to identify risk and put measures in place. A child will need to feel motivated, hopeful, safe, and well supported if we are to stop the exploitation.

How to work with the child's network

Co-production: There will be circumstances where parental involvement could be challenging. For example, if there are family members who have links to organised crime, or there is parental drug use. In most cases, parental engagement is a protective factor. If a service fails to engage a parent / caregiver, the county line has more time and opportunities to exploit the child. This is because the family are not actively engaged in the plan for the child. Some parents report that they find navigating services complex and unsupportive, adding that when we are assessing them, they are assessing us to see if we are ticking boxes, known what we are talking about and care. Families / caregivers who are involved and have helped shape the plan, understood the goals are a great source of help. Promoting positive future goals and ways to get there through positive activities can help children see a way out. Children need to feel as if they are not alone and families / caregivers need to walk alongside them, not just in the short term, but in the longer term too. Family Group Conferences and Signs of Safety are helpful models that support engaging the family.

Creating safety: Families / caregivers need to be well supported and contained to help their child. The right information can help families / caregivers to know what emotional support and practical things are required to best support their child. If families / caregivers understand the county lines business model and the tactics that are deployed to control and frighten children, they may feel better able to respond in a way that creates safety for the child. Children involved in county lines activity are likely to be traumatised, and families / caregivers understanding what trauma responses can look like will be important. It also needs to be recognised that families are likely to have also been traumatised by their child's exploitation. Practitioners should help families to reconnect. Strengthened and improved relationships will contribute to improving wellbeing.

Bespoke support: Families should be offered their own separate support to help them deal with the exploitation. Children are likely to display behaviours we find challenging (because of trauma) and there is likely to be significant agency attention such as, following reports of missing episodes, or homes being raided by the police. For parents to be able to navigate these highly stressful situations, they will need bespoke support. Families are also likely to see and hear things that could be important. It would be helpful for families to have information on how they can report things anonymously and how they can navigate services. Being provided their own advocacy worker could greatly assist with this. The needs of families should not be overlooked.

How to work with the child's peer groups

Mappings: Mapping peer groups and the interconnections between individuals can be helpful in terms of thinking about care and support / interventions. Understanding the complexities of the relationships and how quickly they can change is an important aspect of peer mappings. Some children may be exploited by one drug line whilst others could be exploited by multiple drug lines. Local mapping should inform the intelligence picture and provide a sense of when friendships may become more strained or fractured. Reachable / teachable moments could also come from friends experiencing something harmful, such as an attack or being robbed.

“True” friendship: A true friend is someone who genuinely has their friend’s welfare and best interest at heart. When a child starts to distance themselves, they often find out who their true friends are. Initial change can be met with suspicion, however over time a child’s true friends appear to be pleased for them, and in some cases, have asked what steps they took to distance themselves. Others will choose not to associate with the child anymore, often because of fear or jealousy. There could also be significant pressure placed on the child not to leave. Interventions that help a child identify the difference between a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship will start to prepare the child for the change that lies ahead.

New friendship groups: Peer groups are particularly important during adolescence. A child having access to children from outside their immediate network is helpful. It is likely that the child will have cut ties with pro-social peers so re-connecting children with others is an important step. Networks can help stop further exploitation. Alternatively, existing peers who support positive change can be helpful, particularly during significant periods, such as custodial sentences. Supporting children into new activities could help them to establish a new peer group. Isolating a child and preventing them from interacting with new children can stop them having opportunities to develop a new identity. It is important to hold in mind that children can learn new and positive things from others. Children need to make connections to feel able to exit.

Mentors: Individuals (either peer or adults) who have made the transition out of exploitation, and can become a positive mentor to others, could be brought in. It should be noted, lived experience alone is not enough. Mentors will have needed to have dealt with their past and have the right motivation and values. Safeguards and robust commissioning and monitoring arrangements need to be in place. Providing a network of peers who understand the challenges and can assist with thinking through exit are likely to be helpful. This includes understanding how the county lines model works and the likely fallouts. Foreseeing difficulties can help a child navigate a highly complex and dangerous scenario. Breaking planning into a series of steps has been found to be helpful, particularly if the child is mentored by someone who has taken those steps themselves. Services should be investing in those with lived experience, along with cultural competence and working with them to form part of the multi-agency response. For further information on cultural competence, please see our work on this.

Disillusionment: Moments of betrayal or abandonment can contribute to a sense of disillusionment for an exploited child. Perceived loyalty which might bind people can become ruptured, as children learn that those who they thought had ‘their back’ are nowhere to be seen. This can be particularly the case for children who spend time in custody. Letters, visits, and calls can stop after a period of time, leaving the child feeling isolated. By taking a trauma informed approach, professionals can work to strengthen their relationship with the child and increase opportunities to support the child exit.

How to work with the community

Safe spaces with safe adults: Exploitation can occur online but also in spaces and places outside of a child’s home. For some, home is not a safe or happy space. This can lead to some children spending more time away from home. Generally, it is people, not places that make children feel safe. Communities need to be part of the solution and to provide a safe space, along with protective adults. This includes children who may be trying to move away from county lines activity or have recently done so. There is limited research exploring the risk (or perceived risk) when

a child wants to leave. It is therefore critical that all stakeholders play a role in keeping a child safe, to create a protective barrier around the child. This includes the child having a real sense that their community cares about stopping exploitation. Services should work in a community focused way and support others to develop their responses. This could include the introduction of [bystander interventions](#), which support individuals to safely challenge their peers if they display abusive behaviours. Statutory services could support local stakeholders to become part of the plan by providing free education, training, and guidance.

Keep young people busy: It is helpful to provide a positive outlet for emotional release. For example, sport has been identified as being helpful in multiple ways (e.g., outlet for aggressions, social activity). Keeping children busy with activities they enjoy and are accessible to them is essential. This could include activities such as music and arts etc. These spaces need to be free from exploitation.

Reintegrate children: Communities play a key role in accepting a child back into the society. Agencies should consider how they work with the community to encourage greater understanding of exploitation and to prevent the child being stigmatised. If a child is excluded from their community this can have a negative impact on them, including a lack of chances and opportunities. Gaining employment has been found to show a reduction in general offending. Families are also often isolated because of their child's exploitation. They can feel isolated, judged, and blamed. Youth Justice is well placed to consider how restorative practice could support the reintegration of an exploited child, who has contact with the youth justice system. This would need to include their family.

How to work with education

Teacher attitudes: Research suggests that children that are linked to gangs often have a sense that they are perceived differently from non-gang involved youths. This could also be said of exploited children, who can be perceived as criminals. This is perceived as unhelpful for children wanting to leave. Research indicates that positive teacher-student relationships are important in preventing or decreasing youth delinquency. Positive relationships can act as a buffer from negative influences.

Responsive: Children who find themselves out of education need to be provided suitable provision and quickly. Being out of education is detrimental to a child. Children need to feel that what is being offered to them has purpose. Children can gain a sense of how valuable they are to society from the offer of a placement. Exploiters will tell children that the system doesn't value or care about them. When children are then offered opportunities that do not match their abilities, interests or are in areas that are not safe for them, they are likely to turn them down. All agencies should be working to develop the aspirations of children. This requires education to be responsive to a very vulnerable group of children.

Exclusions / reduced timetables: Exclusions and reduced timetables can be harmful to children. There is evidence to suggest that some children are being excluded because they have been groomed into criminal activity. For some, the exclusion comes at the onset of the exploitation. Children report to feeling 'forgotten' and 'written off'. Not being in education can lead to children being available for exploitation. A lack of achievement can also lead to children feeling a lack of hope for their future. Most children want to be back in mainstream education; however, agencies appear to struggle to find a pathway back. Agencies need to be alert to the risk of exploitation and work quickly to reduce the likelihood

of it happening. Further work is required to ensure that schools are more inclusive for this group of children. In addition, one review found children who died or experienced serious harm had often been permanently excluded from mainstream school. Permanent exclusion was identified as a trigger for a significant escalation of risk. Exclusion has a major impact on children's lives and if it is unavoidable then there should be immediate wrap-around support.

Working with other agencies

Labelling: Labelling is something that children have spoken about. The way that children are characterised is important as this contributes to their sense of self. If children are viewed as the problem as opposed to being a child 'in need', this can lead to punitive responses. This is particularly the case in the context of county lines, where children reject the victim label. Children report that they have felt labelled as 'drug dealers' and not worthy of hope. Repeat stops by police of children who fit the gang profile can have an unintended consequence. This can cause a build-up of resentment towards the police. This is also true of other statutory services and one of the reasons children stop engaging with them. Adults with lived experience spoke of being labelled as 'bad kids' when excluded from school. They reported that the label you are assigned as a child follows you to adulthood. This can act as a barrier to moving forward in a positive way. Language is important and services should hold in mind the power of a label.

Dismantling structural barriers: Services should provide challenge to the system and ensure that children are given every opportunity regardless of race, gender, class etc. This includes education, employment, and accommodation.

Consistency and reliability: Children need ongoing support and consistency from agencies together with high quality relationships and plans that support building on strengths and opportunities. Services should seek to provide high levels of support to exploited children. This could include taking them to interviews or courses, ensuring they have suitable clothing and money for lunch. Keeping children occupied in things they wish to pursue, can also lead to the intensity of a county line decreasing. Another benefit to this approach is that in many cases, if there is a proactive network around the child, the exploiters will cease exploiting that child as they become worthless due to the risk that the line holder could be identified. Exploiters do not want professionals visiting homes, being in communities, showing an interest or asking questions. It is helpful for exploited children and families to have consistent professionals and services. This is important if trust is to be built. If professionals can develop positive relationships with children, they are more likely to be able to explore motivations and drivers. Children report to feeling 'quizzed' by professionals, with the focus being on superficial issues. High quality support should also recognise the trauma the child may have had or could still be experiencing (which may include substance misuse or mental health provision). In situations where a child does not recognise the exploitation, services should continue to provide safeguarding, care, and support.

Responsivity: Statutory services tend to be designed to deal with the consequences of an event. They are often not designed to respond to unreported events or mediate between different parties. Having workers based in affected neighbourhoods is an important requirement of an

effective intervention. There is benefit to services reflecting on how they work with children, including their opening hours and availability of workers. Services should ensure that children know who to contact out of hours. Children also need suitable placements and education, training and employment opportunities that meet their needs. Too often children are not offered the type of provision they feel would be helpful to them. Consideration should also be given as to who is best placed to make an offer of help to the child. Research suggests that if a child has had a negative experience with an agency, they are less likely to accept any assistance as they are unlikely to see it as helpful.

External controls: Safe, predictable, and supportive relationships are one of the most important things a service can provide to an exploited child. Risk management plans that include control measure such as electronic tags, exclusions, and non-associations, can be effective in helping to safeguard the child. For these measures to have the maximum benefit, the child needs to see the measure in a helpful context - part of a package to protect and safeguard them, from a professional they trust.

Child centred placements: Professionals who work in placements should be well trained and supported when working with children who have experienced exploitation. Local Authorities should make every effort to source suitable accommodation in good time, to allow appropriate planning to take place. Children should also be consulted about where they live. Moving children to placements where they do not want to be, is something that needs to be carefully considered. Children who have been exploited have often had very little agency. Moving them without their consent can be incredibly damaging. They can feel an increased sense of isolation, helplessness, and punishment. Where children do have to move, consideration should be given to ensuring they become familiar with the area, they are shown safe spaces, appropriate services are engaged (such as mental health) and they have adequate essentials (such as towels, food, crockery).

Out of sight out of mind: An individual is more likely to relapse into criminality at certain times, and this is especially true if they have been relocated. Support needs to be provided at times when someone is most likely to feel isolated and lonely (for example, weekends or evenings). It also needs to be held in mind that cutting ties with your old life (peers, neighbourhood, etc.) can cause significant distress, particularly at certain times when there could be a significant 'pull back' (for example, if someone they know is harmed). For a new life and identity to be developed, early planning is required. This should include the child developing new hobbies and interests. It is much more than providing somewhere new to live and needs to be considered as part of the commissioning process.

Debt bondage: This area of the exploitation is complex. Debt is a successful tool that is used to force children to work for free or the child and their loved ones will face harm. In some cases, the debt is fabricated, and the child is told they owe a sum of money. Consideration should always be given to any debts that could be owed (perceived or real), following items being seized by the police, a child being robbed, or changes in a child's behaviour. Debt can keep someone trapped in county lines activity. Services should also not assume that if a child is out of the area (including in custody) due to a debt, they are safe. Threats can come in many different forms including via social media. Agencies should hold in mind that it may be some time before the debt is 'called in'. In other cases, the debt appears to just 'disappear'. This could have something to do with how profitable a drugs line is. The attention of services is what can lead to county line exploiters staying away as they do not want to draw attention to themselves or their operation. Therefore, agencies need to ensure that there is good information sharing of relevant concerns in place. They also need to ensure that when they finish working with a child a professional or other supportive network is still in place and there is a clear exit plan.

Safety of the child and family / network: One report suggests that children are unlikely to talk or report experiences of exploitation to a professional. The report goes on to say that children are more likely to tell a peer. There appears to be several reasons children do not report crimes to the police:

- Understanding of what constitutes a crime and victimisation and how to report this
- The context in which the crime or victimisation occurs
- Risks associated with reporting
- Perceptions of victimhood
- Perceptions and experiences of the police

If a child were to report a crime, they are deeply concerned about the very real potential for retaliation. Family members could also face potential harm because of a child reporting something to the police. Children appear to be more concerned about the potential harm that could be caused to family members than threats to themselves. This often leads to children remaining silent. It should be acknowledged that the threat may not present itself for a significant period, or it could be happening at regular intervals. This is likely to impact on how a child engages with professionals. Children may want to take up the offer of help and support but may feel unsafe to do so. Checking the child's perception of safety (not only for them but for their family / caregivers) and establishing the threat, risk, and harm that a line poses should all contribute to effective safety planning.

Impact of trauma: Trauma can affect a child in many ways, including emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioural. This is likely to impact on a child's judgements, communication skills, planning and perspective taking skills. By taking a trauma informed approach (see below sources of information), a child may have increased capacity to deal with the trauma. How children deal with their experiences can also lessen the impact. If children are able to develop the right skills, this can reduce the impact of the trauma. This is a complex area that will need specialist support (and if a child is unable to access this, consideration should be given to other forms of support, such as [Kooth](#)). The child (and family / caregivers) should be able to see that any setbacks are temporary and part of the journey. Developing the ability to relax and regulate emotions are effective skills that can help children live safer lives.

Attachment to family: Helping a child to see how their family has been affected by their involvement can be a motivation for leaving and staying out of exploitation. This needs to be carefully managed, to ensure that the child does not feel that they are to blame for what happened to their family/carers when they were in fact being exploited. Children need to value their families / caregivers more than their exploiters. This is not an easy task, and one that a practitioner will need both time, skill, and perseverance to achieve. Families / caregivers can help keep their children on track by investing time in them. Keeping children occupied and with safe adults is important. Family connectedness is associated with less problem behaviour. It is likely that families may have experienced their own traumas. Families who feel well supported Contained families / caregivers are more likely to be present and supportive of their children. Children need to know that their families / caregivers care about them and want them to be safe. Containing families / caregivers are more likely to be able to provide the emotional scaffolding that children need when experiencing adversity. Despite the many challenge's families have faced, ensuring the child feels included and valued are important in terms of holding them together. Families should be supported to reconnect when perpetrators have damaged relationships.

Families and caregivers also play an important role in empowering their child. They are often in a unique position where they can praise the child for their strengths as well as identifying things the child could do to reinforce and encourage a positive identity. Families and caregivers are more likely to be able to pick these moments.

Working with the system

'Adultification' is a term used to describe how children (specifically black children) may be seen and treated as more mature and adult-like than their actual age. This can lead to children being expected to think and behave like adults and blamed when they do not. It can also ~~This can~~ lead to services overlooking their safeguarding responsibilities, as the child can be viewed as not vulnerable. Services should reflect on:

- The actual age of a child – This is an obvious indicator of vulnerability, particularly if the child is black, male and the harm belongs outside the home.
- The capacity and level of understanding the child has
- Unmet needs, such as a lack of education or unstable accommodation

Services should be careful not to just focus on the problematic actions of the child and ignore the fact that these are children with unmet needs, including requiring protection from harm. How children are viewed can lead to some children (often black children) not being provided the same protection as their counterparts. Seeing children as less innocent and less vulnerable is harmful to them. Children remain the 'victims or beneficiaries of adult actions', this could be from those who choose to abuse and exploit them, or from the services they may be provided or denied.

Tackling perpetrators: The county lines model adapts and evolves, allowing the exploitation of children to sometimes go unnoticed. All parts of the system must be curious and alert to new tactics and any loopholes that can be utilised. The system must have a strong focus on tackling perpetrators and disrupting their activities. Exploiters do not want the attention of families, communities, or the authorities, as this creates a risk to their business model. Without such a response, the system allows children and their families to be abused, through a lack of regard. A greater focus on the disruption and enforcement of perpetrators is needed and should be started as soon as possible, if children are to be safe. There are several toolkits which are helpful in terms of setting out the different powers that can be deployed (see below sources of information). Areas should consider holding multi-agency disruption training, to bring different parts of the system together to consider how they can collaborate. Multi-agency disruption plans should also be formulated to ensure perpetrators feel the full force of the law. Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) panels are a useful vehicle to help this happen locally and hold partners to account.

Accommodation: For some children who are trapped, access to safe accommodation is a lifeline. However, the concerns regarding a lack of suitable placements / accommodation are well documented. This is a fundamental problem that needs to be addressed. When a serious risk of harm is presented, a child and their family may need to move quickly. This can sometimes present a challenge. Some families will be required to give up employment, (secure) tenancies or even sell their home. They may need to find school placements for their other children. The system can be slow during these times, and this can lead to additional tension and fractures within families. Information regarding concerns should always

be shared with the new Local Authority and Police. The immediate support offer (whether that be from the home or host area) should include help from services that can offer advocacy, provide basic supplies (food, clothing, clean bedding etc.) and care (addiction services, mental health etc.). There is also a shortage of therapeutic and specialist placements which can lead to some children being further exploited. Staff working in these placements should also have the cultural competence to care for these children. Safe and secure accommodation needs to be prioritised for this group of children and their families, for it to be effective.

Prosecution: If services suspect exploitation, a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) should be completed at the earliest opportunity. The priority should be safeguarding. When prosecutions take a long time to be dealt with, there can be an unintended consequence for children who are exploited. If children are Released Under Investigation for a number of months, children can become further embroiled with very little specialist support or monitoring. Involvement with the formal criminal justice system has benefits for some children (in terms of providing some support and external controls) and pitfalls for others (in terms of labelling and sentencing). Prosecuting children who are exploited by county lines is complex. Children can often swing from victim to perpetrator. Some go on to exploit other children to protect themselves or to move up the drug supply ladder. Other children will only be made aware of any outstanding debt bondage associated to the prosecution once a sentence has been served, meaning that the coercion and threats start all over again. What appears to be critical here is that each case needs to be examined on its own merits and services should have good communication with Police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) regarding pending charges. Youth justice are well places to share concerns about exploitation with the Crown Prosecution Service and this should be done as early as possible.

Sources of information:

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