

Safeguarding Bulletin

County Lines

You may have heard the phrase County Lines on the news or TV but behind the headlines and storylines there are many young people and adults that are being criminally exploited, groomed and harmed. At the basic level the 'line' refers to a pair or network of mobile phones that are used to control the drug deals made and delivery of drugs around the country from one town to another. The lines are operated at the top level of the organised crime network (OCG). The system runs on exploitation, with older dealers grooming younger children to keep their distribution lines flowing and for the OCG to make more money to finance their own lives.

There are a number of distinct stages that children or adults get involved in county lines:

- **Targeting/befriending**, a child or adult at risk is observed for selection through friendships and glamorising the group activities
- **Experience** to the lifestyle through gifts, alcohol, money, drugs and offering protection
- **Hooked**, becoming more involved and given risky tasks to do for the group
- **Trapped**, find it difficult to leave the group and becoming dependent on the group

The children that are groomed into OCG's can be young and will often start work as 'spotters', watching out for any police presence and alert those further up the chain. This escalates to hiding money, weapons and drugs in a safe place, often in their own homes. This leads them to becoming deeper involved in the organisation that they find it difficult to then get out. In order to control a child or adult at risk there are implied or actual threats of violence to close family members which is a way of ensuring compliance and loyalty to the OCG.

County lines are in every city and town in the UK and Birmingham is no different. Those at risk can be from every social background. The home of an adult at risk may have been taken over by unknown people that use it as a base to run lines from, this is known as 'cuckooing', and children are often forced to stay at the address to control the adult with threats of violence.

As with any major event, Birmingham 2022 will attract visitors from all over the country and globe. The OCG's are always looking for new markets and the Commonwealth Games can be a catalyst for this. Therefore it is important that our staff understand the risks and report it.

Spot the signs!

It is difficult to know that a county line operation is underway but there are some telling signs.

- Repeatedly going missing for long periods of time and whereabouts unaccounted for
- Sudden rise in truancy/staying out unusually late
- Returning home with money, clothes or accessories which they are unable to account for
- Changes in behaviour, becoming fearful and/or withdrawn and/or prone to unexplained outbursts of anger
- Being secretive (more guarded than usual for a typical teenager)
- Carrying more than one mobile and/or weapons
- Real distancing from one or both parents/ caregivers
- Unexplained injuries (which may indicate violence from others and/or self-harming), refusing medical help
- Gangs will often have profiles on social or networking websites like Instagram or Snapchat so look out for sudden changes to their profile and/or use of slang/derogatory language.

Being alert and reporting it may be a small piece of information that completes the jigsaw.

You witness an incident or come upon information which raises concerns about the safety and/or welfare of a Child or Adult at Risk, or an individual's actions or behaviour towards a Child or Adult at Risk

Think: Is there an immediate serious risk to the Child or Adult at Risk or are they in need of urgent medical treatment – if you are not sure speak to a line manager

YES

- Contact the emergency services by calling 999
- Preserve any evidence
- In the case of a child, inform the parent/legal guardian, unless doing so would put the child, yourself or others at risk
- In the case of an adult where possible and if safe to do so, let the adult know what you are doing
- Record the information on a Birmingham 2022 Safeguarding Report Form via the notification system

NO

- Speak to the Safeguarding Lead or Safeguarding Officer within venue to seek advice
- Record the information on a Birmingham 2022 Safeguarding Report Form via the notification system (on The Foundry)
- The notification will be triaged, assessed by the team and a decision made on how to progress