

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) Policy

Version number:	Version 1	Document ID Document owner:	HND Children's Care Ltd.
Version Date: Review Date:	January 2026 January 2027	Document ID Number:	2.15 Child Criminal Exploitation Policy
Version expiry:	January 2027	Document classification:	Final
Version status:	Live document		

Regulations and Standards:

The Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015:

- Regulation 12 - The protection of children standard.
- Regulation 34 – Policies for the Protection of Children.
- Regulation 40 – Notification of a Serious Event.

Further Guidance:

Please refer to the Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership within the County / Local Authority where the home is located.

Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines

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

Criminal Exploitation and Gangs:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/gangs-criminal-exploitation/>

Please also refer to the following internal policies and procedures:

'Safeguarding – Child Protection Policy'. 'Child Protection Referrals Policy'.

Contents:

1. Definition
2. County Lines
3. Who is at Risk?
4. Signs and Indicators
5. Agency Response
6. Working with Children
7. Further Information



1. Definition:

The Home Office defines Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) as: 'Child Criminal Exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual'.

'Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. Criminal exploitation often happens alongside sexual or other forms of exploitation'.

'Child Criminal exploitation is broader than just county lines and includes for instance children forced to work on cannabis farms, to commit theft, shoplift or pickpocket, or to threaten other young people'.

Currently there is no statutory definition for Child Criminal Exploitation. However, it is covered within the [Modern Slavery Act 2015](#) which sets out the offences of slavery, servitude and forced and compulsory labor in section 1, and human trafficking in section 2. Potential victims can be exploited in several ways, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, and criminal exploitation. Children may be forced to work in cannabis factories, move drugs, money, or weapons across county lines or within their locality, launder money through their bank accounts or carry out crimes of theft or violence, particularly against other young people.

2. County Lines

County lines is a form of Child Criminal Exploitation. It is a term used to describe the activities of gangs and organised criminal networks who are involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas (within the UK), using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of "deal line". These gangs are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move (and store) the drugs and money, and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons ([County lines: criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults, Home Office 2018](#)).

The adults running these networks remain at a distance from the frontline activity of drug dealing, reducing the risk of being caught and instead - they exploit vulnerable children who are at high risk of significant harm transporting and selling drugs, often many miles from home. Some children are forced to carry the drugs in harmful ways that are abusive and could result in their death. For example, 'plugging' is commonly used, which is when children can be forced to insert and carry drugs in their rectum or vagina.

Children may be sent to another area of the country to live with a vulnerable adult whose home has been taken over by the gang in exchange for a continued supply of drugs. This is known as 'cuckooing'. These environments are extremely dangerous for children who face the risk of violence from their exploiters and / or the drug users who have been cuckooed,



as well as from an unsafe physical environment featuring toxic substances and used needles. Other dealers in the area may also target these children to prevent them taking over their 'patch' - exposing them to the risk of more violence.

County lines activity is dynamic, and perpetrators will change their methods of exploitation quickly. As professionals become more responsive to identifying children at risk, criminals adapt their tactics. This may be by targeting new groups of children to exploit to avoid detection or recruiting children within the local area and hence avoid the risk of them being identified when travelling. As a result, a child who is exploited can leave their home or care placement in the morning, sell drugs, and return the same day and so avoid being reported missing.

There are high levels of violence and intimidation linked to county lines activity. Children can be very quickly groomed into criminal activity, often before parents or professionals realise what is happening.

Initially they may be trusted with small activities or 'minor' tasks that may seem inconsequential to the child, but which lead to a rapid escalation in demand and risk. Although the risk to the child is already present, at this point they are often unaware and may begin to believe that they have the trust and respect of their 'elders'.

One of the tactics that may be used by perpetrators involves staging a fake robbery where the drugs and money concealed on the child are stolen by their own gang. In these cases, the child believes they have lost money, drugs or phone contacts that are valuable to those running the county lines, and that they must work for free to repay the debt. Perpetrators might also threaten the safety of their family or parents, or their homes.

It is important to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs, and to remember that the receipt of something (e.g., money, drugs, 'status') by a child or vulnerable adult does not make them any less of a victim. It is also important to note that the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a child who engages in county lines activity to prevent someone carrying out a threat to harm their family.

All criminally exploited children are at risk of neglect, emotional harm, sexual exploitation, and abuse, as well as substance misuse and extreme forms of violence. Sexual violence can be used as a form of punishment.

Younger siblings may be recruited through fear, violence, and intimidation against the family of older children who have already been exploited.

The trauma caused by intimidation, violence, witnessing drug use or overdoses and continued threats to themselves or to family members can lead to significant mental and physical ill health of exploited children.

3. Who is at Risk?



Any child or young person may be at risk of criminal exploitation, regardless of their family background or other circumstances. For some, their homes will be a place of safety and security; for others this will not be the case. Whatever the child's home circumstances, the risks from exploitation spread beyond risks to the child. Their families or siblings may also be threatened or be highly vulnerable to violence from the perpetrators of criminal exploitation.

Like other forms of abuse and exploitation, county lines exploitation:

- Can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years.
- Can affect any vulnerable adult over the age of 18 years.
- Can still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual.
- Can involve force and / or enticement-based methods of compliance and is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence.
- Can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and young people or adults.
- Is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation. Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources.

Perpetrators are known to target vulnerable children and adults; some of the factors that heighten a person's vulnerability includes:

- Having prior experience of neglect, physical and / or sexual abuse.
- Lack of a safe / stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example).
- Social isolation or social difficulties.
- Economic vulnerability.
- Homelessness or insecure accommodation status.
- Connections with other people involved in gangs.
- Having a physical disability or learning disability.
- Having mental health or substance misuse issues.
- Being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories).
- Being excluded from mainstream education, in particular attending a Pupil Referral Unit. It is important when schools are considering exclusions, they also consider the safeguarding risks to the child.

It is thought that 14-17 years is the most common age for children to be exploited but there are reports of children under the age of 11 years being targeted.

Male children are most commonly identified as being criminally exploited, but female children are also used and exploited. It may be that female children are identified by agencies for other reasons other than criminal exploitation but are also being criminally exploited.



4. Signs and Indicators:

Some potential indicators of county lines involvement and exploitation are listed below, with those at the top of particular concern:

- Persistently going missing from school or home and / or being found out-of-area.
Unexplained acquisition of money, clothes, or mobile phones.
- Excessive receipt of texts / phone calls and/or having multiple handsets.
- Relationships with controlling / older individuals or groups.
- Leaving home / care without explanation.
- Suspicion of physical assault / unexplained injuries.
- Parental concerns.
- Carrying weapons.
- Significant decline in school results / performance.
- Gang association or isolation from peers or social networks.
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being.

5. Agency Responses

If a practitioner identifies that a child is involved in, or at risk of involvement in CCE they should respond following their individual Local Authorities Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures, alongside any specific local guidance for identifying and responding to CCE.

Sharing intelligence and information is crucial when developing multi- agency approaches to preventing criminal exploitation. It is only by sharing data that agencies can develop an understanding of the prevalence, nature and scale of criminal exploitation and county lines activity. This work should be carried out alongside similar profiles for sexual exploitation and children who go missing, and seek to identify children who are vulnerable, locations of interest and potential perpetrators. An early, coordinated response to any child who has been criminally or sexually exploited is really important for the child, and other children linked to them.

Effective early information sharing, and intelligence gathering can:

- Help build a profile of children that may be most at risk identify and support a child's needs at the earliest opportunity.
- Reduce the duration of harm and prevent escalation to more serious abuse.
- Help identify and understand links between different forms of exploitation and hidden, or related, crimes.
- Identify locations being used for the purposes of exploitation.
- Identify networks or individuals who pose a risk to children.
- Provide evidence in applications to the court for civil and criminal orders.
- Enable quicker risk assessment of a potential victim of trafficking and development of an effective safety plan.

The Home Office has published guidance for safeguarding agencies in *the* [Child exploitation](#)



[disruption toolkit.](#)

The toolkit is primarily aimed at frontline staff, including law enforcement, social care, education, housing, and the voluntary sector, working to safeguard children and children under the age of 18 from sexual and criminal exploitation. Additionally, it is intended to help all safeguarding partners to understand and access existing legislative opportunities at their disposal and to target specific risks and threats.

It is also important that, as a Regulated provision, HND Children's Care Ltd inform our relevant Regulatory Authority (Ofsted), again for the purpose of information sharing and transparency amongst targeted professionals.

Regulation 40 of the Children's Homes Regulations 2015 states:

(4) The registered person must notify HMCI and each other relevant person without delay if—

(a) a child is involved in or subject to or is suspected of being involved in or subject to, sexual exploitation.

(b) an incident requiring police involvement occurs in relation to a child which the registered person considers to be serious.

(c) there is an allegation of abuse against the home or a person working there; (d) a child protection enquiry involving a child —

(i) is instigated; or

(ii) concludes (in which case, the notification must include the outcome of the child protection enquiry); or

(e) there is any other incident to a child which the registered person considers to be serious.

The suspicion of, or actual Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) occurring would certainly fall within Regulation 40 (4) (b) and (e) and possibly (d).

6. Working with Children:

Children's needs and safety must come first. This means that professionals need to work flexibly and continue to 'stay with the child', even when they are unwilling to engage. Relationships between children and professionals that are based on consistency, stability and respectful communication will help in supporting effective interventions with exploited children.

When a child presents with offending, or other concerning behaviour, professionals need to be curious and compassionate and ask: what is happening in this child's life that is causing them to behave this way?

The behaviours that children present with, such as offending or violence, may result from exploitation outside the home and / or from abuse at home. Any intervention needs to consider all risks and needs. Children who have been criminally exploited are the victims of crime (although they may not initially see themselves as such).

Agencies should consider the context of the child's behaviour as well as the impact (for



example, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health issues or substance misuse), to help determine an effective response. This is particularly relevant for children exploited through county lines activity.

[Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery \(GOV.UK\)](#) - thematic report from Joint Inspections on the risk of child criminal exploitation.

[Children and Young People Trafficked for the Purpose of Criminal Exploitation in Relation to County Lines a Toolkit For Professionals - \(The Children's Society in partnership with Victim](#)

[Support and the National Police Chiefs' Council\)](#) - a number of resources that may be useful for professionals when working with children and young people, their families and communities at risk of abuse and exploitation.

[Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines \(GOV.UK\)](#) - Guidance for frontline professionals on dealing with county lines, part of the government's approach to ending gang violence and exploitation.

[Child exploitation disruption toolkit \(The Home Office\)](#) - Disruption tactics for those working to safeguard children and young people under the age of 18 from sexual and criminal exploitation.

[County lines exploitation: guidance for practitioners \(Ministry of Justice\)](#) - Practice guidance for Youth Offending Teams and frontline practitioners.

[County lines exploitation: practice guidance poster \(Ministry of Justice\)](#) - Note: not all processes included may be applicable to your local area, so please refer to your local CCE Pathway as well.

[Running the Risk \(Catch 22, 2015\)](#) - Report on children and young people being recruited to travel to areas away from home to sell drugs.

[County Lines after COVID - a new threat? \(2020\)](#) - Crest Advisory Report examining the changing picture of county lines activity.

End