

12 September 2017

County lines exploitation

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

The Children's Society will attend the meeting to outline the work that they are engaged in on county lines. This report provides background for their presentation and outlines other work that is underway, as well as suggesting how the LGA could respond. Cllr Joe Caluori, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families at Islington Council, will also attend to update members on recent work on this issue across London and ongoing efforts to develop a more co-ordinated approach nationally.

Recommendation

Members are asked to consider how this work can be progressed in partnership with the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board, following the suggestions in paragraph 17.

Action

Officers to proceed as directed.

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County lines exploitation

Background

1. County lines is a term used for urban gangs and organised crime groups extending drug dealing activities beyond their urban area into suburban, market and/or coastal towns using dedicated phone or “deal” lines¹. Lines can also be run within a smaller geographical area. County lines is a cross-cutting form of harm which can involve drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, trafficking and missing persons, often involving vulnerable children and young people.
2. It is a widespread issue. Feedback from police forces in England and Wales to the National Crime Agency (NCA) on the issue in 2016 showed that 71 per cent of respondents reported established county lines activity in their areas and 12 per cent reported an emerging picture of activity². While gangs from London dominate activity, the NCA’s report highlighted an emergence of gangs from other areas using the county lines model.
3. The Children’s Society have recently begun a new national child sexual exploitation/child sexual abuse prevention service, commissioned by Norfolk Police for the whole of England and Wales and funded by the Home Office. They are working within regional organised crime units (ROCU³) on scoping work around these issues, with the aim of creating strategies looking at a range of issues, but tailored towards local needs. They will also create toolkits which will help professionals work in response to particular vulnerabilities. A part of this work is focussed on harm caused through county lines exploitation.
4. The Children’s Society have also recently advised on the production of a new short film on county lines, which is currently being made into a feature length. They will speak about some of the issues that they have identified through their national service and previous work on county lines.

What is county lines exploitation?

5. Typically urban gangs move to establish new bases in areas outside of their urban areas to facilitate the selling of drugs – normally heroin or crack cocaine but also other drugs such as cannabis or cocaine⁴. This may be done for a range of reasons. There may be less of an established market or capable competition, thus potentially increasing profits

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/626770/6_3505_HO_Child_exploitation_FINAL_web_2_.pdf

² <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/753-county-lines-gang-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2016/file>

³ ROCUs form an important part of the national policing network, providing a range of specialist policing capabilities to forces to help them to tackle serious and organised crime effectively

⁴ <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/753-county-lines-gang-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2016/file>

and operating outside of an area in which they are known, and which may be targeted by enforcement activities, providing a perception of increased anonymity.

6. The phone line is central to the operations of the gang in the new area. In 2015 the NCA stated that this can often be a long standing number, running for years or even decades that is then marketed to users within the area using a variety of methods⁵. However, the NCA's most recent report from 2016 noted that there has been an emerging trend of changing the deal number⁶.
7. Gang members engage in marketing of the deal line, including introductory offers such as buy one get one free⁷. Once a market is established and a brand name for the drug line known, those at the top of the hierarchy within the gang will typically seek to use others as runners, seeking to reduce the risk to themselves. The exploitation of children or vulnerable adults to carry drugs or cash is a typical feature of county lines activity. Boys, girls and vulnerable men and women can all be at risk of exploitation. This may be referred to by members as "going country"⁸ and children as young as 12 have been identified as being exploited, however the typical age is 15-16 years old⁹.
8. Gangs are known to target vulnerable children and adults. The Home Office's guidance on county lines published in July 2017 outlined the following factors which heighten a person's vulnerability:
 - 8.1. Having prior experience of neglect, physical and/ or sexual abuse
 - 8.2. 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)
 - 8.3. Social isolation or social difficulties
 - 8.4. Economic vulnerability
 - 8.5. Homelessness or insecure accommodation status
 - 8.6. Connections with other people involved in gangs
 - 8.7. Having a physical or learning disability
 - 8.8. Having mental health or substance misuse issues
 - 8.9. Being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories).
9. Typically gangs target children from urban areas who are then trafficked to the new location. This has been reported as being via trains but can also be via private hire cars and taxis. They transport drugs and money as well as selling drugs from 'trap houses' – locations where drugs are made or sold and gang associates base themselves. They may be subjected to other forms of exploitation including child sexual exploitation. They

⁵ <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/620-NCA-Intelligence-Assessment-County-Lines-Gangs-and-Safeguarding/file>

⁶ <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/753-county-lines-gang-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2016/file>

⁷ <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/620-NCA-Intelligence-Assessment-County-Lines-Gangs-and-Safeguarding/file>

⁸ <http://saferlondon.org.uk/2016/09/county-lines-i-need-know/>

⁹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/626770/6_3505_HO_Child_exploitation_FINAL_web_2_.pdf

may also witness or experience a wide variety of other behaviours which could cause trauma including witnessing adult sexual behaviour, seeing drugs being injected, witnessing rapes, being victims of sexual or physical violence or sleeping in unsafe conditions around drug paraphernalia.

10. The exploitation of vulnerable adults can take a range of forms:

- 10.1. In establishing a base in a new area, gangs may target vulnerable adults, taking over their addresses through force or coercion. This is called “cuckooing”. Adults, who may already have drug dependency issues, may be given drugs to initiate a relationship and then may fall into debt bondage and/or further dependency which sees them having to work for the gang and being exploited.
- 10.2. 90 per cent of the police areas who responded to the NCA’s survey found that there was criminal exploitation of women. They may enter into what they regard as a relationship with a gang member but then can be controlled and subject to domestic abuse¹⁰. The NCA found that the most common form of assistance was the use of their address, followed by holding and running drugs. They were also employed to book hotels and hire cars, identify local addresses for cuckooing, act as drivers and sometimes enforcers. They may have children themselves who can then be exposed to the activities of gang members.

Councils

11. In January 2017, nineteen London Boroughs wrote to the Home Secretary to highlight the importance of tackling county lines at a national level. They called for a national strategy and action plan, arguing that the geographical spread of county lines exploitation meant that a national approach was necessary to tackle the issue effectively.
12. This work was co-ordinated by Islington Council, and Cllr Joe Caluori will attend the meeting to provide further details. Some additional information is, however, available at: www.islington.media/r/6442/call_to_protect_london_s_vulnerable_young_people_from

LGA Activity

13. Safer and Stronger Communities Board Members heard from the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner in January 2017 and agreed that we would jointly produce a guide for councillors on modern slavery. That guide will highlight the issue of county lines exploitation. Members also agreed that the LGA would highlight further case studies on modern slavery and trafficking which could also include county lines. The LGA Children and Young People Board is currently working on guidance for councillors on youth justice, which will also include case studies and guidance around county lines. Additionally, the LGA will be looking to produce a series of workshops on modern slavery to highlight the issue and increase awareness.

¹⁰ <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/753-county-lines-gang-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2016/file>

14. The LGA was involved in the Home Office's recently published guidance on county lines to support practitioners:
www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/626770/6_3505_HO_Child_exploitation_FINAL_web_2_.pdf. The LGA is also a part of the cross-government county lines working group, responsible for developing an action plan and overseeing its implementation. The working group is seeking to raise further awareness about county lines with local authorities, and is also keen to collate examples of different approaches and good practice from councils.
15. Gangs' links to violent crime will be explored as part of an LGA conference planned for this autumn.

Next steps

16. The cross-cutting nature of county lines exploitation is relevant to both the Children and Young People Board and the Safer and Stronger Communities Board, which is also considering this issue at their September meeting. We therefore propose taking forward this work jointly, and will prepare a joint paper summarising discussions and recommendations from both meetings with suggested actions for both Boards to agree.
17. Members may wish to consider:
- 17.1. The production of additional resources for different council departments around modern slavery and trafficking.
 - 17.2. How this issue is considered within the regional workshops on modern slavery.
 - 17.3. Whether the LGA should consider calling for a national strategy and action plan, supporting the work that is already underway in a number of London Boroughs.
 - 17.4. What more the LGA could do to raise awareness of this issue amongst our members, and to support the development of a coherent and co-ordinated national response.
 - 17.5. How the LGA could encourage greater joined up working at a local level between the relevant authorities.

Implications for Wales

18. Councils in Wales are subject to the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The Welsh Government is tackling the issue of modern slavery specifically through the employment of an Anti-Slavery Coordinator, responsible for making Wales hostile to slavery and to co-ordinate the best possible support for survivors. The Welsh Government has also set up the Wales Anti-Slavery Leadership Group with membership from the Home Office, the National Crime Agency, Welsh local authorities and the WLGA amongst others.

Financial Implications

19. The development of new council resources may require incur financial cost, however this is likely to be met within existing team budgets.