

Addressing the risk of criminal exploitation of young people in Stockton

What is a County line?

The term 'County lines' refers to the criminal exploitation of children and young people by gangs and organised crime networks, mainly in relation to the selling of drugs. Often children are made to travel across counties and they communicate using dedicated mobile phone lines to supply drugs. Although the true figure cannot be confirmed, it is estimated that there are at least 46,000 children in England who are involved in gang activity. It is estimated that 4,000 children are being exploited in London alone. According to statistics there were 700 county lines active nationally in 2017. The most recent figures suggest this has increased to 1,500. Concurrently violence figures have increased over the same period.

Gangs deliberately exploit vulnerable children, targeting individuals who are homeless, living in care, not in regular education, experiencing chaotic lifestyles and trapped in poverty. Transition from Primary to Secondary school age is seen as a key time particularly for vulnerable children, this period is one of the key times where individuals get drawn into criminal exploitation.

The intelligence model for County Lines continues to be developed nationally and due to the rapid acceleration of new lines a Co-ordination Centre has been established through the National Crime Agency which is to be based in Birmingham. This is an evolving model which will also include a regional Police resource with one co-ordinator and one analyst support local areas.

Do we have a County Lines/Criminal Exploitation issue in Stockton?

The key challenge for us in Stockton at the moment is that we need to refine our intelligence. In terms of young people at risk of criminal exploitation we do have evidence to suggest this is occurring, although the true scale is not clear. Currently there is no clear evidence of county lines in Stockton or the Tees at this point. However, due to the rapid expansion of County Lines across the country it can be assumed that if it is not currently in place there is a high chance that it will be soon.

What do we need to have in place?

We are fortunate in Stockton to have a number of established partnerships and panels in place that provide us with the opportunity to discuss, problem solve and highlight emerging issues. The key challenge for us is to ensure that these processes continue to develop. National guidance calls for the need for a multi-risk panel which looks at the most vulnerable individuals covering all aspects of risk as opposed to separate systems which only look at one aspect of vulnerability, for example Child Sexual Exploitation, ASB, Missing from Home etc. Within Stockton the Vulnerable exploited missing and trafficked (VEMT) group is best placed for this to take place.

Next steps

Work is ongoing to review the various processes which are in place as well as explore how best to use existing data and information gathering processes to support the early identification of risk. In addition to this a joint bid in collaboration with the PCC has been submitted to the governments 'Early Intervention Youth Fund' which will seek to co-ordinate diversionary and targeted work across the Tees. Further updates will be provided to SSP in due course.