

Child Criminal Exploitation, Gang Activity and Youth Violence Affecting Children.

This procedural guidance is primarily aimed at frontline staff who work with children and young people and related partner organisations. It is intended to help practitioners understand the nature of the risks posed to children and young people related to gang activity, violence and criminal exploitation and summarises the responsibility of practitioners to intervene effectively to prevent criminal exploitation and respond promptly when it is known that a child or young person is being exploited.

Young people's experiences of significant harm often exist beyond their families, and practitioners must respond as they would when concerns arise about a child or young person suffering harm within the family and home.

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach that recognises the different relationships that young people form, for example peer on peer abuse within their neighbourhoods, schools and online that can feature violence and abuse. This can escalate to the point where a child or young person becomes involved in situations where they find themselves at serious risk of significant harm. Unfortunately, parents and carers often have little influence when their children become drawn into and involved with individuals and situations that cause harm outside of the family and the home. Therefore, Children's Services, Child Protection systems and their partner agencies need to engage with individuals and recognise that a clear understanding of Contextual Safeguarding and its approach is critical for children and young people who are being harmed within their own communities.

It is recommended that this procedural guidance is read in conjunction with the Isle of Man Safeguarding Procedural Protocol for Children and Young People who are at risk of, or experiencing exploitation (2021).

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1. Definition

Criminal exploitation is a form of harm that was relatively unrecognised until 2014-15 and has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and communities.

The UK 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.

Potential victims can be exploited in a number of ways, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, 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

Crime such as County Lines is a major cross-cutting issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, human trafficking and missing persons. As such the lines often blur between individual elements of

organised crime which can make it harder to spot the signs and know the best approach to tackle it.

Organised County lines is a form of Child Criminal Exploitation and is a term used to describe the activities of gangs and organised criminal networks referred to on the Isle of Man as organised Crime Groups who are involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas (within the UK and Crown Dependencies), using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of "deal line". These groups are likely to exploit children, young people 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 and young people who are at high risk of significant harm transporting and selling drugs, often many miles from home. Some children and young people are forced to carry the drugs in harmful ways that 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. This is a common method to transport drugs into the Isle of Man. Drug mules will travel to the island via the Steam Packet ferry or airport with drugs plugged internally.

Children, young people and vulnerable adults may be sent to the Isle of Man to transport drugs. It can be the case that vulnerable young people's homes will be taken over by the group in exchange for a continued supply of drugs. This is known as 'cuckooing.' A child or young person will attend these addresses and remove the drugs, handing them over to a member of the group.

These environments are extremely dangerous for children and adults 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. Often drug mules will return to the United Kingdom in a matter of days.

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, which may include targeting new groups of children to exploit to avoid detection.

A child who is being exploited can leave their home or care placement in the morning, sell drugs and return the same day and so avoid being reported as missing.

On the Isle of Man there is a clear change in the methods of exploitation, in that children and young people are often manipulated or coerced into accepting drug

packages through the postal or courier system. Packages are sent to the home address of such children or young people. The package will be received at that address before being handed to the individual within the criminal group on the island. This method is used by criminal groups operating on the island as an attempt to distance themselves from such packages and avoid prosecution.

There are high levels of violence and intimidation linked to county lines activity. Children and young people can be very quickly groomed into criminal activity, often before parents or professionals realise what is happening. Younger siblings may be encouraged to become involved through fear, violence and intimidation against the family of older children who have already been exploited.

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

Child Criminal exploitation, like other forms of abuse is a safeguarding concern and constitutes abuse even if the young person appears to have become readily involved. Criminally exploited children and young people 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.

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 and young people. The behaviours that children and young people present with, such as offending or violence, may result from exploitation outside the home and/or from abuse at home. Careful consideration must be given to the context of the child's behaviour as well as the impact, for example, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health issues or substance misuse. This is particularly relevant for children exploited through county lines activity. Any interventions must take into account all the risks and the needs of the child or young person.

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 or young person's home circumstances, the risks from exploitation spread beyond risks to them. 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; and
- 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 abuse 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. It is important when schools are considering exclusions that they also consider the safeguarding risks to the child.

The most common age group to be exploited is 14-17 years of age however there are reports of children below the age of 11 years being targeted.

Male children are most commonly identified as being criminally exploited, with female children often being used for sexual exploitation. Some children and young people come to the attention of other agencies and organisations for different reasons and are not initially identified as being exploited

Working with Children and Young People who are being exploited

Practitioners should consider their own safety whilst working with young people and visiting a household. It may be appropriate to interview the child and the parents in a neutral setting. Information sharing about high risk families and individuals (such as those carrying weapons) should be considered across all agencies that might have contact with the individual concerned.

It is important that practitioners receive the supervision, support and training required to work with the child or young person and that managers provide effective oversight and supervision of frontline practice.

4. Signs and Indicators

Some potential indicators of county lines involvement, or of being involved in organised gangs and exploitation are listed below:

- Persistently going missing from school or home and / or being found out of the jurisdiction of the Isle of Man when reported as missing;
- 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 / placement 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. Street Gangs/Organised Crime Groups

Being part of a friendship group is a normal element of growing up and it can be common for groups of children and young people to gather in public places to socialise. Although some group gatherings can lead to increased anti-social behaviours with peer- on- peer abuse and youth offending, these activities should not be confused with a street gang or with the serious violence of an organised crime group.

A street gang can be described as a relatively durable, predominantly street based group of young people who see themselves as a discernable group for whom crime and violence is integral to the group's identity. They are often in conflict with other similar gangs.

Young people who are involved in gangs and violence, and have become associated with criminal networks may not actually identify themselves as being exploited, but it is clearly to their detriment that they are involved in this type of activity. As a member of a gang, young people are used through whatever means to engage in criminal activity, often by other young people or adults who coerce them to do so.

There is a distinction between street gangs and organised crime groups based on the level of criminality, organisation, planning and control. However, there are significant links between different levels of gangs, for example street gangs can be involved in drug dealing on behalf of organised criminal groups. Young people may also be at risk of sexual exploitation in these groups.

Children and young people may be involved in more than one gang and may not stay in a gang for significant periods of time. The term gang is rarely used as children and young people use terms such as 'crews', 'cuz' (cousins), 'my boys' or simply 'the people I grew up with'.

An organised criminal group is a group of individuals normally led by adults for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain (financial or otherwise). This involves serious and organised criminality by a core of violent gang members who exploit vulnerable young people who can become indebted to the gang/groups and then exploited in order to pay off their debts.

Safeguarding should focus on both young people who are vulnerable of making the transition to gang involvement as well as those already involved in gangs. This vulnerability may be exacerbated by risk factors in an individual's background, such as being abused or neglected within the family home, including violence within the family, or being removed and placed into care, involvement of siblings in gangs, poor educational attainment, or poverty and mental health problems.

Practitioners should be aware of particular risks to young people involved in gangs from violence and weapons; drugs and sexual exploitation, with a higher risk of sexual abuse for females.

6. Agency Response

Working with criminally exploited children and young people is a complex issue. They could potentially be both a victim and an offender, and this can involve serious crime and investigations which are essential to ensure the prosecution and disruption of the perpetrator. The perpetrator is usually an adult who is responsible for coordinating criminal activities with the involvement of children and young people.

Children and young people involved in criminal exploitation should be treated primarily as the victims of abuse and should have their needs carefully assessed with the aim being to protect them from further harm.

Where child criminal exploitation is identified as a potential risk by a practitioner within any organisation or agency or if a child has made a disclosure, child protection procedures must be followed and a referral should be made to the Initial Response Team, Children and Families Division in accordance with the [Referrals Procedure](#).

The sharing of all available information is crucial at the time of the referral being made to the Initial Response Team.

Information gathering, cross referencing and sharing is essential when there are emerging concerns relating to the exploitation of young people. It is important to understand local patterns, to disrupt and deter perpetrators and to identify, help and protect children. Effective early information sharing and intelligence gathering can:

- Help build a coherent picture of risk sources and potential targets for abuse;
- Identify and support a child's needs at the earliest opportunity; reducing the duration of harm and escalation to more serious abuse;
- Help identify and understand the 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 risks such as trafficking or radicalisation; and
- Assist in the development of effective safety plans.

The Isle of Man's commitment to sharing information for the purposes of safeguarding is set out in the Isle of Man Safeguarding Board [Sharing Information Guidance and Protocol](#).

Daily Exploitation Meetings

Once the referral has been received by the Initial Response Team, Children and Families Division, to be able to determine whether children and young people are at risk of or are being criminally exploited the child or young person should be discussed within the Daily Exploitation Meeting (DEM) taking into account all of the available information about that young person and their circumstances. The safeguarding mnemonic will be completed for these initial discussions and this will determine the nature of the next steps for this child / young person.

- As much information as possible must be gathered by practitioners to assist decision making in this initial meeting , the meeting will gather information from partner agencies to determine where possible
- The views of the young person and their sense of the risks that they are exposed too;
- Capture their lived experiences and take account of their context, gender, ethnicity and culture.
- Understand the risks and protective factors;
- The young person's wider network in schools, peer groups and local neighbourhoods.

It may be necessary to revisit this child/young person at the following DEM meeting if all information isn't available at the initial meeting.

The meeting will be chaired by a manager at Team Manager level and should have equivalent representation from the following agencies:

- Children and Families Division
- Health
- Isle of Man Constabulary
- DESC
- CAMHS;
- Youth Justice;
- St Christopher's/Fostering if the child or young person is looked after.

Where there are no/low level concerns identified, there will be no further action required other than support provided by early help or universal services if the

young person, (if of sufficient age and understanding) or parent/s consent to this. The early help plan may be crucial in the early identification of children and young people who need additional support due to the risk of being on the periphery of gang activity/ involvement.

This initial information may indicate that the child is in need of service provision to prevent impairment to their wellbeing and therefore a NARRATES assessment should be undertaken and a Child with Complex Needs (CWCN) plan developed. Such an assessment can only be carried out with the development of a plan with the consent of parents or young person, if of sufficient age and understanding. If at any point there is withdrawal of parental consent resulting in heightened professional concern, the need for progression through a strategy discussion will need to be considered to decide upon the next steps that should be taken. If the findings from the CEAM assessment identifies that the child or young person is being significantly harmed or is likely to suffer significant harm and is in need of protection. A CEAM Strategy Meeting should be convened. Professionals within that meeting will consider whether to pursue child protection enquiries under Section 46 of the Children and Young Person's Act (2001). Where there is a risk to a child's life or the likelihood of significant harm action may be necessary to secure the immediate safety of the child and urgent legal advice may be required.

The strategy meeting should also decide if the organised or complex abuse procedure should be invoked. This procedure applies when there are multiple victims and/or perpetrators.

Children and Young People who are looked after - When concerns are raised that a child or young person who is being looked after is possibly being criminally exploited the allocated social worker must in the first instance inform their Team Manager.

The child or young person should be discussed within the next DEM (if this is a new concern), this information will then form part of a CEAM assessment completed by the allocated social worker or the residential worker. If the child young person is assessed as being medium/high risk then they will be discussed at the RMM meeting and the risk assessment reviewed

Consideration must be given to inviting the fostering link worker/residential care manager and the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to the meeting. The IRO should always be informed of new information and any changes to placement and the care plan.

If a strategy meeting is required then this should consider

- Whether any immediate action is required, including the need for a medical assessment;
- Whether the current placement is appropriate and the risks to other children in the placement;
- Putting in place a safety plan and if it is decided that the current placement remains appropriate steps must be put in place to prevent the child or young person going missing and reduce the risk of harm. Wherever possible the child or young person should be asked to be a part of creating the plan which should include; Monitoring callers to the home or adults collecting children and young people by car and visitors causing concern should be turned away; Telephone calls and online communication should be monitored with a decision made as to whether to restrict where possible the use of them.
- Recording whether there are patterns to the child or young person going missing. For example, are they missing for short or longer periods of time;
- If a child goes missing from their foster placement or residential home and staff/foster carers are concerned that they are at risk of exploitation, they should inform the police, report the child missing and pass on the relevant information to the social worker.

Referral made/Response required when a child or young person who may be at risk of criminal exploitation comes to the attention of the out of hours.

Individual children's circumstances will be assessed by the out of hours duty team where the following decisions should be made according to circumstances:

1. Record and, alert all necessary parties, discuss the possible completion of a CEAM assessment, however if the child young person is an open case consideration to be given the best person to complete the tool. All available information to be considered and, in order to determine the level of risk the SAFEGUARD mnemonic should be used in the first instance. if there is no evidence of exploitation take no further action; or
2. Record, alert all necessary parties, if this is a new case not open to services undertake a safeguarding mnemonic if there is no immediate risk (but there are concerns) to the child or young person take the findings to the next DEM meeting for agreed further action;
3. Record, alert all necessary parties if the concerns are significant , undertake a CEAM and if there is evidence of immediate significant harm the decision should be made to convene a CEAM strategy discussion to agree steps to safeguard the child or young person.

The Risk Management Meeting

The Risk Management Meeting (RMM) takes place on a weekly basis. All children and young people who have been risk assessed, discussed within DEM, with an assessed level of medium/high risk with plans agreed to reduce the risks of exploitation will be discussed within the RMM.

The purpose of this meeting is for the multi-agency professionals to offer oversight and assurance on risk management plans, that they are sufficiently responsive to the assessed levels of need. The meeting will also consider associates and hot spots for escalation to police colleagues. The meeting offers reflective time to discuss individual cases and any specific barriers to improve the outcomes for the children and young people who are being exploited and make suggestions as to how any barriers can be overcome.

It is important to remember that the RMM is not a replacement for planning for any further action for the child or young person. This should take place in the CEAM strategy meeting and ongoing planning meetings for the young people. The RMM should have equivalent representation at Service Manager level from:

- Children and Families Division;
- Health;
- Isle of Man Constabulary;
- DESC;
- CAMHS;
- Youth Justice Team;
- St Christopher's/Fostering if the child or young person is looked after

The Strategic Exploitation Meeting

This meeting is mainly focused on generic service information rather than information about individual children or persons of interest. Where individual children or persons of interest are discussed, information should only be shared in line with the Isle of Man Information Sharing Guidance and Protocol. Alongside this, a confidentiality declaration will be signed by all participants of the meeting and read out at the beginning of each meeting.

This meeting should be held bi monthly and will be responsible for identifying trends, patterns, hotspots, locations, gaps and barriers and will use information from the RMM tracker and have oversight of:

- Missing data/information from safe and well interviews/return home interviews;
- Offending data;
- Location information

The Strategic Exploitation Meeting should have equivalent representation at a Senior Management Level from the following agencies:

- Children and Families Division;
- Health;
- Isle of Man Constabulary;
- DESC (Education, Sport and Culture);
- CAMHS;
- Probation.

Raising awareness of child criminal exploitation with the wider community including parents and carers as well as public services such as transport and recreation and the business community is important and helps in developing an understanding of the local risks and patterns of offending. Schools have a crucial role in prevention by educating young people to understand the risks especially when young people are involved in developing prevention and awareness resources.

7. Further Information

The Isle of Man Safeguarding Procedural Protocol for Children and Young People who are at risk of, or experiencing exploitation (2021).

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.

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

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