



# CHILD EXPLOITATION & ONLINE HARM

## Practitioner Briefing

### March 2023

The purpose of this document is to provide members of the partnership with an understanding of what constitutes child exploitation, the varying means by which children are exploited along with the associated risk factors and indicators.

This document also describes what is meant by online harm, an emerging issue in today's society.

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### CHILD EXPLOITATION (CE)

'Child Exploitation refers to the use of children for someone else's advantage, gratification or profit often resulting in unjust, cruel and harmful treatment of the child.

These activities are to the detriment of the child's physical or mental health, education, moral or social-emotional development. It covers situations of manipulation, misuse, abuse, victimisation, oppression, or ill-treatment'.

*Save the Children, 2020*

When a child or young person is exploited, they are groomed by being given things like gifts, drugs, money, status and affection. This is usually in exchange for the participation in some form of criminal or sexual activity but can also be linked to Human Trafficking. The victim is often asked or told to do something in return for something they want or need.

It is irrelevant whether the child consents to any part of the relevant action. Even if the child receives something in exchange for their involvement, they are still a victim.

Child Exploitation is a cause of significant harm and should trigger child protection processes and consideration of all relevant preventative actions. It is critical for professionals to be aware of indicators of exploitation and trafficking and to take appropriate safeguarding and procedural steps.

### CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION (CCE)

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is a type of abuse where children and young people are manipulated and coerced into committing crimes for the benefit of the exploiter.

CCE usually involves an imbalance of power due to age, gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, status or access to money. Children can be particularly vulnerable as it is assumed they are less likely to be detected in such activity and/or receive lesser penalties if caught. Exploiters employ a range of tactics which they adapt to the individual they are seeking to exploit. This exploitation will often target emotional, physical, and material needs to entice individuals to engage in criminality to achieve the perceived 'gain'. Violence or the threat of violence can also be used to force individuals to comply and engage.

It is worth highlighting again that a person receiving something in exchange for their involvement, does not mean they are not a victim of criminal exploitation.

Physical contact between the victim and perpetrator may not be necessary, the use of increasingly sophisticated technologies offers an alternative means for exploitation to take place, creating physical distance and at times reducing the need for physical contact.

Types of CCE can include being forced or enticed to commit theft, work in an illicit trade, threaten or commit violence and hold weapons, drugs and/or money.

Any child being forced or coerced to commit crime must be seen as a victim of exploitation.

### **County Lines**

'County Lines' is a specific type of CCE prevalent in the North East and is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across Police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by Serious and Organised Crime Groups (SOCGs). The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs.

Those involved in County Lines are likely to exploit children and young people through coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. Children and young people are coerced into transporting money and drugs across the country, so that the criminals can remain detached and are less likely to be caught.

### **Cuckooing**

The term 'Cuckooing' is a Police term for 'someone having their home taken over by a SOCG for the purpose of criminality, more often than not for the purpose of drug dealing or for storing items, including drugs, money and weapons.'

Similar to County Lines, children or vulnerable people are coerced or forced (sometimes with threats or actual physical/sexual violence) into allowing their property to be used for the purpose of criminality. Many of these individuals are often vulnerable through drug/alcohol use, by virtue of age, disability or other vulnerability.

Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to 'Cuckooing' if they, for a variety of reasons, find themselves in their own accommodation and being responsible for their own care and welfare. An SOCG will exploit this vulnerability and, should that child or young person have support in place, they will actively encourage them to disengage, creating the ideology that they (the SOCG) will provide them with support and create suspicion of support services. This is often the first tell-tale signs of exploitation which may be picked up by support services.

## **CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (CSE)**

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of sexual abuse in which a person(s) of any age takes advantage of a power imbalance to force or entice a child into engaging in sexual activity in return for something received by the child and /or those perpetrating or facilitating the abuse. As with other forms of sexual abuse, the presence of perceived consent does not excuse or mitigate the abusive nature of the act. CSE may be perpetrated by family members, older adults, peer networks, gangs and criminal networks.

Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (money, drugs, alcohol etc) and intangible rewards (status, protection affection etc). What is critical is the unequal power balance in which the exchange occurs. Where the gain is solely on the part of the perpetrator or facilitator, it must be something more than sexual gratification to constitute CSE (as opposed to other forms of sexual abuse).

CSE can take a variety of different forms. It can take place in person or online and involve both contact and non-contact sexual activities. CSE can occur through use of technology without the child's immediate recognition, for example the persuasion to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones with no immediate payment or gain.

## **Webcam Extortion**

Webcam Extortion is a specific type of online CSE prevalent in the North East and involves demands being made for monies or other favour by means of a chat application, the internet and a webcam. Person(s) involved in the commission of threats or fraudulent behaviour convinces a victim into taking off their clothes, sometimes performing sexual acts in front of their webcam, allowing them to record same. Threats are then made, warning the video footage will be made public unless money is paid or other criminal acts completed.

### **CHILD EXPLOITATION - VULNERABILITY FACTORS**

#### **Factors that may interact to create vulnerability to exploitation are:**

- Abuse, neglect or an early adverse experience
- Disrupted family life, including family breakdown and care experience
- Family history of abuse, neglect, domestic abuse, substance misuse
- Bullying / peer pressure
- Absence from education
- Running from home or care
- Experience of exclusion or isolation, especially in transitional phases
- Drug and alcohol use
- Poverty and deprivation
- Poor health and low self-esteem
- Learning disabilities and autism
- Prevalence of undiagnosed mental health problems/ family history of mental health difficulties

### **INDICATORS OF CHILD EXPLOITATION**

#### **Potential indicators of child exploitation are:**

- 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
- Being protective of a phone, abnormally high volume of secretive calls, change in behaviour as a result of phone contacts
- Relationships with older / controlling individuals or groups
- Multiple callers/visitors including unknown adults/older young people
- Entering/leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults
- Leaving home / care without explanation
- Suspicion of physical assault / unexplained injuries / sexual assault
- Disclosure of assault followed by withdrawal of an allegation
- Parental/Guardian concerns
- Carrying weapons
- Significant decline in school results / performance
- Criminal association or isolation from peers or social networks
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being
- Unplanned pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Peers involved in sexual exploitation
- Drug/alcohol use
- Younger children asking for sexual health advice

## TRAFFICKING

Child Trafficking is the term given to the movement of children with the intent to exploit them. A child victim of human trafficking is a victim of child abuse. No international border requires to be crossed for this offence to be committed, it does not require the person to have been moved. Identified forms of Child Trafficking and exploitation include:

- Sexual exploitation/prostitution
- Domestic servitude and forced labour
- Forced marriage
- Organised shoplifting
- Nail bars
- Debt bondage
- Child criminal exploitation (includes County Lines).

### Indicators of Child Trafficking

There are a number of circumstances that could indicate a child may have been trafficked into and within the UK and may still be in the control of the trafficker or the receiving adults. These may include the following

#### ***Physical Appearance and Behaviour***

- Show signs of physical abuse/look malnourished or unkempt
- Be wearing inappropriate clothing for the weather or type of work they are doing
- Appear agitated, anxious or withdrawn.
- Change their attitude and begin to display sexualised or violent behaviour or language
- Have money, gifts or items that they cannot afford and/or cannot explain
- Have unexplained injuries and/or sexually transmitted infections
- Appear withdrawn or afraid to talk especially to those in authority
- Give similar answers to other children or appear to have been coached in answering questions
- Using illegal substances or alcohol/possessing large amounts of illegal substances
- Display markings that suggest ownership (numbers/symbols)

#### ***Restricted Movement***

- Be absent from school or disappear during school time/not enrolled in school
- Has gone missing from Local Authority care
- Show signs they are unable to move freely or are dependent on another for travel, food and/or money
- Have no identification or travel documents in their possession
- Be vague or unclear about the address where they live
- Have their communication controlled by another person who speaks on their behalf
- Receiving excessive calls/texts
- Be dropped off/collected for work, usually very early or late
- Be found in areas away from home, or go missing for unexplained periods of time
- Is driven around by an older adult or 'boyfriend'/'girlfriend'
- 'Cuckooing' is the terms used when criminals target homes of vulnerable people to exploit them and use the property for drug dealing and other criminal activities.

#### ***Isolation***

- Be fearful or distrustful when speaking to strangers especially those in a position of authority
- Have relationships which does not seem right e.g. a child accompanied by an unidentified older adult
- Have limited access to family or friends
- Be unfamiliar with the local language
- Have access to numerous unaccounted for devices/regularly changes devices

#### ***Work***

- Is required to earn a minimum amount of money every day
- Works in various locations
- Hands over a large part of earnings to another person
- Has entered the country illegally
- Has false documentation

It is highly unlikely victims of Human Trafficking will self-identify in explicit or obvious ways. This applies to children specifically who may appear to submit willingly to what they think is the will of their accompanying adults. Parents and Carers may have involvement in the exploitation of a child. Children are likely to be loyal to these adults and are unlikely to seek protection on their own initiative.

Children enter the UK either accompanied by adults or as unaccompanied children. Often these adults pose as the child's parent or claim to have their parents' permission.

Children are trafficked within the UK. This can include teenage girls, born in the UK, being targeted for internal or domestic trafficking between towns and cities for sexual exploitation. Children do not have to leave a dwelling in order to be trafficked, trafficking can comprise of being moved within a single dwelling for the purpose of exploitation.

Where a child has been identified as being at risk of trafficking, the overarching course of action is to ensure the child is safe and not at risk of being moved or re-trafficked.

## **ONLINE HARM**

Children can be exposed to harmful content online such as material encouraging anorexia, self-harm or suicide. They may build relationships online with contacts promoting this type of content and feel pressured or encouraged by them to engage in harmful behaviour.

Children also may feel more confident talking to other children and adults online than they would offline, often engaging in a way that they would not face to face and less aware of the potential risks.

Online can refer to use of social media pages, websites, chat rooms, instant messaging services and gaming applications.

Adults can pose as young people in order to build relations with children. These relationships can then be used to groom, sexually abuse or exploit children, both online and face to face.

People who work with children and young people should be able to raise awareness about online harm and abuse and encourage children to talk about what they do online and who they communicate with. Professionals also need to understand the role the internet can play in self-harm and suicide amongst children and support children to make informed judgements about what they access online.

### **Online Grooming**

Online grooming is where someone befriends a child online and builds up their trust with the intention of exploiting them and/or causing them harm. They may look to entice, manipulate or force the child to

- Engage in sexual conversations
- Send indecent images and videos of themselves
- Carry out sexual acts via a webcam
- Meet up with them in person

### **Sharing of Self-Generated Sexual Images**

Children may exchange self-generated sexual images or videos online or via messaging services that can easily be shared with other people who they do not know and without their consent. The impact of further non-consensual sharing cannot be underestimated, often creating anxiety, fear and having a significant detrimental effect on the child's wellbeing.

## Exposure to Harmful Content

Children may be exposed to harmful content online, for example images or themes glorifying suicide and self-harm. They may also join social networks and chatrooms promoting or pressurising children to engage in harmful behaviours. Through these communities, children might also experience bullying or receive abusive messages from other group members.

### **ONLINE HARM – VULNERABILITY FACTORS**

Factors that may interact to create vulnerability to online harm are:

- Mental Health Issues (personal or parental)
- Neglect
- Abuse
- Trauma / Adverse Childhood experience
- Physical, sensory, learning or cognitive disabilities

## WEBSITE RESOURCES

The links below provide professionals with self-directed learning towards the understanding of what constitutes child exploitation, the varying means by which children are exploited along with the associated risk factors and indicators.



[www.fearless.org](http://www.fearless.org)

National website with non-judgemental information and advice about crime and criminality. Uniquely, Fearless provides a safe place to give information to about crime - 100% anonymously. [Fearless Scotland | Crimestoppers \(crimestoppers-uk.org\)](http://Fearless Scotland | Crimestoppers (crimestoppers-uk.org))

[Drugs | Crimestoppers \(crimestoppers-uk.org\)](http://Drugs | Crimestoppers (crimestoppers-uk.org))



### **Catch 22**

Catch22 is a social not for profit business.

a. For over 200 years we have designed

A series of downloadable posters for professionals who work with children. They explain Child Exploitation and Missing From Home.

[Spot the Signs: Child Exploitation and Missing Awareness Poster Hub - Catch22 \(catch-22.org.uk\)](http://Spot the Signs: Child Exploitation and Missing Awareness Poster Hub - Catch22 (catch-22.org.uk))



### **Childline**

#### **CHILD TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION**

If you've been affected by child trafficking and exploitation, or are worried about someone else, there are ways to get help and support. You don't have to cope alone.

[Child trafficking | Childline](http://Child trafficking | Childline)

### **NSPCC** NSPCC: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Information and advice about child sexual exploitation to protect and help children and young people. [Child Sexual Exploitation & How to Keep Your Child Safe | NSPCC](http://Child Sexual Exploitation & How to Keep Your Child Safe | NSPCC)



### **The Children's Society**

Working to transform the hopes and happiness of young people facing abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

Flipsnack resources to identify and support victims of Child Exploitation. [National Exploitation Resources by The... - Flipsnack](http://National Exploitation Resources by The... - Flipsnack)



### **Disrespect Nobody**

National campaign to help young people understand what a healthy relationship is, to help

re-think views of controlling behaviour, violence, abuse, sexual abuse and what consent means within their relationships.

[www.disrespectnobody.co.uk](http://www.disrespectnobody.co.uk)



National Crime Agency

### **National Crime Agency**

[www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk](http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk)

National law enforcement agency to protect the public from the most serious threats by disrupting and bringing to justice those serious and organised criminals who present the highest risk to the UK.

## PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

It is essential that all individuals working with children and young people have an understanding of and recognise the vulnerability factors and indicators of child exploitation and online harm. These issues exist in Aberdeenshire, local examples are provided in Appendix A. We require to work together to focus of our attention on keeping children and young people safe from exploitation and abuse.

If you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on **999**. If you're worried about a child but they are not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns. Further information can be found here - [Report a Concern \(girfec-aberdeenshire.org\)](http://girfec-aberdeenshire.org)

## Appendix A - AN ABERDEENSHIRE PERSPECTIVE

Aberdeenshire, like every other area across Scotland, is effected by Child Criminal Exploitation in its various forms. Cuckooing and County Lines are particularly prevalent owing to the market for controlled drugs.

We have experienced a number of situations within Aberdeenshire where CCE is present and working in partnership these incidents have been positively acted upon and concluded with appropriate safeguarding being put in place and support being provided.

### **County Lines Exploitation – Cross Border**

In December 2021, following the execution of a Drug Search Warrant at a property in Aberdeenshire, three Liverpoolian males were arrested in possession of a dealer quantity of heroin and ‘Crack’ Cocaine. Through the development of partnership awareness of exploitation and county lines, the males were deemed to be likely victims of exploitation. Owing to their ages, two of the males were referred into the National Referral Mechanism and later deemed to be victims of CCE/Human Trafficking. As part of their transitional safety plan, contact was established between Aberdeenshire Social Work, Police Scotland and Merseyside Police and Social Work to ensure the sharing of information to support the males in their home areas. Transfer of responsibility was transitioned to Merseyside and the youths were allocated Social Workers. Work is ongoing with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) to ensure that the youths are treated as victims and are not unnecessarily criminalised.

### **Cuckooing – A local victim**

In April 2022, information was received regarding the home address of a vulnerable 16 year old male in Aberdeenshire who was being exploited and ‘cuckooed’. Action was taken and he was traced at his home address as part of partnership outreach work. At this time, he disclosed having been ‘used’ by others and that his address was being used for the purpose of dealing drugs, although he didn’t want this to be happening. Damage had been caused to his address and he was living in conditions which were not suitable. The male was immediately supported by Aberdeenshire Substance Misuse workers and has since been moved from the address to temporary accommodation as a protective factor. His support was discussed by partners to ensure that it was appropriate and that any decisions taken were not putting him at additional risk. The male involved had been allocated temporary accommodation based on a family disagreement and him leaving home. He was immediately exploited by others due to his drug habit.

### **County Lines Exploitation – Cross Division**

In October 2022, following the of a Drug Search Warrant at a property in Aberdeenshire, a 15 year old male from the central belt of Scotland was arrested and found in possession of a dealer quantity of heroin and ‘Crack’ Cocaine. He was also found to be a missing person. Through improved understanding of what exploitation looks like owing to partnership led awareness raising, the male was deemed to be likely victims of exploitation. He was referred into the National Referral Mechanism (result pending) and was repatriated to his home area. It was clear at the time to Officers that he was the victim of County Lines however he refused to engage with Police.

### **Exploitation – Temporary Accommodation**

In 2022, following a significant increase in the number of referrals to Aberdeenshire Council Homeless Department by individuals in one area of Aberdeenshire upon them turning 16, an emergency meeting was pulled together to discuss possible causation factors and concerns around possible exploitation. It became very apparent at that time that these individuals were all associated variously through minor criminality and to one specific adult. It was established that the adult concerned had encouraged the young people to apply for housing so that they could have drug fuelled parties and it is anticipated that this would have led to exploitation relating to the supply of controlled drugs – something the male had previously done.



Collaboratively Police and partners considered the available options and, whilst legislatively the Local Authority must provide accommodation under certain circumstances, it was decided that (where possible) the accommodation would not be local to the area where the individuals stayed and this resulted in a number of them withdrawing their applications. Likely preventing the opportunity for them to be exploited in this manner.

Police and partners understanding of exploitation, how to recognise it and how to report it has significantly improved in recent times.