Child Criminal Exploitation Policy

Foster Carer Policies and Procedures · https://handbook.co.uk/docs/child-criminal-exploitation-policy/

(Last reviewed 18/02/2025)

Policy Statement

This policy should be read alongside the agency's Missing from Care Policy and Safeguarding Policy.

Our fostering agency is committed to protecting children from every form of exploitation, including child criminal exploitation (CCE), in line with the Fostering Regulations 2011, the Children Act 1989, and all related safeguarding legislation.

We recognise the particular risks posed by County Lines exploitation and are dedicated to preventing and responding to these harms. This policy aligns with the Home Office guidance *Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines* (2019) and the HM Government document *Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation* (2016).

This policy aims to protect individuals from being drawn into criminal activity and to reduce any further risk for those who have already experienced Child Exploitation.

County Lines

County Lines is a significant, cross-cutting issue that involves drugs, violence, gangs, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery and missing persons; addressing it requires partnership between the police, the National Crime Agency, multiple Government departments, local authorities and Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations.

County Lines is therefore a safeguarding and child-protection concern that needs coordinated action from the police, health services, local-authority safeguarding teams and Government departments.

The UK Government defines County Lines as:

"A term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks 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’. They 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.”

Across the country, gangs exploit young people and vulnerable adults to move and sell drugs in suburban areas, market towns and coastal regions. This criminal activity is called “County Lines” because the individuals travel to areas where they are not known to the police and can therefore operate without immediate detection. Some of these children are as young as ten and are frequently subjected to threats, violence and sexual abuse.

To protect vulnerable young people from County Lines exploitation, the Home Office is increasing awareness of warning signs among professionals, including foster carers. Foster carers are well placed to notice potential exploitation and are encouraged to share any concerns with their Supervising Social Worker.

Child Criminal Exploitation

The term Child Criminal Exploitation is increasingly used when children are involved and is defined as follows: Child Criminal Exploitation is common within County Lines and occurs when an individual or group uses a power imbalance to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under 18. A child may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears to be consensual.

Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur online. *Sextortion* is short for *financially motivated sexual extortion*. It is a form of online blackmail in which someone threatens to share sexual images, videos or information about a child. The offender may seek money or try to make the young person do something they do not want to do. Sextortion can be carried out by individuals, but organised-crime groups are often responsible. Offenders may target young people through dating apps, social media, webcams or pornography sites and may use false identities to build trust. If a young person meets someone online who quickly turns the conversation sexual or requests sexual images, this may be an attempt at sextortion.

Criminal exploitation of children is broader than County Lines and can include, for example, children being forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft.

Managing Criminal Exploitation

Who is vulnerable to County Lines exploitation?

The national understanding of County Lines is still developing, but recorded cases show:
• Children as young as 12 years old being exploited or transported by gangs to courier drugs outside their local area;
• Young people aged 14–17 years being the most commonly affected group;
• Looked After Children and children known to children's social care or youth offending teams being at increased risk of exploitation by gangs;
• Children who are not known to services also being targeted as gangs try to avoid detection;
• White British children being approached because gangs believe they are less likely to attract police attention, although children of any ethnicity or nationality may be exploited;
• Social media being used to make initial contact with children and young people.

As an agency, we fully acknowledge that any child or young person could be affected by this type of exploitation, so it is important not to focus only on specific groups. We accept that children of any background may be at risk, and foster carers and Supervising Social Workers must therefore remain consistently vigilant.

Signs for Foster Carers to Look Out For:
A young person's involvement in County Lines activity often leaves signs. A person might show some of these signs, either as a member or as an associate of a gang dealing drugs. Any sudden changes in a person's lifestyle should be discussed with the child's Social Worker or the Supervising Social Worker.
Some potential indicators of County Lines involvement and exploitation are listed below, with those at the top of particular concern:
• frequently going missing from school or home and/or being found outside the local area;
• unexplained money, clothes or mobile phones, and/or receiving an excessive number of texts/phone calls;
• having multiple handsets
• relationships with older or controlling individuals or groups
• leaving the care setting without explanation
• suspected physical assault or unexplained injuries
• carrying weapons

• significant decline in school performance or results
• association with gangs or isolation from peers or social networks
• self-harm or notable changes in emotional well-being
• references to specific postcodes
• gang-related symbols or drawings
• use of gang-associated phrases or terminology

Procedure Following Concerns for a Child:

Foster carers looking after children and young people who are known, or believed, to be at risk of County Lines exploitation must follow the agency's safeguarding guidance and local procedures. Foster carers must share any concerns, behavioural changes or patterns with their Supervising Social Worker and the child's Social Worker. If a foster carer believes a child or young person is in immediate danger, they must contact the police.

When a child or young person is known, or suspected, to be at risk, the Supervising Social Worker will ensure the child or young person's Safer Caring Policy reflects the identified concerns and associated risks. This will be further informed by the completion of a CCE Risk Matrix.

During risk assessment, the CCE Risk Matrix must be used to determine the level of risk by weighing likelihood against potential severity. This straightforward tool helps Supervising Social Workers to highlight risks and to guide and support foster carers in managing them while caring for children and young people.

Risk levels offer guidance; professional judgement remains paramount. Information drawn from risk indicators, professional insight and protective or safety factors will help develop a clear picture of what may be happening to the child and the level of exploitation risk they face. This understanding must be clearly reflected and addressed in the child or young person's Safer Caring Policy.

Supporting Foster Carers

As an agency, we are committed to safeguarding and protecting children and young people; this includes supporting foster carers to meet their needs and keep them safe.

Training and Awareness

Alongside mandatory safeguarding training, foster carers looking after children who are known, or potentially, at risk must complete training on recognising signs of CCE and understanding the specific risks linked to County Lines exploitation.

Risk Assessment and Management

A thorough risk-assessment process is in place for all fostered children, with specific attention to CCE factors. For children and young people known to be at risk, a Risk Matrix is completed to inform risk-management plans and effectively reduce identified risks.

Partnership Working

The agency works closely with each child or young person’s local authority, law-enforcement agencies, schools and health services to share information, coordinate interventions and provide support to those at risk of, or affected by, County Lines exploitation.

Reporting and Recording

Clear reporting procedures for concerns related to County Lines exploitation are set out in each child or young person’s Safer Caring Policy. Foster carers are encouraged to share any suspicions or disclosures immediately, and detailed records are kept in line with statutory requirements. In addition, monthly service meetings review children and young people known to be at risk and update their RAG rating.