

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Drugs, HC 198

Wednesday 29 June 2022

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Ms Diane Abbott; James Daly; Simon Fell; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald.

Questions 265 - 344

Witnesses

I: Dr Richard Lewis, drugs lead, National Police Chiefs' Council, and Chief Constable of Dyfed-Powys Police; Steve Rodhouse, Director General of Operations, National Crime Agency; and Charlie Doyle, Assistant Chief Constable, British Transport Police.

II: Nicky Hill, Head of Services, Abianda; Junior Smart OBE, Business Development Manager and Head of SOS gangs project, St Giles Trust; and Dr Jack Spicer, Lecturer in Criminology, University of the West of England.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Dr Jack Spicer \(DRU0027\)](#)

[NPCC \(DRU0079\)](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Richard Lewis, Steve Rodhouse and Charlie Doyle.

Q265 **Chair:** Good morning. This is the fifth session of the Home Affairs Select Committee's inquiry into drugs. We are very pleased today to be looking at the issue of law enforcement around the trafficking and supply of drugs, and how that fits with the 10-year drug strategy and county lines. I will start by asking the three witnesses before us to introduce themselves.

Dr Lewis: Bore da i chi gyd. Good morning to you all. I am Dr Richard Lewis, Chief Constable of Dyfed-Powys Police, previously of Cleveland Police, and I am the newly appointed NPCC lead for drugs.

Steve Rodhouse: Good morning, everyone. My name is Steve Rodhouse. I am the National Crime Agency's Director General, leading on our operations.

Charlie Doyle: Good morning, everyone. I am Charlie Doyle. I am the Assistant Chief Constable for crime, public protection and contact at the British Transport Police.

Q266 **Chair:** Thank you very much for attending today. We are very interested to hear your views. We have had four sessions already on the issue of drugs and are very keen to hear what you have to say.

I will start with Mr Rodhouse. One of the aims of the 10-year drug strategy is to create "a ring of steel to stop drugs entering the UK" and eliminate drugs "from our cities, towns and villages". How realistic is that?

Steve Rodhouse: I am nothing but a realist. I suggest that eliminating drugs from our communities would be unrealistic, but nevertheless it is absolutely right that we seek—I am very happy to talk about the work of the National Crime Agency—to restrict the flow of drugs from abroad into the UK and the trafficking across the UK. I think everyone here would regard elimination as quite some challenge.

Chair: Does anybody else wish to comment on that?

Dr Lewis: I associate myself with those comments. Of course elimination will be difficult to achieve. It should be something that we aspire to, of course, but eliminating drugs from our communities with a law enforcement focus alone would be impossible.

Charlie Doyle: I would add that, clearly, the treatment of those who find themselves in that position is where we will make the most progress in eliminating the market. We will not police our way out of the issue.

Q267 **Chair:** Could each of you say something about your current assessment of where we are, in terms of the drugs that you are most concerned about and changes in patterns of drug taking and supplies?



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Dr Lewis: There is a relatively stable cohort of entrenched users of heroin and crack cocaine, which runs to about 300,000 people. Beyond that, our concern is the increased use of cocaine in a whole range of areas of our communities, and of course county lines—not just the drug abuse and drug taking but the violence associated with the county lines model of drug trafficking. But in particular the increase of cocaine use right across our communities.

Q268 **Chair:** Can you say a bit more about that—“right across communities”? The Prime Minister has talked about the middle-class use of cocaine and it being seen as not really a drug problem. Is that what you are referring to?

Dr Lewis: Yes, I am. I think I would probably resist the term “middle class”. I think many members of our community would not regard themselves as middle class. I certainly do not. I am a working-class police officer. When we stigmatise it as a middle-class thing, I think others will disassociate themselves from the term. It is right across communities, regardless of where people are and who they are.

Steve Rodhouse: We need to bear in mind that this is an illicit market and not always easy to evaluate, but it is clear from our assessments that the demand for drugs in the UK remains high and the overall trend is that the use of drugs increasing. Our assessment tells us that the UK consumes around 117 tonnes of cocaine every year. In one year—this was repeated in both 2019 and 2020—around 2.7% of our population used cocaine. There is a much smaller group of opiate users—around 300,000—using in the region of 38 tonnes of heroin a year. I agree with Chief Constable Lewis that it is a relatively stable base in terms of users of heroin, but year on year we see slight increases in uses of cocaine.

Looking at other drugs of concern, thankfully, the use of methamphetamine and fentanyl remains small, and we need to remain vigilant that that remains the case in the UK. They are incredibly dangerous drugs that other countries have seen real challenges with, but at the moment there is not widespread use of those drugs in the UK.

I think it is right to say that the drugs trade in the UK creates considerable profits. We would say that the UK cocaine market alone is valued at £11 billion. That is clearly an incentive for people to remain in the trade, and it is part of the National Crime Agency’s work to tackle the money that is laundered from criminality.

I echo the comments about the link between the drug trade and violence. Colleagues may be aware of an operation that the National Crime Agency ran last year called Operation Venetic. This was an operation to get inside a criminally dedicated secure communications system with between 9,000 and 10,000 users in the UK. When we were able to get into that communications system and see the traffic and what was being said, it became clear that the system was being used almost exclusively by people involved in the supply of drugs. It was also very relevant that in looking at that data we identified at any one point around 200 cases



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where individuals using the system and trafficking drugs were plotting to cause harm to others in pursuit of their drugs trade. My colleagues will see this on a day-to-day basis in their communities. That link is still very much there.

I could say a lot more but I am sure there will be questions.

Q269 **Chair:** We will have some questions but first I want to pick you up on what you said about fentanyl. We heard some evidence that there was concern that what has happened in Afghanistan—I understand the Taliban has issued a fatwa to stop the growing of poppies to make heroin—could affect the global supply of heroin, and the knock-on effect of that is that fentanyl would become much more of a problem. Is that your understanding of what could happen?

Steve Rodhouse: We are always alive to those problems. The heroin trade from Afghanistan is significant; 95% of the world's supply of heroin emanates from Afghanistan. We will deal with what the Taliban do rather than what they say, and at the moment, we are not seeing any signs that heroin supply is constrained, so that does not in itself give rise to an increased incentive to use fentanyl. Fentanyl is a product that can be combined with heroin, and that is what has caused deaths in the UK, but we are not seeing that being a trend at the moment. It is something that we are alive to.

Charlie Doyle: My opening summary is that my concern is about the age of those who are getting involved with the movement of drugs from a transport perspective, and particularly a rail transport perspective. Analysis conducted in 2017-18 by the NCA demonstrated that about 40% of county lines traffic was being moved on the British railway, across three countries into pretty much every community. The operations we have conducted have shown that because of the reach of the railway—operating, as I say, across three countries, completely borderless—young people are being trafficked, being moved around the country, effectively at the behest of organised crime groups, to make money.

Those young people are seen as pretty much dispensable, if truth be told. Of the children we deal with, 38% are aged between 10 and 19, and 40% are 19 to 29. They are not generally from stable family backgrounds. A lot of them will already be known by services. They are effectively taken from the streets, exploited because of their age and vulnerability, and used to move drugs around the country. Very often, that will result in those young people getting into other forms of crime, putting themselves at increased risk and indeed being exploited within communities—“cuckooed” is the term that has been coined. They are transported from, say, the south coast—there was an example last week, when a 13-year-old and a 14-year-old pushed through a gate line. They are effectively being run by a 16-year-old who is running that county line, and that is being managed by a 20-year-old. This is the sort of age group we are talking about that is dealing in class A drugs, as Mr Rodhouse has said.



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It is predominantly cocaine, but not exclusively; we see some heroin and a fair amount of cannabis on the network. There are lots of examples where young people from remote parts of the country are found in other parts of the country with no family connections and no support. Managing that across a number of support agencies, we deal with about 400 local authorities, 43 Home Office forces and a range of other law enforcement and support agencies, not to mention the third sector, which also provides huge support to policing in managing the safeguarding and welfare of those young people.

My biggest concern is not necessarily the financial gain that organised crime groups are making; it is the exploitation of the children they are using to make that money.

Chair: Thank you. We will have a series of questions on those points.

Q270 **Simon Fell:** Thank you to our witnesses for joining us. Mr Rodhouse, I will start with you. When Dame Carol Black did her review of drugs policy, she stated that she was not certain that even if law enforcement agencies were sufficiently resourced it would result in a sustained reduction in the supply of drugs. Do you agree?

Steve Rodhouse: I am not sure I have understood the question. I want to get it right.

Simon Fell: Dame Carol Black said that even if law enforcement agencies were sufficiently resourced, that might not result in a reduction in supply. Do you agree?

Steve Rodhouse: It is a really complicated picture. I do not disagree, but I think there is nuance to this. It is very relevant that last year, UK law enforcement, largely driven by the National Crime Agency, seized something like 284¹ tonnes of cocaine, so more than double what is consumed in the UK, yet it is fair to say that availability in the UK persists. I am not claiming that UK law enforcement alone can stem the flow of drugs into the UK. As has already been said, the demand is there. What I do say, though, is that our work is not wasted, because unless you continue to target, both at home and abroad—source countries, transit countries and the highest harm groups within the UK—the situation will become much worse and the UK will be flooded with drugs to a degree that will cause more harm in our communities.

It is right to say that law enforcement alone, no matter how well resourced, cannot solve this problem because it is about demand and treatment and education as much as law enforcement. Law enforcement has a very important role to play. From the National Crime Agency perspective, that role is abroad, it is closer to our borders, and it is within the UK. For the avoidance of doubt, though, I could always use more resources.

Q271 **Simon Fell:** If only they were mine to offer. You lead me neatly on to my

¹ Note from witness: The correct figure is 278 tonnes of cocaine.



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next question. This is not just a law enforcement issue; this is about the whole-system approach. Is what is going on at the moment effective? Is it working?

Steve Rodhouse: Where I sit, we lead the UK's fight to cut serious and organised crime. We are a 24/7 law enforcement organisation and we work at national and international levels, so I am not best placed to talk about what is going on in our communities with treatment and education. That is not my area of expertise. However, I have been in law enforcement for 29 years and I have run projects that focused on volume criminals who are offending because of their drug habit, and I know that the threat of law enforcement action alone is not the tool that will cause them to cease. It is treatment, education and support for the wider social issues that they face, whether that is training, wider health, education or employment. It has to be a broad picture, but I am afraid I am the wrong person to ask about the situation on the ground in terms of treatment. That is not my area of expertise.

Q272 **Simon Fell:** Looking at it from your perspective, you are responsible for what you are responsible for, but you must look around your environment and consider that a bit more funding in one particular area or a bit more resource in another would make your life a lot easier. Where would you like to see more pressure put?

Steve Rodhouse: What is strong within the 10-year drug strategy is the three-way approach to enforcement—which I am very pleased to lead, because these people cause untold harm—treatment and education. Those at the point of need, at their changeable moment, need to have swift access to treatment, but I caveat that by saying it is a relatively uneducated view. Back in the day—Charlie Doyle and I have worked together for many, many years—when I was arresting people and they had been committing offences because of their drug habit, what was needed was the ability to get them into treatment then. That was not always available, and I suspect that it is not available now, but that would make a difference

Q273 **Simon Fell:** That is helpful. Thank you. Looking at the reduction of supply, the figures we have on county lines suggest that some of the actions you have been taking have been really effective, reducing the number of lines from around 1,000 to about 600. In a normal market, you would expect to see prices going up when there is that reduction in supply. Are you seeing that play out?

Steve Rodhouse: The pricing picture is complex. The short answer is no. Wholesale prices did increase. There is a big difference between wholesale prices and retail prices in the drugs market. Wholesale prices for cocaine have steadily increased. They certainly increased at a wholesale level during the period of lockdown. Since then prices have reduced on a trajectory over the last six months to a year. In the cocaine market, we think that is because there was sufficient product in the system during lockdown to manage demand, so prices went up because of the context but not necessarily because of a lack of availability. There



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is now, we would say, an over-supply in the system that is causing wholesale prices to fall.

Q274 **Simon Fell:** Do you see a rise in demand based on lower prices or is demand constant regardless of what people are charging?

Steve Rodhouse: It depends on the commodity. The heroin market is very stable. If production goes up, that does not always lead to greater demand. Heroin is a drug that has a reputation; it is not a clean drug, and it is not easy for dealers and networks to create new demand for something like heroin. The cocaine market is slightly different. People will use cocaine as a party drug and it has a different reputation, sadly, so it can be easier to create new demand. It does very much depend on the commodity.

Dr Lewis: I think demand has been resilient to price. The opportunity to take drugs was impacted significantly by the covid lockdown, when fewer parties and fewer get-togethers led to a decrease in the amount of drugs taken by those who we referred to previously in some of the other areas of our society, but demand is relatively resistant to price.

Q275 **Simon Fell:** In previous sessions we have heard a lot about the potential for decriminalisation and regulation. What is your view about the potential impact on law enforcement of moving to decriminalisation, let's say of cannabis? Would that make your life easier? Would it make it harder? Would it just push challenges elsewhere?

Steve Rodhouse: I think it would still leave a lot of challenges. I am a law enforcement professional, not a policy official; it is not for me to change the law. However, regardless of whether something is legalised or decriminalised, there would continue to be a criminal market to undercut a regulated market, to have a differentiated product, so I think my challenge within the National Crime Agency would persist. There would still be a lot of money to be made. There would still be an incentive for gangs to engage in importation and trafficking. There would still be the violence that goes on between gangs competing for markets. There would still be use of a product that was not regulated and that was undercut in price and quality. I am not persuaded that my life would be much easier.

Simon Fell: I am assuming, Mr Doyle, that you would take the same view.

Charlie Doyle: Yes. We did not see any abatement in the market during covid. On criminalisation or not, I draw a parallel with alcohol or tobacco: they are regulated to a degree but there is still an illicit market there. I think here, the money that is made would be made regardless of whether or not it was a legal commodity; they would just find another way to exploit the market.

Q276 **Simon Fell:** Do you have any insight from countries, or states in America—wherever—where they have moved to regulation or decriminalisation? Do you have international comparators for how it has affected them?



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Dr Lewis: It is difficult to come by data that is comparative with the UK. There is emerging information and evidence to suggest a link between cannabis and mental health problems and psychosis later in life. So, while the data from some of the states in the US and countries such as Portugal might be heartening on the impact at the moment, I do not think we will be in a position to properly assess the impact of changes to the legislation for many years to come, perhaps generations. I would not jump to any conclusions now about the success or otherwise of decriminalisation or legalisation.

Q277 **Chair:** Can I ask about the National Crime Agency's involvement internationally? I understand that you have officers in various countries, including countries such as Colombia, which are obviously very difficult countries to operate in. Could you say a little bit about your involvement?

Steve Rodhouse: We operate a network of, at any one time, around 150 officers working across the globe, supported by a team in London and with strong links to agencies such as Interpol and Europol. We put our people where the need is greatest across all the threats—of course, the National Crime Agency works right across the organised crime threats—but a number of our posts are heavily focused on the drugs threat. We do not work in countries without the consent of their Government. We typically work hand in hand with Governments. Some of those relationships are more testing than others, as you would imagine, and we do not always share the same views on policing and law enforcement.

Our roles there are many and varied. They allow us to complete law enforcement inquiries in those countries and to generate and share intelligence. I will be very careful about the way I describe this; I am very happy to give the Committee a briefing at a different security classification. We work hand in hand with a number of countries to develop their capabilities to tackle the drugs threat as it impacts on the UK. I was in Pakistan a couple of weeks ago, seeing and meeting those teams and looking at that work, and I was pleased to see the very direct link between the work going on in those countries and operations back in the UK that I am talking to my colleagues about. It is a really powerful tool that we have. It is unique. We have the biggest law enforcement network that the UK has overseas, and greater than many countries have, too. It is very significant and gives us a degree of access, influence and operational effect that I would not want to lose.

Q278 **Chair:** Can I pick you up on one thing? You mentioned how challenging it can be with certain Governments—certain countries—that do not have the same standards of law enforcement that we have in this country. In terms of accountability, how do you ensure that you are not getting yourself involved in situations where there could be human rights abuses and so on?

Steve Rodhouse: That is uppermost in our minds. I do not want to be misunderstood. I do not want to criticise countries by proxy here, but there is a different approach to law enforcement. Before we share any intelligence or generate any operational activity, we have permission to



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do so. There is a detailed regime—I will not go into it now but I am very happy to provide details of it—which allows us to seek permission to share intelligence. Of course, we need to be very mindful of what is done with that intelligence, of how other countries might generate intelligence and pass it to us, and of what the implications might be for individuals who are implicated in criminality within those countries. We are inspected on that by IPCO, too. We are very well regulated on that, and rightly so.

Chair: Thank you for that. I will come now to James Daly. I think we are going back to domestic issues, around football matches.

Q279 **James Daly:** It is a rather different subject from what you have just been talking about, gentlemen. For my sins, I am a season ticket holder at Huddersfield Town. I heard a gasp in the room at that statement.

It has been obvious, certainly to me, and to others, that there are more drugs in and around football stadiums. The alarming thing for me about that is that at Huddersfield we saw a pitch invasion, and law enforcement would not have been able to stop that. I have no idea whether drugs were related to that, but there were certainly people behaving in a very unpredictable manner.

Dr Lewis, I think you have Swansea City in your area. I am not going to ask you to comment on Swansea City, but can you give us an idea of your view on the impact drugs are having on people's behaviour and law and order around football grounds?

Dr Lewis: First, it is important to say that the vast majority of football fans behave appropriately at matches up and down the country, including at Swansea City and at Huddersfield Town, of course.

There is a growing body of evidence that cocaine is used among a cohort of football supporters. Some of the stimulant properties of cocaine include increased confidence, euphoria and strength, which is a potentially problematic cocktail when put into the highly emotionally charged environment of football. We are seeing increased use of cocaine at football, but it is an emerging body of evidence, the scale of which is yet to emerge. We would like to increase drug testing on arrest for those arrested for football-related disorder. That would provide us with a wider body of evidence of just how big a problem it is, but we are seeing an emerging picture of cocaine use.

What we do not accurately understand yet is the interaction between cocaine and alcohol and how that can increase the effect of both stimulants—and, again, the link between football and alcohol. It is an emerging body of evidence but one that concerns us at the NPCC and nationally.

Q280 **James Daly:** When you consider the policing of individual stadiums—I am using Huddersfield as an example—it is mainly done by inside stewarding. It is policed, if I can put it that way, by stewards rather than police officers, although there are lots of police officers outside. The worry is that if people are getting into stadiums with drugs or having



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taken drugs, it puts an onus and responsibility on people who are not law enforcement officers to try to police their behaviour. Do you agree with that assessment or am I being too gloomy about what is happening?

Dr Lewis: The security measures inside football stadiums run by non-police personnel are generally done exceptionally well. Most football games, most weekends, go off without any incident at all. The interaction between law enforcement and those working within stadiums needs to be at its absolute best to ensure that, whether it is a pitch invasion that we are dealing with or searching on entry. There is certainly more that could be done to enhance the relationship between police officers and those working within stadiums but as a model of policing, it works well across the country at the moment.

Q281 **Simon Fell:** I will bring in Mr Doyle as well. The general viewpoint, although obviously there may be more work to be done in this respect, is that it is not felt that drug use at football is related to intentional criminal behaviour but is more a societal issue—it is more about people taking drugs in a recreational fashion. Is that a correct interpretation of where the police are with it at the moment?

Dr Lewis: I refer back to my earlier answer. The body of evidence is increasing, so through the months of this coming season we may be in a better position to have a more accurate picture. We cannot accurately assess at this stage whether the use of cocaine is specifically to induce violence at football stadiums or outside.

Charlie Doyle: Pre-covid, we probably would not have been having this discussion. Covid arrived, and since we have unlocked and started to see football fans return, we have started to see a growing body of evidence, particularly for travelling fans, that cocaine use—particularly cocaine as the commodity—has increased. As Richard said, it is a relatively discrete body of evidence, but we conducted a very specific, surgical operation on a number of train services in March, funded by UK Football Policing, and found evidence of drug use on trains being used by football supporters—toilets, handles, tables. There is a growing sense of evidence that it is being used by those travelling to and from games, not only at games, so there is an argument for an enforcement angle before fans arrive at a venue. Similarly, there is a body of evidence that that is now starting to engage risk groups—specific groups of individuals and specific groups of travelling fans who will engage in that behaviour.

There have been a number of intelligence reports from members of the public about the antisocial behaviour that goes with drug and alcohol misuse on services. Increasingly, we would welcome the FA and others getting involved and, as has been mentioned, we would welcome the power to test on arrest and link that to football banning orders and so on so that essentially we could stop people going to football where there is evidence of drug misuse in relation to football.

Simon Fell: That is very interesting. Thank you very much.

Q282 **Ms Abbott:** Following on from my colleague's question, I have read that



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increased cocaine use at cricket matches is contributing to poor behaviour. Do any of you have any knowledge of that, or does the different class profile of people who watch cricket mean that it has escaped your attention?

Dr Lewis: I think that is something we understand even less about than we understand the football point. It may be that it is simply that cocaine is used within a wider cohort of society, running into millions annually, and therefore they are simply captured in all types of events, whether that is the arts or whether it is football, cricket or other sports. There is a very small body of evidence to suggest that there may be a link, but that is still very much emerging.

Q283 **Ms Abbott:** Dr Lewis, I see that you are the Chief Constable of Dyfed-Powys. Do you have any thoughts about what might be a different pattern of the drug trade and drug use in London or do you think it is much the same as in Dyfed-Powys?

Dr Lewis: I can't speak to the experience of working in London—it is not a force that I have ever worked in—but patterns of drug use are relatively consistent across the country. The means of distribution might be different. Networks in London are, of course, far more sophisticated for the general public as well as those who deal in drugs than they would be in west Wales, which has difficult transport network issues, but patterns of drug use are relatively stable across the country, whether for someone living in the middle of London or in the middle of Carmarthen.

Q284 **Ms Abbott:** You don't think things are different in London. That is interesting. Steve Rodhouse, what is your view of the 10-year drug strategy?

Steve Rodhouse: As I alluded to earlier, I really support the fact that it does not simply focus on enforcement although, as you would expect, as a law enforcement officer I welcome the increased focus on that. However, I think the real strength is the focus on education and treatment. Of course it is very early stages, but it seems to me to be a balanced approach to tackling a wicked problem where the solution does not rest in one measure but in a set of combined measures right across enforcement, prevention and treatment.

Q285 **Ms Abbott:** Dr Lewis, do you think that the 10-year drug strategy will change the work of you and your colleagues?

Dr Lewis: I certainly hope that it will. I commend the Government for the strategy being a 10-year strategy and one that stretches beyond the life of this Parliament, which means that we can potentially provide some long-term solutions. Most of the funding is directed toward treatment services and I support that. It has to work hand in hand with the work of law enforcement to ensure that we cut the demand for drugs across the country. I am hopeful that the 10-year drug strategy and the Government's response to that will drive down the supply of drugs and the use of drugs in our communities, but of course time will tell.

Q286 **Ms Abbott:** Dr Lewis, what steps are you taking to help realise one of



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the strategy's aims, which is to break drug supply chains?

Dr Lewis: It comes back to treatment services. Steve spoke earlier about teachable moments. There are few opportunities for us as law enforcement agencies to have a window into the life of those who use drugs; those are, generally speaking, in custody suites upon arrest. I commend the approach for ensuring that at those times—at the time when we can change people's minds—there are opportunities available to them there and then, for entrenched users to go into treatment services, and for those who are not entrenched users but who are exploring drugs to go into drug awareness opportunities, redirecting them out of the criminal justice system.

I think it is fair to say that traditionally—it is no longer the case—law enforcement saw drug abuse and drug dealing through the narrow lens of enforcement. Over recent years—I am proud to say I am a member of a police service that now looks at it with a much wider lens—it has become very much about treatment, ensuring that those who are addicted or using are given opportunities to veer out of the criminal justice system. For those who don't, of course, that is what we are here to do. We are all from law enforcement agencies, and we would happily take up that challenge, but we would like as much as possible to ensure that those who are using drugs are diverted into treatment services—very much a public health approach as opposed to the narrow lens of enforcement.

Q287 **Ms Abbott:** Dr Lewis, a final question on funding and resources. In written evidence to this Committee, the NPCC outlined that despite promised uplifts, budget levels will still not reach those of a decade ago. Do you think that the priorities in the 10-year drug strategy can be realised on current budgetary and resourcing levels?

Dr Lewis: The budget is in place for the first three years of the 10-year strategy. Anything beyond that is welcome, for us to start planning for the years that follow. The three-year funding envelope is a rarity for us—it is usually from year to year—so that will certainly help us to budget and respond, but of course I only have responsibility for the policing budget in my own law enforcement agency. I am pleased to say that the majority of chief constables across the country prioritise drug trafficking as part of their control strategies. Time will tell, of course, in terms of the money that will be available thereafter, but to repeat a point I made earlier, I am pleased that the vast majority of the money promised in the Government's response to the 10-year strategy is into ensuring that there are treatment options available for entrenched users.

We can keep arresting people, year after year after year, but we have not yet budged the number of drug-related deaths—overdoses or poisoning. In fact, it is increasing; we are now at about 4,500 people a year. That is proof positive that the previous approach—a criminal justice/law enforcement response on its own—cannot be effective in reducing that number, but I am hopeful that through a multi-agency approach the future can be brighter.



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Q288 **Ms Abbott:** To be clear, you do think that priorities in the 10-year drug strategy can be achieved, in the next three years, at the current budgetary and resourcing levels.

Dr Lewis: Any extra funding that we can be provided with as a law enforcement agency would of course be welcome. My own force now has more police officers than it has ever had, partly through Government uplift and partly through resources provided by our police and crime commissioner. We need to ensure that we evaluate the work through the drug strategy, so I cannot say categorically at this stage that we will be successful, but you can be sure that law enforcement is very much behind the ethos of the strategy and playing our part—a small part, dare I say—in the multi-agency response to reducing drug deaths.

Q289 **Ms Abbott:** You do not need any more money?

Dr Lewis: We always need more money, so any extra resources provided would be gratefully received. We will see over the years to come whether that is achievable.

Chair: We have a quick supplementary from Mr Daly.

Q290 **James Daly:** A very quick one. You said something very interesting. My background before I came here was in the criminal justice system. I understand the point you make that the police should spend their time involved in law enforcement and not in the rehabilitative process—that is for third-party agencies and partners—but you were saying that the police are directly involved in the rehabilitative programmes. Will you give us a flavour, very briefly, of what you meant by that and what this multi-agency approach looks like?

Dr Lewis: I will clarify that point. It is not the role of law enforcement agencies to play a part in the rehabilitative process but at those teachable moments—the point of arrest, the point of charge—we can divert those people into other agencies, third-sector agencies and the health sector, to ensure that they get the care that they need.

Q291 **Chair:** Could I be clear as well? To what extent is drug testing being carried out on arrest? Do you know how widespread it is?

Dr Lewis: It is increasing. It is not at the level where we would like to see it at this stage. The additional resources that can be provided to ensure that we do drug test on arrest would provide us with a better picture, not just of drug use but of poly drug use as well—how many different drugs are in people's systems and what impact that is having on, for example, domestic abuse. There is a growing body of evidence that there is a link between cocaine use and domestic abuse. Drug testing on arrest, for whatever the offence might be, would give us a better picture of how drug use interacts with other crime types.

Q292 **Chair:** So you would like that to be extended.

Dr Lewis: Very much so.

Q293 **Chair:** You have talked about evidence being gathered. Could you



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provide us with that evidence when it is available?

Dr Lewis: We can certainly do that, in writing or back with oral evidence.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q294 **Stuart C. McDonald:** I want to go back to the beginning, when you were all very realistic about the fact that eliminating drugs is not realistic. Could I pick up first on one of the challenges the police face in this—perhaps this is for Steve Rodhouse—which is the use of the dark net? What is the significance of the dark net in all this, as opposed to on-street dealing, and what more can be done to tackle the problem?

Steve Rodhouse: The NCA and other colleagues patrol the dark net as much as we are able to. Our assessment is that impact of the dark net on drug dealing is very small. Our best estimate is that around 1% of the cocaine market in the UK is accounted for by the dark net. However, we think it is growing and we would be silly if we did not regard it as a future threat. It is small in number but significant.

Interestingly, the dark net knows no national boundaries. It would seem that the UK uses the dark net for drug supply disproportionately compared with other countries. Around 20% of the sites and users of the dark net come from the UK. The UK seems to make more use of it than other countries. However, the proportion of the UK drug market accounted for by the dark net is very, very small. I would not want to dismiss it. I think it is not the place to put the greatest effort at this time, but it is not to be ignored.

Q295 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Is there anything that can be done to assist you in tackling the use of the dark net? Do you have the powers you need, or is it about social media companies or other platforms?

Steve Rodhouse: The dark net is a challenging area. The challenge is around technical competence and capability. As with lots of areas of covert law enforcement, particularly tackling the highest end of high harm, it is a continual challenge to keep up with the technological tools that are being used by criminals. That means investment. It also means securing people with the right skills and backgrounds in the agency. I am very grateful that I have some fantastic people working for the NCA, but it is a continual challenge to attract and retain people with that level of technical expertise. That is a broad comment and not simply focused on the drug trade, but that is probably the biggest area of concern for me.

Q296 **Stuart C. McDonald:** If the dark net is such a small part of the problem, why is it that year after year, tonnes and tonnes of substances are making their way into the United Kingdom? What is the challenge in trying to keep this stuff out?

Steve Rodhouse: The challenges are many and varied. There is a sustained and growing demand, which we have heard about. As we have talked about, different drugs have different markets. Cocaine is a drug used often in the context of socialising and parties. We are a relatively affluent economy; therefore, we are an attractive market for others.



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Drugs are not big in bulk. It is not easy—far from it—but drug gangs are very creative in how commodities enter the UK. We are typically not a producing country for drugs; we are an end destination, and in some cases we are a transit country for other countries as well. If I talk about the meth threat, we are a transit point for places such as Australia.

One of the challenges that I am putting more resources into—again, I want to be careful about what I say in this forum—is that we are an island nation and these drugs come typically through ports. There are drugs that come to us through less regulated channels, but typically drugs will come through a port—through an airport, in container traffic, or roll-on roll-off through near Europe, which is a staging post. We see considerable evidence of corruption within those ports. The team has been conducting operations recently that have demonstrated that drug gangs can use people within the ports to avoid the checks and balances and regulations to allow them to facilitate drugs coming in and leaving the port. That is an area of real focus. The National Crime Agency, policing and Border Force are working really closely on this. It is a growth area of our work because it is one of the vulnerabilities that we are trying to fill.

Q297 Stuart C. McDonald: Having recognised the high level of demand, you all expressed scepticism, in response to Mr Fell's questions, about the possibility of considering decriminalisation or a response of that kind. Are you dead set against any reform of the Misuse of Drugs Act, despite 50 years of not much progress—even something like reclassification of certain drugs or allowing the introduction of drug consumption rooms, for example? Is there any sort of change that you would be comfortable with?

Steve Rodhouse: I do not want to blank that question but I need to reflect that I am a law enforcement officer and I deal with the law that is available to me at the time. I have to repeat my concerns that no matter what measures are taken, I think that there would still be an illicit trade in drugs, and that is what I would want to target.

Q298 Stuart C. McDonald: There may be, but we also heard the argument in relation to alcohol, which has been put to us before. The illicit alcohol market would rise exponentially if we did to alcohol what we do through the Misuse of Drugs Act to other substances.

Steve Rodhouse: Yes. They are policy questions and ones that I am not best placed to answer.

Q299 Stuart C. McDonald: Sure. Dr Lewis, what about the policing of drug consumption rooms? Lots of people have come to us and said they would like to at least see them piloted. Would you have concerns from a policing point of view if we piloted a drug consumption room, and would that be helpful?

Dr Lewis: I will highlight some of the concerns that Steve has already mentioned. I enforce the law; I do not create the law. If there were a body of evidence that supported that, and if the Government were in



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support of it and wanted to legislate for it, as law enforcement agencies, we would express our views privately on whether there was the potential for success or otherwise, but at this stage they are not allowed in England and Wales and therefore there cannot be a pilot site. We would need Government support to do that, and it would be a matter for an individual chief constable, working in an individual area, whether he or she would support such a thing. It is a policy matter as opposed to a law enforcement issue.

Q300 Stuart C. McDonald: I get all that, but if we have to make decisions or recommendations on policy, we need to understand what the impact would be on policing, and you are very reluctant to give evidence on these issues. The argument goes—there are loud voices within policing that will say this—that we waste so much time and resource on policing the low-level purchase of cannabis, for example. Would it not free up enormous amounts of police time to tackle high harm issues if you were not having to spend time with somebody who has been found in possession of a small amount of cannabis, for example?

Dr Lewis: The small amount of cannabis is very much the thin end of the wedge. Alongside that, there are those who produce cannabis and the links to organised crime—the trafficking of people associated with that crime. I understand how policy makers may think that arresting the small cannabis user from time to time is not the most effective use of police resources. What I will say is that when you stop and search somebody, you do not know what drug you will find. If it is cannabis, then of course you are legally obliged to do something with that, but it is the thin end of the wedge to a much wider industry worth a lot of money.

Q301 Stuart C. McDonald: In 50 years none of that policing has done anything to reduce demand for cannabis. It is getting worse year by year. The argument is, as you know, that if people are able to buy cannabis legally, or in a regulated manner, that is one way that you could significantly undercut all the stuff that you have just said.

Dr Lewis: I still think that there would be an illicit trade in cannabis and other—

Q302 Stuart C. McDonald: I don't doubt it, but what about the magnitude of it? Isn't the emerging evidence that the magnitude of the illicit trade would be substantially reduced?

Dr Lewis: I have not seen that evidence. I am sure that it exists but I would like to read it before I offer a wider opinion on that issue.

Q303 Stuart C. McDonald: Sure. Can I turn instead to county lines? Charlie Doyle, can you tell us how you identify young people who you suspect of county lines activity? What proportion of them end up being charged, and how many do you manage to successfully divert to other outcomes?

Charlie Doyle: I will speak specifically about the railway, but I imagine that the proportions are broadly similar elsewhere. On identification, prior to the dedicated county lines activity funded by the Home Office, there were indications—children travelling alone. At that point, the industry



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would adopt an approach of asking, "Have you got a ticket? No," and the child would be displaced in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

We encouraged the industry to look more closely. We ran a number of campaigns, and we extended them to other law enforcement agencies, to say that there are certain indicators—kids travelling at strange times of the day or night, perhaps when they should be at school, or travelling without a ticket; the things that stand out—and to encourage people to speak to these children and understand where they have come from and where they are journeying to. Having more of a dialogue and a conversation with those kids very quickly elicits the sort of behaviour you are looking for. They are generally evasive. You might find them sat on their own on a service that is otherwise relatively busy.

Through that engagement, moving through the conversation, we would get on to the question, potentially, of a search and on occasion arrest or diversion. Of those that we detain, about a third are arrested and about a third of that number are charged and about a third are diverted to other services. That is where the challenge presents itself. We spoke about it earlier on in terms of the drug strategy. One of the biggest challenges is accessing those services. We are a national agency operating across three countries. Trying to navigate that framework of support services and statutory agencies is pretty difficult. We have engaged specialist assets to help us with that—people who know their way around the system—to enable us to divert those kids to the right support services. We have welcomed the support of third-sector agencies such as St Giles Trust and others that are engaged in that space.

To answer the question that a Member asked earlier, my personal view is that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That is where the drug strategy can make significant inroads in terms of diminishing demand and, crucially, expanding the requirement for education not just for those who are using but for the wider public, which Steve has alluded to. If you understand where some of these drugs are originating from, how they are being manufactured and processed, and the destruction that that creates in those communities, you perhaps start to think again about whether you need that party drug or that ounce of cannabis.

It is a bit like the manufacture of cheap clothing in countries where the conditions of the workers are appalling. Drugs is like that and worse. You might think about educating the public that there are other ways to have a good time and they don't necessarily need to invest in the drug industry. The way to deal with it is not by dealing with those at the user end but by dealing with those who are doing the transporting and manufacturing. That is where you can start to make progress.

Q304 Stuart C. McDonald: Mr Doyle, you have identified that some of those involved in transporting are victims themselves, hence some of these young people have been diverted for protection. What percentage of them are referred into the national referral mechanism, and what is the point? What does that achieve? Is it useful?



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Charlie Doyle: We have referred about 100 into the national referral mechanism, and they are largely those who are being exploited—those who are being trafficked—by other people. You will see many examples of kids running other kids. They are recruited from among their peers, from other kids in the community. They are attracted by the lifestyle, the money or the promise of what might be. Sometimes those kids become victims of trafficking themselves and are effectively trafficked by others. The national referral mechanism allows us to deal with those who are organising trafficking upstream, to effectively dismantle those organised crime groups who are making the money. At some point, you come to the head of the snake, if you like, and it is about how far along that path we can go.

I will give you an example of a kid we detained, who came from London and was found in Norfolk. That involved 11 forces. There was a premises there that was being used to traffic other kids from that premises across the UK. You tend to find these hubs of activity where you uncover—it is a bit like a Dickensian novel; a Fagin-type approach—this industry in which kids are being quite literally put to work to sell illicit drugs in the UK. In the 21st century, that is appalling.

Q305 **Tim Loughton:** Apologies that I was not here for the beginning of the session.

Can I come back to what Mr McDonald was saying, Mr Doyle? I travel up on the train every week on the Brighton line. Brighton is certainly not unfamiliar with drugs problems and county lines. I can't remember the last time I saw a BTP officer on a train other than during the pandemic when they were making sure people were wearing masks. We rarely see onboard supervisors either. How are your officers identifying these kids involved in county lines and challenging them? I do not see it.

Charlie Doyle: We will have a number of discreet patrols that are using those services. Obviously, we have many services travelling from the home counties into London. We generally find that it is those services in and around main hubs such as London, Manchester, Liverpool and so on. We will also look at the end-to-end destinations and the stations in between. In fact, Brighton is one of our highest-use areas. A significant proportion of the kids we deal with are located in Brighton or on the Brighton/south-east coast main line. There is a range of activity that is undertaken there.

Arguably, part of the reason you will not necessarily see officers overtly is that they need to operate covertly to identify those kids. There was an example at the weekend. Unsurprisingly, people will actively avoid a visible policing presence or operation. We have to be agile in our response. As most of this activity is conducted via mobile phone, if we openly police an origin or a destination station, news of that spreads very quickly and unsurprisingly you will find that these kids will get off before or after the location where we are plotted up. We have to be as agile as they are and as discreet as they are, or as they are trying to be, in order to catch them.



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Q306 **Tim Loughton:** So you have plainclothes officers who will be challenging these children on the trains; we just don't see them.

Charlie Doyle: Absolutely, and we have spent a considerable amount of time and effort training rail staff to spot the signs of those kids who may be at risk.

Q307 **Tim Loughton:** That was going to be my follow-up question. Is there intelligence sharing with the onboard supervisors and other staff who will not challenge them themselves but will contact you to say, for instance, "I'm a bit suspicious about little Johnny in carriage 5"?

Charlie Doyle: Absolutely. You will find on many an occasion, as a consequence of the #LookCloser campaign, which was specific activity with the rail industry, that whereas five years ago they would have put those kids off in the middle of nowhere because they had no ticket, now they are phoning us and saying, "Actually, we're a bit concerned about little Johnny in carriage 5. We think you need to intervene." On occasion, we have stopped trains and put interventions in place. You often find that these kids will be missing from care. They will be from a completely different part of the country and we will say, "What are you doing in Brighton? You hail from the north-east."

Tim Loughton: Understood. Dr Lewis?

Dr Lewis: In terms of the county lines business model, as corrupt as it is, of course the work on the trains and the transport network is incredibly important because it is the visible presence, but beyond that the focus needs to be on those that hold the lines—the ones upstream who are trafficking children and using vulnerable people in this way. There has been a great deal of success nationally with ADDER sites as diverse as Middlesbrough and the Swansea Bay area to ensure that we tackle criminality, including county lines criminality, at source as opposed to simply policing the end of the problem, those who traffic drugs on trains and so on.

Q308 **Tim Loughton:** I want to ask you, Chief Constable, about the Government's response to tackling county lines, particularly the county lines taskforce. I am guessing that if I asked if you thought the Government have invested enough in tackling county lines you would say, "No, more money is welcome." That is taken as read. Five constabularies, including BTP, have piloted the county lines taskforces. Do you believe that they have been a success and should now be rolled out nationally, or do we need to undertake more learning?

Dr Lewis: There is always more learning and more resources required. It is a question of resources, but beyond that, it is a question of prioritisation of the resources that we currently have. It is not simply about asking for more to ensure that we can roll out more initiatives; it is about ensuring that we are using the resources that we already have effectively.



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On the further roll-out, subject to the evidence that is emerging, which is positive, of course we will be supportive of ensuring that that is rolled out more nationally than it currently is. Yes, we are broadly supportive.

Q309 Tim Loughton: We have had evidence before where there has been intensive action in certain towns and cities to try to wipe out the county line dealing gangs, with some success, whether they are in taskforce areas or not, but that creates a vacuum into which London-based gangs will move, on the basis that there is a market with a new opportunity opening up, so you are just cutting one head off the Hydra for another to reappear. Is that a fair assessment?

Dr Lewis: It is like any commodity, whether it is illegitimate drug abuse or legitimate commodities such as coffee or anything else that you care to name. If there is a market there for it, any vacuum you create will be very quickly filled by another business or organised crime group. It is only in conjunction with agencies such as health boards and local authorities, who fund a lot of drug treatment services, that we can truly effectively tackle drug abuse in our communities. Our response as law enforcement will always be to enforce and arrest—to put more doors in and arrest more people—but that has to be done in conjunction, and I hope that is what we will see with the 10-year strategy the Government have announced, with other agencies, ensuring that when that vacuum is created, other agencies can come in to cut demand and cut the requirement for demand with those who use.

Q310 Tim Loughton: What do you see as the role of the police in that? I absolutely take it that your role is to identify, investigate and seek out and bring to justice those committing crimes, but there are those in other agencies who want this problem seen as a public health issue, and that is down to health authorities, social services and others as well. What is the interface between the police and those other agencies where you a decision that might otherwise be, “We will arrest those people” becomes, “We will work with other agencies to remove the demand or rehabilitate those people”? Do you have a clear strategy in your area in Wales as to where the police activity should be in regard to other agencies, or is that emerging?

Dr Lewis: The 10-year strategy will push us in that direction to make sure that we interact further with our partner agencies, and that does need to improve. The Policing Minister has written to all constabularies over the last couple of weeks about ensuring that our local SROs are appointed—not necessarily police leads—to ensure that we use that multi-agency approach. We have significant success in the early ADDER areas, as I mentioned earlier, in the interaction between agencies. While the funding is not available for all constabularies for the ADDER process—it is not for mine—the principles of that can be used in other constabularies. Of course, working alongside partner agencies will be vital in the ongoing fight against drugs.

Q311 Tim Loughton: Do you think those multi-agency approaches should be chaired by police officers, or are other agencies more suitable for that?



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Dr Lewis: It will be dependent on the circumstances that prevail locally. As a general rule I would advocate that they are not police leaders. We have a very particular response within the wider criminal justice system and support agencies in tackling illicit drugs, but I think the message it would send if an SRO who is not a police officer is appointed in a local area would benefit other organisations' understanding that they have a role as well. We have seen a disinvestment over recent years, up until this new strategy was announced, in treatment services. It will take a while, therefore, for that to be built up with the money promised by Government through the response to Dame Carol Black's review, but we will see that in emerging years.

Q312 **Tim Loughton:** Interesting. If one looks at the local safeguarding children boards, for example, which is the multi-agency approach to child safeguarding, without doubt the best ones are those chaired by police officers—they are much better at bringing different agencies together—but your approach is interesting. Mr Rodhouse, will you comment on the county lines taskforce, what you think has been achieved so far, and how they would be rolled out nationally?

Steve Rodhouse: I think it has been very successful but I need to be clear that working with policing, we have recognised that tackling the drugs threat from a pursue perspective needs to be done at lots of different levels; before you arrived we talked about the international down to the street. We have worked together to allocate the key responsibilities. The responsibilities that I have, with the National Crime Agency, are overseas, closer to the border, high harm groups driving the market.

The response around county lines has been necessarily much more local, so I am not absenting myself from it, but having seen the work at first hand to identify the line holders and take really decisive and creative action to take those lines out of action, I think it has been really positive. I agree with Richard that if you take one gang out, there will be a competition to replace them, but that is not a reason not to do it and it is absolutely the right thing. From a pursue perspective, which I am closer to, that has been really effective.

Q313 **Tim Loughton:** Is there anything missing from the 10-year strategy that from a crime agency perspective you would like to see, or do you think it gives you the powers and potentially the resources—but never enough—to be able to do that job?

Steve Rodhouse: I think that it is in the right place. Like everything, it is in the delivery, isn't it? We worked with policy colleagues to make it clear where we think it is important, and it is around working overseas to protect the UK, challenging at the border, tackling the high harm groups, and going after the money. That is my part of it but, as I have said on a number of occasions, I could not be more pleased that there is a really strong focus on investment in treatment and education to reduce the demand. We said at the beginning that the demand is resilient for the



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drugs market and that has to be a key focus, so I am pleased to see that in the strategy.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed for coming along this morning. If there is any further evidence that you are able to provide to the Committee, particularly around the county lines taskforce, and information about drug testing on arrest, we will be very keen to see it. Anything else would be very useful. Thank you very much indeed for this morning's evidence.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nicky Hill, Junior Smart OBE and Dr Jack Spicer.

Q314 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. This is the second panel of the fifth session of our drugs inquiry. We are very pleased to have witnesses from the third sector and academia to answer questions about trafficking; we are particularly interested in county lines. I will start by asking our witnesses to introduce themselves.

Dr Spicer: My name is Dr Jack Spicer. I am a lecturer in criminology at the University of the West of England.

Junior Smart: Good morning to you all. My name is Junior Smart. I am from St Giles Trust. I am the founder and business development manager of SOS project and SOS bus.

Nicky Hill: Good morning. My name is Nicky Hill. I am the Head of Services for Abianda, a small social enterprise working with women and girls affected by county lines.

Q315 **Chair:** Thank you. We will have a number of questions, but may I ask each witness in turn for their reflections on the 10-year drug strategy and how they think it may help with the issue of county lines and trafficking?

Junior Smart: We at St Giles agree with the ethos of the strategy. It is quite ambitious and there is a lot of money being invested into it. However, I have a couple of key questions. First, it is a little bit worrying that there is a focus on targeting those who supply drugs. In our experience that will do quite little to impact the availability of drugs. This is not new. This has been said before by the Home Office in previous reports. That leads to this continual rhetoric around enforcement that we know will only be damaging to the communities that are most vulnerable in the first place.

There is a lot of talk about drug use and the drug markets behind the county lines but very little about the cause and the demand that is fuelling that in the first place. That leads us to bigger conversations—sensible conversations—that I believe have been put forward by other Ministers such as David Lammy in the past. We need to be in a position where we have a frank and honest discussion about the amount of money that is being put into this versus the benefit.



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Also, by the county lines definition, they are consistently focusing on drugs when in reality we are talking about commodities, and some of those are commodities are actually legal. The majority of them are illegal, but county lines is like an illegal commodity network—a commoditised network—and we have to ask big questions about how young people are getting drawn in, what are the push-pull factors and the exploitation factors around that, and not just focus on enforcement. One of your earlier witnesses said that we can arrest and arrest and arrest our way out of this but we will not budge the tide. These are very senior people coming from very experienced positions.

St Giles values its connections with partners such as British Transport Police, and we are huge advocates of the county lines co-ordination centre, which for the first time really started to monitor county lines activity, but we still have to look at the driving factors around both the markets and the young people and their involvement.

Q316 **Chair:** That is very helpful; thank you. Can I ask Nicky Hill for your observations on the 10-year drug strategy?

Nicky Hill: I very much echo the comments by my colleague, Junior, and by Mr Rodhouse earlier, recognising that the strategy is ambitious. I concur that there is real value in the focus on prevention and harm reduction and treatment. All that is really positive, but to echo the question, it is about the delivery. What does that look like on the ground? We have had lots of conversation this morning around the sharp end of county lines and the role of drugs, particularly crack and heroin, but we must recognise that drugs feature in young lives in multiple and complex ways. They are being used in communities by young people in lots of different ways for lots of different reasons. We need to think about that spectrum of harm in a really broad way and think creatively about how that strategy plays out in practice in communities—how it is delivered, how it is funded and who does that—while recognising that we have seen a real reduction in drug and alcohol services for young people.

Thinking back a decade or more ago, we had the Connexions service and one-stop shops, so young people could wander into a service and have an honest conversation with a skilled professional around their drug and alcohol use. That is not the way things work now. Quite often, the pathway into support for young people who are using drugs and alcohol is through the criminal justice system; it is at the point of arrest, and at that point you have missed the opportunity for diversion. I am very passionate about making sure that we are thinking about earlier opportunities for intervention and the drug strategy must hold on to that, not just in the way it is structured but in the way it is implemented.

Q317 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Dr Spicer, in your written evidence to the Committee, you argue that the 10-year drug strategy includes “unevidenced and unrealistic aims”. Will you talk a little bit about that?

Dr Spicer: Yes. When it comes to certain statements in the drug strategy, there is talk of building a “ring of steel” around the country to



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prevent drugs from entering, which is unevidenced and unrealistic. It says things about eliminating the presence of drugs from our cities, towns and villages, which is also unevidenced and unrealistic. Those sorts of claims undermine the wider point around trying to reduce not necessarily drug use but drug-related harm. That is where our efforts and attention should really be.

There is certainly plenty to like about what is in the new drug strategy; the extra funding for treatment in particular is very welcome, especially given the cuts experienced over the past decade or so. But the supply control measures in it basically follow the same path that has been followed for the past 50 years or so with the Misuse of Drugs Act, and therefore it is unlikely that anything particularly different will change by following that strategy.

There is a lot of emphasis on disruption. We heard from the previous panel about disrupting organised crime groups and disrupting the market, and that almost being viewed as a proxy, as something beneficial—drug market disruption being something that is good. I point out that there is a weight of evidence suggesting there are lots of unintended consequences about disrupting drug markets. It is often associated with an increase in violence, so often you will have a drug enforcement crackdown and you will have a spike in violence.

If you have significant drug market disruption you may well have disruption in the purity levels of the substances being sold, which is problematic in relation to health harms and can lead to the introduction of other drugs into the system; we have already talked about fentanyl this morning. I express caution about the idea that drug market disruption is simply a good thing, because it can be associated with a rise in drug-related harm as well.

Chair: There is a lot there that we can unpack during this session. I will come first to Diane Abbott.

Q318 **Ms Abbott:** Dr Spicer, in your written evidence you argue that the Government's response to the supply and control of drugs needs to be reconfigured. Do you want to expand on that thought?

Dr Spicer: It builds on what I previously mentioned about not simply viewing supply reduction as a benefit but thinking about harm reduction more broadly and what measures can be put in place to address drug-related harms in the broader sense but specifically drug market-related harms. My research suggests that when we are thinking about police-led enforcement and crackdowns, we should not necessarily view that as the end of the process; we should view that, perhaps, as the start of something wider.

Often, police put in a lot of resources, effort and time and they will go in and do a lot of arrests in one day. They will execute a number of warrants, arrest a lot of people, and that will often be viewed as the end of the process. A wider, harm-reduction-informed, multi-agency-informed process would perhaps view that as the start of something else, where



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other people can come round the table and we do not view the arrests as the main output; we view engagement with wider services as the main output.

Q319 **Ms Abbott:** Do you think Project ADDER is a step towards that?

Dr Spicer: Similarly to the drug strategy more broadly, there is lots to like about Project ADDER. The increased investment for drug treatment is a very positive thing. The fact that it is targeted at specific areas experiencing heightened drug-related problems—often those areas that are experiencing deprivation as well—is a good thing. Diversion—I cannot remember whether it is the first or second D in the ADDER acronym—is certainly a positive thing and should be pursued.

We have seen a number of police forces over the past few years engaging in police diversion schemes for drug possession offences and that should be pursued and rolled out further. I would personally take it even further and decriminalise possession, but within the legislative framework we have at the moment I think diversion is a positive thing.

The only thing I would say, repeating the point a little, is that the enforcement and disruption part of ADDER is very similar to what has happened for a long time previously, so it is unrealistic to view that as being able to contribute anything materially different from what has happened in the past.

Q320 **Ms Abbott:** But you would decriminalise possession?

Dr Spicer: I certainly would. The international evidence suggests it can be a productive mechanism for reducing drug-related harm and engaging people with services, where criminalising them may prevent that.

Q321 **Ms Abbott:** Dr Lewis, who is the drugs lead for the National Police Chiefs' Council, told me that Dyfed-Powys is much the same as London. One thing that characterises London is the demographics. I am interested to hear if anyone has anything to say on how you engage with the specific issue of black and minority ethnic youth being engaged in the drugs trade or in county lines.

Dr Spicer: I will respectfully defer to my two colleagues on the panel, who I think are better informed to comment specifically on that. All I would say, as a broader point, is that when we look at the history of drug law enforcement, it has fallen disproportionately on black people and other marginalised people in society, and it is a real problem.

Junior Smart: There is massive disproportionality that happens. The young people we are working with consistently tell us that they are over-enforced and under-protected. Quite simply, legislation and policing measures—it has taken us a very long way for them to understand there is an overlap between victim and offender. However, the systems that are in place cannot keep up with the way that the people who are involved in county lines continually adapt and evolve.



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Earlier, they were talking about the dark web. I can honestly tell you that the majority of the young people I work with are not using the dark web to order their drugs. They are actually using the normal web. We are in an age now where apps are being developed that look like normal things, so tech-savvy parents will check the child's phone and it is hidden in plain sight.

There is not a joined-up approach around sharing information. Those sorts of problems consistently plague this arena where we are talking about exploited children. But in legal terms we are still talking about children who are being exploited and—I believe the term is adultification—being treated like adults. There are the mass links we see between school exclusions and criminal activity, the push-pull factors that underpin both those things, and one of your colleagues talked earlier about the link between drugs and other types of behaviour that might affect a young person's involvement—domestic violence, theft and so on.

There are some really good examples. If you look at Scotland, where the demographic is reversed and still drug use is prevalent, they are more progressive. One of the things you have to do if you are to tackle drugs is to tackle demand. I believe that they were trying to push through things like places where you could safely take drugs, and changing the prescribed drugs so it is not just the one type. These sorts of measures have already been implemented by other countries around the world to success, but I do not think we are at the stage where we are ready to have that conversation.

I have come this far so I might as well raise one more contentious point. There still remains a lack of involving young people. When they are the ones at street level experiencing this stuff, there still remains a lack of involving them in the solutions when, in fact, they would be the experts. If you went to one of these areas where young people are and said, "Tell us about your drug issues. Tell us about where the people are selling from. Tell us about what this community needs," they would be able to tell you. Yet frequently they are not included in discussions like this. You have other agencies coming in and describing what they think is needed, and everybody else is supposed to accept it.

Ms Abbott, we have to understand that the people who are involved in taking drugs have multiple complex issues, yet we are only coming up with one kind of measure to deal with them, and that is punitive measures—scapegoating measures. We shame them, we criminalise them and we put them in custody, and then we expect them to change. If we want to see real differences in the demand, the requisition, the exploitation of young people and the distribution networks involved in this stuff, we need to adopt different approaches.

Q322 Ms Abbott: Thank you very much, Mr Smart. I am interested that you do not need to bother with the dark web; you just put an app on your phone and you can order your drugs. It is an interesting point that we should involve young people more in looking for the solutions. Ms Hill?



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Nicky Hill: Again, I echo everything that my colleague Mr Smart has shared. He touched on something that is incredibly important, the concept of adultification. By that, as he described, we are talking about the inherent bias that exists within lots of professionals to see young people as older and having more agency and more control and more options in front of them than they in fact do. We know that that in itself disproportionately affects young black people.

Particularly from an Abianda perspective—we work with women and girls—we know that there is a significant disproportionate exploitation of young black girls. We understand that through our work and talking to young women. It is very much part of the ethos of Abianda to hear and amplify young women's voices. We know they are experiencing intersectional systems of oppression, as young women and as black young people. That bias exists within the services that are there to safeguard them.

We know how that often plays out: behaviours that indicate distress, harm or abuse are seen as problematic, difficult and challenging. They are often the behaviours that lead to police involvement and the criminalisation of those young people when actually what they are expressing to us is that they are experiencing harm at the hands of adults because they are being exploited and groomed to be part of county lines. That fundamentally over-applies to young black people and young black women.

Q323 **James Daly:** So your argument, Mr Smart and Ms Hill, is effectively to decriminalise any offence related to drugs for anyone under the age of 18. Is that what you are saying—for anyone under the age of 18, decriminalise every drug-related matter?

Nicky Hill: I am not sure that is the position that Abianda would take. We very firmly take a position that the response should be a safeguarding response rather than an enforcement response, and that safeguarding response—*[Inaudible.]* We would like to see a much more significant focus within "Working together to safeguard children" and the legislative frameworks that support safeguarding around how we work with young people who are being exploited and where that might involve possession of drugs—

Q324 **James Daly:** Ms Hill, I will take that as read. We can have a discussion about the best way that treatment or support should be, whichever way we want to discuss that, and the 10-year drug strategy has some good points in respect of that in terms of investment. That is a separate debate. I am asking you: what level of offending do you believe should lead to a young person going before a court for a drug-related matter?

Nicky Hill: I appreciate the question. I make it clear that I work for an organisation supporting young people, not within the criminal justice system or within policing, so I probably do not feel qualified to make that very arbitrary judgment. I stand by the point that I feel like young people can best be responded to through safeguarding measures rather than



policing, enforcement and coming before the courts. I think that is as far as I can go on that.

Q325 **James Daly:** Mr Smart, what do you think about that?

Junior Smart: I do not necessarily think your question was fair, because that is currently how the law works, isn't it? It is either, "We're dealing with a perpetrator," or, "We're dealing with a victim." Anyone on the frontline who is working with young people or their families will tell you it is far more nuanced than that. The key approach here is that we need to overhaul the systems completely and it needs to be on a case-by-case, holistic basis. Some people involved in this are there by choice. Recreational users are frequently missed in this whole thing. The reality is far more nuanced than that. Some people are there by force, some people are there by coercion, some people are there by their own choice, and I think it needs to be done on a case-by-case basis.

For example, if you look at CCE, it still lacks a statutory definition, which has meant that it has been left down to regional areas to define who they see and how they treat them. That needs to be changed. That could be a very quick win. If we defined that statutorily, everyone would have to follow suit. I think that is the key thing. We are working with someone who could be a victim, a perpetrator or even a witness. Where do they fall?

Q326 **James Daly:** Mr Smart, you are making a very valid point. I was a criminal defence solicitor for 16 years. I have represented more young people than—I know exactly the hundreds upon hundreds of nuances that young people go through, because I have stood in court with them. I have been there when they have had every form of community rehabilitation and probation order. These discussions and these levels of how you interact with young people have been going on for a long time, but there has to be some basis to the point we are talking about.

I think you have made your point, so can I ask you, rather than going over that point, specifically to tell us an example of good practice that you have seen that has helped a young person to address the problem that they have and something that you believe could be rolled out nationwide or something that we could perhaps support?

Junior Smart: Okay. I would look at some of the great work that has happened in Wales with the Welsh police. St Giles Trust was involved—the voluntary sector was involved—when they were shutting down a cuckooed property, and they recognised that county lines are part of an ecosystem. If they shut down that county line, you would expect all the other county lines in the area to increase, because obviously the need for drugs will not have gone away. When they shut down that property, all the young people were treated as exploited young people, so we had all the services. This was a true joined-up approach. Then you had treatment for the drug users, because they were going to be looking for more drugs to fulfil what they needed. They also understood that some people fund their drugs through alternative means, for example



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shoplifting. The sex industry is another part of it. So there were the services—

Q327 James Daly: Mr Smart, drug rehabilitation orders and drug support has been there for the last 15 to 20 years. This is nothing new. People who I was representing a decade ago were given the opportunity to have treatment and support from youth offending team workers and various other people. I am just asking for a specific example of good practice or something that you have seen that has turned a young person away from drug taking and got them into a more positive mindset and a different way of life.

Junior Smart: I was going to say that St Giles and SOS was part of that, and we believe that the support that we were able to give that young person to help transition them out of it—because there were driving factors behind it. So we believe that people with lived experience, first-hand experience, but properly trained—also, there is a time resource element. That was given as part of two of those young persons' orders. But what was really amazing was that two of the people that they defined as perpetrators had been witnesses to two children being raped and, had they not received that proper support, those rapes would never have been known. I would always side with support over sanction and that is one example that I can give you.

Q328 James Daly: Thank you very much. Ms Hill?

Nicky Hill: Thank you. At the risk of repeating myself, I am a very strong advocate of provision that is universal and easily accessible, where we understand the barriers that young people face and work creatively to remove those barriers. There are some examples of good practice that we can learn from and replicate. Some of the work in Shropshire is incredibly impressive: young people's drug and alcohol services are very much aligned with their exploitation services. They are seen as intrinsically overlapping and interlinked, providing access at the higher level to young people who are using problematically but also doing a lot of early intervention and diversion work outside of the criminal justice system.

I note your very valid point around the long-term, extensive work that has been done within youth offending services and other criminal justice agencies, but I think that in itself is problematic. We need to be keeping young people out of youth offending services and youth justice services and creating provision in communities. Again, I would suggest Shropshire as a point of good practice.

Q329 James Daly: Thank you very much indeed. My final question is to you, Dr Spicer. Perhaps you can give your view on this. There is this classification of offending, which I do not accept, of low-level offending. Many shops in my constituency are being ravaged by shoplifters. Most of those shoplifters have drug addiction problems. Some of them are young people and some of them are older people, but they are going into shops with knives and various other things, and it is a huge social issue. The



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reason why they are going in there with knives and threatening people is essentially that that level of offending has been decriminalised by Greater Manchester Police. On the relationship between services and criminal activity, do you share the view that we should essentially decriminalise all drug-related activity? How do you believe that that serves the public interest?

Dr Spicer: I struggle to follow the argument that the reason why people who might have drug problems are shoplifting is because it has been decriminalised. It has not been decriminalised yet, so I—

Q330 **James Daly:** Sorry, “decriminalise” is the wrong word, but people are not arrested for that. There has been a decision that law enforcement will not arrest people for that level of offending, so I am using that as an example of the theory that we are putting here. If you are going to consider something to be “low-level” offending, whether that is possession of drugs, shoplifting or something like that, my concern is that if we go down the line of decriminalising, or whatever the word is, we will just have open season, with people committing acts of antisocial behaviour, while hoping that treatment works.

Dr Spicer: I will make two points. First, there is an assumption there that the threat of criminalisation will prevent people from using drugs, and that manifestly has not happened. The second, broader point, to avoid getting too bogged down in discussions of decriminalisation, is that the drug treatment system for the past decade has been ravaged by a combination of funding cuts and an embracement of the recovery agenda dismissing harm reduction.

We have roughly 30,000 fewer opiate clients in treatment now than we had in 2010. If you have 30,000 fewer opiate clients in treatment, that means the demand for heroin, and likely other substances, such as crack cocaine, will increase and lead the market to flourish. The second, broader point, which is perhaps more important than decriminalisation, is that to firmly engage with that population and achieve the health and criminal justice benefits that we would like to see, the emphasis should be placed on effective treatment, funded and appropriately resourced.

Q331 **Tim Loughton:** Mr Smart, you gave evidence to our Committee a few years ago about serious youth violence—the gang violence and the extraordinary postcode gang operations and things like that. How would you say the situation has changed—for the worse or better—over the last three years with respect to county lines activity and gangs?

Junior Smart: Thank you so much for asking that question. It has been terrible. Speaking as a frontline practitioner, I have to be completely honest with you and say that. Many nights I have had a heavy heart. It has changed for a number of reasons, including the rise in technology—the gangs have consistently managed to out-adapt enforcement. I have to ask the question: what purpose does criminalising young people serve?

The numbers with respect to exploitation of young people have just gone up. There is the knock-on effect; you have the immediate impact of



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something and then you have the secondary and tertiary effects. We had the immediate effect of the lockdown, the fact that many people were then stuck in homes that were unsafe, where there was abuse and violence taking place. Many young people turned to going online. The rise in negative online behaviours meant that more young people could be groomed. There is much that can be said about the sexual objectification of women and how that has developed. We are still going to be experiencing the knock-on effect of that.

But one of the crucial ways in which I suppose county lines were affected was that lockdown impacted things like shoplifting—a key way that people might fund their drugs—and sexual exploitation. It impacted all those aspects. Right now, we have the cost of living crisis. Many families cannot survive. I challenge any MP out there to go out there—I have to put it in this kind of way. It is easy when you are dissident from the reality to always do the blaming thing and say, “It’s your fault.” Go out there and do a shop with some of these families that are struggling and see how well you can survive on their income because, I tell you what, my reality is—

Q332 Tim Loughton: Mr Smart, we are getting off topic here. I am asking specifically about the nature of county lines gangs. I am not asking about—

Junior Smart: That is what I am saying.

Tim Loughton: Hold on. I am not asking you about the impact of the cost of living crisis on law-abiding people. What has changed in the last three or four years in the nature of county lines gangs that means they are now more prolific, using younger people, using more girls or exploiting children more? You have mentioned one thing, which is the sort of thing I want to hear: the greater use of technology. How has it changed so that a county lines operation working with gangs to distribute, sell and promote drugs in certain areas is now different than it was when you spoke to us several years ago?

Junior Smart: I was just about to come to that. Because families are having to work longer, there is less parental presence in the home. Therefore, young people are able to carry out behaviours for much longer without being detected. That means that when a young person goes missing from the family home, that is being detected much later. We have had numbers of schoolchildren who have not returned to school. Those sorts of things play into the pull factors.

The gangs have been able to glamourise what they do—the use of social media technology, the amount of money that is available, all that sort of stuff—but they have also been able to take advantage of the lockdown conditions. Now the lockdown conditions are lifted, we are seeing the violence and all of the debts. For example, one of the things that they might use is a thing called squares and deets and fullz, so getting young people to set up bank accounts so they can launder money.



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Q333 **Tim Loughton:** Can you explain that? I did not quite hear that, but can you explain what you are talking about there?

Junior Smart: There is a thing called fullz—that is spelled F-U-L-L-Z—squares and deets. They are advertising through regular social media platforms. They will say, “If you set up a bank account or you provide bank account details”—those squares and deets—“then you can get paid.” What these groups will then do is use the bank accounts, put money into them, and it is a form of money laundering. The bank institutions are not up to date on this. They tend to fall on the perpetrator angle and criminalise the young person when in fact that young person might be being exploited.

We are seeing young people being groomed, for example, through food. It has become less about money and more about products, safety, protection, all those tangible things that young people—the knock-on effects that everything else has had.

Q334 **Tim Loughton:** I think that the point about bank accounts is really interesting. That is exactly the sort of thing I was asking for. You are saying that there has been a proliferation in young people opening bank accounts to launder money from drug dealers, effectively.

Junior Smart: Yes.

Tim Loughton: And that the banks have not really latched on to this. It is something that the banks should be able to detect because you know how difficult it is to set up a bank account these days, with the checks and things that you have to go through. How is this able to happen?

Junior Smart: This thing has been going on for quite a while—quite a number of years—but it is only coming to the forefront now because of social media. It is not that hard; on most social media platforms these groups are able to advertise with literal impunity. It is terrible because when the young people are caught—sometimes the banks catch them—they have markers against their name so that they can never have a bank account again. Again, it falls on the whole question, “What are we seeing, then? Is it a victim or a perpetrator or a mixture of both?”

We are also seeing some very young children using social media platforms. In a couple of areas, we have seen overt sexualisation; the groups are sharing young girls’ social media account IDs. We are seeing a lot of a return to the old exploitative models—the boyfriend model. They are bringing girls into this arena, largely because they have had more availability to them. Violence has also been a key aspect, as you have seen. Since the lockdown lifted, the violence has gone right back up. Again, it is a time resource—I cannot tell you; it has been really hard.

Q335 **Tim Loughton:** There is some interesting detail there, which I think the Committee might want to explore a bit further. Nicky Hill, do you want to add anything to that?

Nicky Hill: Yes. I agree that it is an incredibly important area, and one that I would argue disproportionately affects women and girls. We have a



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long-standing experience at a legislation, policy and practice level, around responding to child sexual exploitation. I think quite often we see that as distinct from child criminal exploitation, and what Mr Smart has alluded to is that they are intrinsically linked and overlap.

We know that often girls are exploited and groomed into county lines in the context of intimate relationships. Quite often that will involve access to their homes access to their bank accounts, which, as Junior stated, can often have lifelong impacts. If you cannot access a bank account because you have been identified as committing fraud, that has a significant lifelong limitation on your ability to live a law-abiding life. I think it is essential that we understand that and how that disproportionately affects women and girls.

Q336 Tim Loughton: That is an added reason why banks should be much more scrutinous in allowing those accounts to be set up in the first place.

Nicky Hill: Absolutely, but young people now—particularly those living independently at a younger age, who in turn are often the most vulnerable, and those living in supported accommodation—will often have bank accounts set up, and very often they will use the bank accounts that they have rather than setting up new ones. When the fraudulent activity is identified in their account, the account is locked down, and it can be many months, if not years, if not indefinitely, that they do not have access to banking in the UK.

Q337 Tim Loughton: Why do you think young girls are attracted to get involved with the gangs? Is it a “glamorous” thing to identify with it? Is it because there are more girls dropping out? Is it, as Junior Smart said, because of the lockdown and the missing kids? We know that there are 100,000 or more children who are now not in school for the majority of the time, who are more susceptible to being lured by these gangs. What do young women and girls in particular see in it?

Nicky Hill: I think we need to understand it in the context of grooming. Grooming is an incredibly sophisticated methodology and we know that organised crime groups and those within those structures are very skilled at identifying where there might be gaps in young people’s lives, and particularly young women’s lives. It is important that we do not always see it as just a simple concept of choice. We know that lots of young people and lots of young women have very constrained choices that exist in the context of survival, poverty, complexity of need, limited resources, and harm at home. I am always loth to talk about what attracts young women into offending because I think it is a very intentional method of pulling them in—of grooming them.

Obviously, that will include things that have appeal. For the history of time, young people have been interested in things that affirm their identity, which they are shaping, whether that is fashion or access to things, but I would absolutely steer us away from thinking it is as simple as a choice where young women or young men are attracted into it. I



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think it is very much about being groomed into it, using those hooks that we know young people are susceptible to.

Tim Loughton: That is very interesting. Thank you very much.

Q338 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Thanks to the witnesses. Dr Spicer, another section of your written evidence suggests that the country's response to tackling county lines needs to actively recognise the role of inequality in driving drug market activity. That sounds quite a difficult concept. Can you say a little more about what you mean by that and how that inequality would be recognised in our response?

Dr Spicer: When we look at evidence, both within the UK and internationally, when we look at drug-related harm, we see that it is disproportionately concentrated among people and populations who suffer from deprivation, so we cannot divorce drug-related harm from wider social harm and inequality more broadly. When we look at people who develop problems with drugs, these are disproportionately affected by populations who live in deprivation. When we look at the current drug-related death crisis, for example, the people dying drug-related deaths are disproportionately people at the lower end of society.

As the two other panel members have already alluded to, while not exclusively, when we look at who becomes dragged into drug markets and drug supply, again, this is often young people at the lower end of society who may well not view their future as being particularly prosperous. When it comes to drug use, drug supply and wider drug-related harm, if we are to address that appropriately, I think we have to look thoroughly at the relationship that it has with wider inequality.

Q339 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Tackling the scourge of drugs also involves tackling those inequalities; is that essentially the point that you are making?

Dr Spicer: Absolutely, yes. To repeat, when we look at the distribution of drug harms in the UK but also when we look at this internationally—Professor Alex Stevens from Kent is a leading authority on this and has argued very strongly and provided very strong evidence about this—if we want to reduce drug-related harms we have to deal with effective drug policy, but we also have to deal with effective social policy that recognises the role of inequality in driving much of these harms.

Q340 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Thank you. Nicky Hill and Junior Smart, how good are the police and the criminal justice system at picking out and recognising victims of county lines? Do we end up dragging too many people through the criminal justice system when, in actual fact, we should be recognising them as victims? What more can be done to try to stop that happening, if it is an issue?

Nicky Hill: That is a key question. The short answer is yes, too many young people are being brought into the criminal justice system, but it is important that we recognise just how complex this area is. The victim-offender overlap is just that, and it is also a seesaw. It is not static; it is



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dynamic. Understanding the transition between victim and perpetrator and understanding the context in which that happens is essential.

What we see at Abianda, and certainly what I have seen throughout my career, is the role of what we are now terming the alpha victim. Where children have been groomed and exploited, they become part of these criminal networks, they are embedded—often with ongoing threat, ongoing hostility, ongoing violence and ongoing exposure to harm—and part of their survival in those systems is to bring other young people into them. That is part of their function and role. They then take on superficially the role of exploiter.

In the earlier evidence session, an example was given of a line being run by a 16-year-old. I really challenge that as a concept. I don't know the details of that case, but children do not have access to the resources to be internationally trafficking drugs and setting up complex business models. That is done by adults. I would argue that any children involved in the business model of county lines fundamentally is being exploited by an adult in some way, shape or form. Quite often they will then go through that transition of becoming what looks like an exploiter or perpetrator themselves.

That is not to suggest that young people do not commit violence in those contexts, but again, it has to be understood in the context of survival and limited choices, and understanding that. That has a huge amount of complexity with it. I will hand over to Junior.

Junior Smart: I think you have said it all there. The law is effective but it is not where it needs to be on county lines. I would argue that it is hampered by ideologies. The lack of a statutory definition is hampering it. If you don't mind me giving you one example, the lack of child criminal exploitation means that it is down to the regions to decide how somebody will be treated, whether they will be treated punitively or supportively. The age of sexual consent is 16. However, I think that the age of criminal exploitation is 21. Even if someone is being exploited, but—sexual exploitation is still happening under that umbrella. If they are above the age of 16 they are still being exploited. They cannot give consent to their exploitation. This is something that keeps coming up again and again in courtroom discussions.

I have a client at the moment and the mother monitored her own son going off the rails, being groomed. She actually had numberplates of the people showing up at the house, yet in a court of law that was not taken as a sign of his criminal exploitation; he was still seen as an active agent in his exploitation. I believe that T2A did some research that talks about age and maturity not being linked. Where does the maturity come into it? We use these boundaries and we say, "No, actually, that person is an active agent" when actually, they are operating off a limited repertoire of choices in the first place. Those are the sorts of things where I think we are failing our young people and their families.

Q341 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Thank you. Does anyone have any comments on



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the role of the national referral mechanism in all this? Is it of any use? Does it work?

Nicky Hill: I am very supportive of the national referral mechanism as a concept; again, it is around its application. The way that it is structured is that there are two significant roles as first responders—police and social workers. What we know from our experience at Abianda—and what I have found throughout my career—is that there is still a huge way to go in ensuring that those professionals understand the referral mechanism and their role in it, and that they are identifying young people and applying that mechanism to those young people. There is still a huge gap in that.

I would also ask—I regularly ask myself—what is the benefit of the national referral mechanism. We see its benefit within the criminal justice system in identifying young people as being exploited, but we know that it does not secure a support offer that is as robust and extensive as that which applies to other victims of modern slavery and trafficking under the Modern Slavery Act.

Q342 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Dr Spicer, do you want to come in?

Dr Spicer: Just a brief wider point around the modern slavery legislation. When it was introduced it wasn't designed for county lines; it was designed for other things. It is now being used for county lines, but I think reviewing its appropriateness and how it might be amended in the light of its prevalent use for county lines would be very useful.

Q343 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Thank you very much. A final question to Nicky Hill and Junior Smart. Both of your organisations have been involved in the Rescue and Response county lines project in London. Could you share your thoughts on how that has worked and whether that collaborative response is something that we need to try to roll out elsewhere? Junior Smart, do you want to go first this time?

Junior Smart: Yes; thank you so much. I think the results speak for themselves—the very fact that the services are oversubscribed, but with clients referred to those services, other services are able to divert their attention to other people. They realise that working with anyone that is involved in county lines is a resource and time-intensive thing. There is the linking in that Rescue and Response has had with other agencies, such as Abianda, which is absolutely amazing in its gender-specific offering. These are all fantastic traits.

The biggest disappointment for me is that Rescue and Response is not replicated. We know that London is just one central exporting hub, or so-called identified exporting hub, of county lines activity. There are at least three or four others in the country. I think that Rescue and Response should be replicated, purely because rather than parachuting in from the outside, it is using people with lived experience on the inside, but also it is the time-intensive work that is needed. The very fact that it has been oversubscribed year on year shows that the demand and the need is there.



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Nicky Hill: I agree with all of that. The results absolutely speak for themselves.

Going back to your earlier question, I think that there is overlap in that what the Rescue and Response service has allowed Abianda to do, which is crucial, is, as well as providing direct support to young women, providing specialist advocacy within the professional networks and systems that young women exist within. That might mean advocating with social care. It might mean advocating within the criminal justice system to ensure that things like NRMs are applied. It allows us to deliver training to professionals, to upskill, to raise awareness, to support them in the application of existing legislative frameworks and policy. It gives us the opportunity to do some really great systems change work.

For example, our staff in London attend Hendon regularly to be part of the Hydra county lines training of police officers, so we are in the room with police officers being trained on real-life county lines scenarios. That not only enables us to understand police decision making but allows us to share the voices of young women and our perspectives as practitioners with police officers. It is creating opportunities for effective partnership, which I think is an incredible strength of Rescue and Response. It is a multi-agency, multidisciplinary partnership that is drawing on a huge range of skills, expertise and intelligence to provide a robust response to young people being exploited.

Q344 **Chair:** Thank you. We are just about to conclude because we have Prime Minister's Question Time at 12 noon, but I want to ask one last question, which is for each of you. What is the one thing that you think this Committee should be asking Government for on county lines?

Dr Spicer: It would probably be not relying on enforcement but looking at the role that drug demand plays in the wider market context, so recognising that an effective, well-funded treatment system is likely to have far more of an impact on reducing the market and reducing drug-related harms than simply enforcing laws against perpetrators.

Junior Smart: We have seen through the likes of Rescue and Response the sort of outcomes that we can achieve when projects are well funded and are culturally led from the top to the bottom. I think that is one of the things that we need to implement going forward to effectively challenge county lines.

Nicky Hill: They would certainly be in my top three, but I will add to that bringing county lines better into the safeguarding arena and out of the enforcement arena. We know from the evidence that law enforcement colleagues gave that 38% of those involved are under 18. We need a much more robust safeguarding response, and that sits outside law enforcement.

Chair: And I think everybody supports having a statutory definition for child criminal exploitation as a good way forward that would be helpful.

Witnesses indicated assent.



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Chair: Okay, thank you. Thank you very much for your evidence this morning. That concludes this fifth session of our drugs inquiry.