



## Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Child exploitation and county lines](#),  
HC 1114

Tuesday 28 February 2023

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Nick Fletcher; Kim Johnson; Andrew Lewer.

Questions 1 - 51

### Witnesses

I: Iryna Pona, Policy and Impact Manager, the Children's Society; Susannah Drury, Director of Policy and Development, Missing People; Rebecca Griffiths, Head of National Counter-Trafficking Service, Barnardo's; and Johnny Bolderson, Senior Service Manager, County Lines Support and Rescue, Catch22.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Iryna Pona, Susannah Drury, Rebecca Griffiths and Johnny Bolderson.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to today's session on child exploitation and county lines. Before we start the session, I want to make anyone watching this session aware that some of the content discussed might be distressing. If you are concerned about anyone who has experienced child exploitation through county lines, please contact 999 if the person is in immediate danger, or if you think a crime has been committed, Crimestoppers UK. You can also find some suggested support organisations listed on our Committee website.

Today we will be hearing evidence from Iryna Pona, Policy and Impact Manager, the Children's Society, Rebecca Griffiths, Head of National Counter-Trafficking Service at Barnardo's, Johnny Bolderson, Senior Service Manager, County Lines Support and Rescue at Catch22 and Susannah Drury, Director of Policy and Development at Missing People.

Could I start by asking each of the panel to outline the scale of the problem as they see it, the work of their organisations in this area and talk a little bit about how the scale and intensity of their workload has changed in recent years?

**Iryna Pona:** I will start by introducing the Children's Society. The Children's Society is a voluntary sector organisation. We work in England and Wales and it has been around for over 140 years, helping families and children in need. Last year we worked with about 55,000 children in 78 projects across the country, but through our system change work, as we call it, we reached a lot more young people. The Children's Society works with people who are at risk or who are exploited, both criminally and sexually. We also work with young people in care and very often the young people we work with experience a range of different issues in their lives, not just one.

We also undertake policy and research work. In 2019, our research focused on county lines and how children and young people are exploited—the journey of exploitation—and also what response they received from law enforcement and safeguarding agencies.

We do not know the true scale of the issue because not enough data about it is collected, but over recent years we have seen many young people being exploited and the scale does not get smaller. The number of children being exploited only increases and the response they need is still not the most fitting for the problems they face.

**Susannah Drury:** Continuing the point about scale, as Iryna Pona says, it is not known because it is such a hidden form of exploitation. One of the best bits of data I have seen is from the Commission on Young Lives, which found that in one year 10,000 social work assessments mention county lines and criminal exploitation. If you think those are just the ones



that have come to the attention of a social worker in one year, that probably gives you a sense that that is the tip of the iceberg and a lot more children are involved.

Missing People provides a range of services for young people who are missing or at risk of disappearing, as well as adults and the families left behind. One of our services is SafeCall, a national helpline and support service funded by the Home Office for young people caught up in county lines, as well as their parents and carers and the professionals who support them. Through that service, we have seen an increase in intensity from increases in the numbers of young people falling into poverty and getting involved in county lines—and I am sure we will talk about those issues later—and also young people who are in care, who are in semi-independent accommodation and those with mental health issues, which often makes them even more vulnerable to county lines exploitation.

Alongside Iryna Pona and the Children's Society, we work on providing the co-secretariat to the APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults. We did a short roundtable about that about five years ago. Missing People has also done a lot of research into this topic, including the experience of county lines for families and the trauma that affects the whole family—siblings, parents, carers and beyond.

**Johnny Bolderson:** I work for Catch22. We design and deliver public services that build resilience and aspirations in people and communities. We recently launched a service based in the four main regions we identify as being where county lines are most active—London, West Midlands, Merseyside and Greater Manchester. We aimed it at the under-25s, which I think is a big part of things, because a majority of people might look at county lines as just being about under-18s but it is not. It is about the under-25s, vulnerable adults, and getting that message across is a big part of our service. The under-25s and vulnerable adults are extremely vulnerable to county lines exploitation and grooming; that does not stop at 18.

We work with Susannah Drury and SafeCall and Missing People to give support around anonymising if people do not want to work directly with us one to one. There is the option that we pass it to SafeCall and we work as a partnership to support that young person or vulnerable adult.

It is hard to judge the scale of the problem because we have to unpick it and put it into certain pockets of where the exploitation is happening and it is very difficult to identify that. I did see some research recently that said 27,000 young people are involved in county lines—that data comes from the Children's Commissioner for England and the National Youth Agency—and 4,000 young people just in London. That is quite a massive number, but there is a larger number that has not been identified. People need to understand about vulnerable adults and county lines.

Q2 **Chair:** When you say “vulnerable” is that by particular characteristics?



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Does that include mental health problems, learning difficulties, particular groups who are being targeted?

**Johnny Bolderson:** Yes, exactly that. It could be learning difficulties. It could be personality disorders, Asperger's, autism, families that have limited funds or health issues, such as being bedridden. A vulnerable young person could be suffering from extreme learning difficulties and they could be taken over through going into that household—I know we are going to talk about cuckooing later—and that leaves them extremely vulnerable.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** I am the head of the National Counter-Trafficking Service for Barnardo's. Last year, Barnardo's worked with over 357,000 children through 794 different services. Many of our services work with children who are being criminally exploited or impacted by serious youth violence. We run a number of services. Our Bristol ROUTES service works with 8 to 18-year-olds at high risk of being involved in criminal activity, including county lines. We have an independent guardianship service in Northern Ireland and at the National Counter-Trafficking Service, I run the Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship Service. We work to support children who have been trafficked in over 2,000 local authority areas in England and Wales. We have expanded and extended over the last eight years, commissioned by the Home Office.

Speaking to what everybody else on the panel has said about scale, it is a massive problem. In the last three months, for example, 300 children were referred to our ICTG service with criminal exploitation as the primary type of exploitation and that was across two-thirds of local authority areas in England and Wales. I will probably talk a lot more about scale, but what I have said is just about children who have been identified or recognised. The problem of scale is much deeper.

Speaking to what Johnny Bolderson said about vulnerability—and I am sure we will talk more about this later—it is changing all the time with children who are being criminally exploited. We see much younger children being exploited through what we know from the media and our awareness-raising as charities. We also see that the modus operandi of exploiters and traffickers is changing, targeting children from more affluent families, and we are looking at those aspects. I would like to draw your attention to that when we are looking at vulnerability, that every child can be criminally exploited and we see that as traffickers are moving on their business.

**Q3 Chair:** From what you are all saying, the scale of the challenge is daunting. Is the growth in this area and resources focused on it—you have mentioned the tip of the iceberg—partly due to the recognition of issues that may have been going on for much longer, but have not been visible? Is it that the issues have become more widespread or is it both? Can you draw any conclusions about that?



**Rebecca Griffiths:** It is both, for sure. Police officers or social workers say that this model of trafficking and exploiting young people to sell and transport drugs is something that they have been seeing for a long time, more than 10 years. However, as awareness has been raised over the last five to 10 years, certainly the issue has been identified. It is a very difficult situation to identify. Young people very rarely disclose what is going on and don't see themselves as victims of this kind of exploitation. It relies on professionals understanding the signs and parents and carers understanding that this could be going on in order to identify it and get some support for a young person, so raising awareness is certainly important. However, even about four or five years ago, almost every police force recognised that it was an issue in their area. We now know that it is an issue very much right across the country, in every city, town or village.

**Chair:** Rebecca, you mentioned your service in Northern Ireland. I have been taking part in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry into tackling paramilitarism and the read-across is enormous. One of the things that has struck us is that a lot of what goes on under a paramilitary banner in Northern Ireland would be defined as county lines elsewhere in the country, with just the same level of criminality, organised crime and exploitation. One of the things we are looking at is some of the language around grooming, child protection and safeguarding and how it should be more appropriately used in that context. There is certainly some read-across to this inquiry in that respect.

I will bring Flick Drummond in now because we have a lot to get through. I will come back later.

Q4 **Mrs Drummond:** You have touched on this already a little bit, but Home Office guidance suggests that there are 10 risk factors that might heighten a young person's vulnerability. Among so many different risk factors, should we be focusing on something in particular to stop young people from falling into exploitation?

**Johnny Bolderson:** That is a big question. We run a support and rescue service for which we are lucky that the Home Office has funded us for three years. The service gives us a chance to work with a young person. If they come in at the age of 14, we could work with that person until they are 17. That is a huge amount of work that can have an impact.

To identify the main indicator of being exploited, potentially it is missing periods, if they are missing from home or excluded from school. I know we are talking about that today. Exclusion is extremely worrying because the young person has lost every relationship, positive or negative, in their lives and they are isolated. I think we have serious issues around social media. Grooming around online gaming needs to be focused on. Online gaming now accesses everything—direct chats, the giving of gifts, everything. Speaking for myself, I would look at the missing periods as one of the main factors.



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**Mrs Drummond:** That is very interesting because we are talking about a register of home-schooled children but really it is a register of excluded children and home-schooled children because many of them disappear from view. Presumably a register would be very helpful because organisations could then track them.

**Susannah Drury:** I agree with the point about missing. Our SafeCall service is focused on young people caught up in county lines and 95% of them had been missing more than once. Missing is that really important sign right across the board and it needs to be looked at very carefully. It might be very short periods during the school day, as you allude to, missing from education, as well as home-schooled or excluded. One of the challenges we often see is that is regarded as truanting, not missing, not as a risk for county lines. That is something for schools and the police to think a bit differently about. Police forces will often not register a child as missing if it is during school hours and will suggest that that is more likely to be truanting.

That is a huge risk and it is one of the reasons why we would say return home interviews, which are outlined in the DfE's statutory guidance, are so important. A return home interview should happen for every child after every missing episode. It is a window of opportunity to find out what is going on for the child, why they went missing, what happened while they were away and maybe what support they need to stop them from going missing again. If that is done after the first, second and third time a child goes missing, it can be the moment of intervention to get involved before they become entrenched in county lines exploitation.

Q5 **Mrs Drummond:** You say return home interviews: does that mean at home or school or what?

**Susannah Drury:** It can be in any place. It should be at a place the child feels safe and able to be open and talk about what is going on for them. We provide a return home interview service in one area of the country and we will try to make where it happens be the child's choice. The idea is that they have a conversation with a trained professional who can spot the signs of various things that might be going on and work with the child to get them to open up about what is going on for them. That should facilitate access to other support services and specialist help, whether that is safeguarding or perhaps help around mental health, all sorts of different services, such as Catch22. It is a vital intervention. It is so vital that it should happen for every child after every missing episode. There is no threshold to get a return home interview and that is important.

Q6 **Chair:** You mentioned that you were doing it in one place in the country. Who is doing it elsewhere?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** We all do it.

**Iryna Jones:** It is also provided by local authorities. It is not always the voluntary sector that provides it; it might be an in-house service. I completely agree that missing is one of the important indicators. A return



home interview is not a solution to missing, but an opportunity to speak to a child, identify what is happening in their lives and also identify individuals who may be targeting children. If the return home interview is done together with good information sharing in multi-agency contexts, that is when the response will be effective.

In recent years, particularly since Covid, we have been concerned about online grooming in criminal exploitation. We have seen more and more instances of children being approached online to take part in what is sold to them as a business opportunity. Children have been exposed to people selling drugs online and to gang-related content, but some matters of coercion and control also involve social media, where children may be threatened. That is also an important emerging area of how grooming for criminal exploitation is happening.

**Q7 Mrs Drummond:** Is enough being done to protect children in care in that case? I would assume that the authorities are looking after them, but is that working well enough, the return home interviews?

**Johnny Bolderson:** We pick up the young person in that real teachable and reachable moment, hopefully. We return them back to either their safe accommodation or home, but if it is a care situation, when we have dropped them off—we can drop them off and leave them, obviously in safety—unfortunately they will or may run away and it is very difficult. We are possibly putting them in an area where they do not know anyone, the young person is not comfortable in that area, they do not have a relationship or bond with the carer and are likely to run away. That is a difficult thing.

The part that is us doing our safeguarding is fantastic, but it can also potentially open up different branches of risk. We could pick up a young person, take them home and think we have done our job. However, they are still very vulnerable because they have lost a lot of money in a drug debt or something like that and they do not want to stay where they are and because it is more relaxed in care, they just leave. They do not have emotional connectivity to that safe place. As we know, safety is in the mind as well about where a person is.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** It depends on the other professionals around the child too. We work with a lot of professionals who don't know that child has been trafficked or what a national referral mechanism is. This will speak to your first question about key risks. Often that will be because, "This is the bible of how we look at the exploitation of children criminally" and there is a lot of emerging criminal exploitation. It is a business, trafficking is a business and it changes all the time. In our service, we worry that when you have key risk indicators, that is what people will go to and use it as a tick box rather than looking at the case with professional curiosity. A lot of the awareness-raising that we and the panel will be doing is the very simple stuff around the legislation that professionals can use, what appropriate accommodation the child should





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have and what safety plans should be around that child. Unless those things are in place, exploitation will continue.

Another aspect is that of the trusted adult. Who is the consistent person in the child's life? Johnny Bolderson will speak to this. Often when you drop a child off, they will not have that consistency and the most consistent person in the child's life is the trafficker.

**Q8 Mrs Drummond:** That was going to be the subject of my next question. Children can fall between gaps because not all organisations know everything and they are not passed on properly. Is that a fact or are co-ordinating responses getting better?

**Iryna Jones:** We have particular concerns. It may be getting better for some young people and I think more professionals are more aware, but there are still persistent gaps in some areas.

In 2019 an APPG inquired into children and looked-after children missing from out-of-area placements and identified that as a particular area of concern for many professionals and police forces that responded to the inquiry. If gaps are happening where the child is, where different agencies are still communicating in their structures, when the child is moved to a different area very often information does not move with them and they do not always have access to a return home interview because of the distance and depending on where they are.

Even if they have access to a return home interview, that information is not always shared back with the area where they are placed. Very often the young people do not get access to the support that they would have in their own local authority to help them deal with some of their issues and reduce their vulnerability. Take mental health support, for example, when they move out of their areas, they go down on waiting lists. That is a particular gap.

The APPG inquiry also showed that when a lot of young people are placed out of area, it is not just in children's homes—regulated accommodation—but also in unregulated accommodation, where all of their issues are on a much greater scale because of how they are included in the multi-agency sector.

**Q9 Nick Fletcher:** The online issue that you were talking about, do you think a complete ban on mobile phones in schools would help? What control do carers have over children in care homes? I am a dad and I used to see what was on my children's phones. What happens in care homes? I know that if you did ban phones in school, children could switch their phones on before they go to school and when they come out of school, but would it not take at least 25, maybe 30 hours a week away where they were not contactable? My concern is that once a child ends up in this world, it is very difficult for them to come out. What do you think about that as a way of reducing the risk of them getting into it in the first place?





**Johnny Bolderson:** That is exactly it. I think the pandemic pushed young people and vulnerable people to online gaming. Think about it, they had nearly two years focusing on what to do so they went to online gaming, exactly where exploiters and groomers want those people to be. It was the only way they could get hold of them directly. Online gaming and social media are perfect for groomers and I think the pandemic pushed our young people into it even more, which of course has increased the problem. Not allowing phones in school would be ideal, but I don't think it would stop the problem. I think the pressure young people would get from the exploiters to make sure they do have their phones on them might even increase the pressure on their families to make sure they still have their phones.

To stop it initially would be ideal, but you have to understand the relationship that a person who is exploited has with their groomer or exploiter. They are looking at them as someone who is almost looking out for their welfare, almost giving them everything they have ever dreamed of, making them part of a family or a team and every need is being met by these exploiters and gangs. That could be what is missing from home and school so it is very difficult, but social media and online gaming are the foundation of county lines recruitment. It is very difficult. I don't think I have answered your question, sorry.

**Susannah Drury:** If school is proving to be a barrier for exploiters—we have worked with young people whose exploiter is there at the school gate, in a car and ready to take them away—whether or not the children have their phones is one thing, but we know that exploiters can create situations that make sure that young person gets excluded so they are away from the safety net of school. They will groom them to behave in a certain way at school. That young person may be dealing with lots of trauma and are often very angry and a situation that can lead to exclusion can happen, to some extent pushed and controlled by the exploiter. As Rebecca Griffiths said, it is such a fluid business model. If something is a blocker, the exploiters will work out a way around it.

**Nick Fletcher:** Would banning phones in schools help or not?

**Susannah Drury:** I don't know. I think the exploiters have such control of those children, I am not sure that they would not find a way around it. I am not sure about that.

**Johnny Bolderson:** There needs to be more focus on social media and online gaming platforms. I think they need to take more responsibility for how easily exploiters can make contact with vulnerable people.

Q10 **Chair:** The law is being changed through the Online Safety Bill to increase the sanction on companies that assist with child exploitation. It is a case of making sure that that delivers some results and that there are some high-profile prosecutions for child criminal exploitation. We hear a lot in this space about the concern and the moral hazard around the threat to children, but we do not see many cases of people being brought



to justice. That is part of the pernicious nature of this challenge, isn't it? Being able to show that there is some real progress in bringing the people to justice would make a big difference.

**Johnny Bolderson:** I have seen an advert on Snapchat and Instagram for young people to get involved in county lines. The advert looked like it was professionally done, like a music video. It looked like something that you would see on TV every day. If I was a young person who was struggling economically, along with my family, my family was stressed, and I was seeing this advert that looks professionally done, I would almost think, "This must be legal because it looks so good. It must be". At the end it says "recruitment opportunities available". It is very professional. A young person seeing something like that and seeing their mum and dad struggling for money could think, "Actually, I can help out, guys".

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Yes, we have seen that a lot and it has grown in the last six months since Covid, that professional advertising. Children think they are going to help their families out and they want to when they see them struggling. It is highly problematic.

Q11 **Miriam Cates:** I want to move on to the experience of women and girls and how that might differ from how boys are treated and recruited. Is enough attention being paid to what is happening to girls and county lines? How does girls' experience differ from that of boys?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** The experience of boys and girls in our service is very gendered—we work predominantly with males—80% to 20% male to female. What I want to put forward about this is that we see a lot of biases in the identification of girls. Professionals will tend to identify girls as being in sexual exploitation and boys as being involved in criminal exploitation, but what we see is that there are multiple types of exploitation. Criminal exploitation is not often picked up in girls and vice versa, sexual exploitation of boys is not picked up.

The systems that we use to identify make it very difficult. A lot of the systems, whether social care or police, look at primary exploitation type and do not look at the layering of exploitation that is happening and the complexity that a child is facing in that regard, whether they are male or female. Also we are seeing boys being identified, where they may have been involved in some form of sexual exploitation, as part of their exploitation of other women and girls. There is a lot of complexity. It is not easy to say that it is compartmentalised.

Another thing I want to push forward is the vulnerability of plugging and spooning and holding drugs in bras, which for females is a big thing. Girls and boys are being strip-searched in police cells and a lot of media attention has been given to that recently. It is not done under a safeguarding model but under a law enforcement model and it is very traumatic for children and reinforces trauma that they have already experienced.



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**Miriam Cates:** It is not treating them as children. It is treating them as criminal adults.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Absolutely.

**Johnny Bolderson:** I totally agree. It is less gendered than previously assumed by professionals. I can add something to what Rebecca said. There is such a thing as a boyfriend offence where the girlfriend can take debt off somebody who she is a girlfriend to. Say the boyfriend has a £2,000 debt. There is a way that can almost bring that girlfriend into the debt and they can be brought in that way through relationships. They are targeted to carry another debt for their boyfriend, which can impact their families and peers. It is very difficult to get an understanding of the experience of a female in a county line because it can fall under CSE, it can fall under different things, so the identification around it is very difficult to get. I would say that it is less gendered than it ever has been. Young people are being whoever they want to be in gender, which is fantastic, but it is going to be anything goes when we go forward from now. We are going to have male, female, transgender, LGBTQ+. It could be anything, yes.

Q12 **Miriam Cates:** How would you describe the different profile of girls who are likely to be preyed upon? Is it similar to that of males in terms of poverty, exclusion from school, family breakdown, those kinds of things? Is it essentially the same kind of profile for the girls and boys who are being picked off?

**Susannah Drury:** To some extent, yes. Slightly different from Rebecca Griffiths' organisation, we are seeing 40% young women and 60% young men and the female proportion has been growing. There are some similar things. We are definitely seeing that boyfriend model. Often a young woman might have an older boyfriend who draws her in, who is her groomer, in fact, as well as bringing her into the drug debt. They might be someone who is higher up. In our experience, there is usually sexual exploitation with young women as well as criminal exploitation, but we have also seen a couple of cases where a young woman is involved in paying off the drug debt of a family member. They might be brought in to pay off a parent's drug debt, for example.

For me, the most important thing is to look at that person. There will be lots of intercepting things going on for that young person in terms of their home environment, adverse childhood experiences and mental health issues or they might be drawn into drug misuse and that is how they are drawn into the exploitation. Care has been mentioned. I think the most important thing is to take a person-centred, trauma-informed approach, which is more than nice words. It is about looking at a person and the whole context around them, recognising that all young people are at risk of this kind of exploitation because of the methods of recruitment, as Johnny Bolderson says. All our young people are on social media and they are all at risk. There is a targeted approach, but there is also that



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kind of more open recruitment approach. Focusing too much on specific risk factors could mean missing some young people.

**Q13 Andrew Lewer:** If you have limited resources, you have to decide whether you go broad or narrow. Do you decide to focus on risk groups or do you just say that everybody is at risk?

**Susannah Drury:** The majority are still young people who we would see as having several risk factors in their lives, but we must not be blind to the fact that all young people are at risk. I would go for the targeted approach for sure, but stay open to the fact that, as we have discussed, young people from more affluent families are at risk, including younger children of 10 plus or so as well teenagers.

**Iryna Jones:** It is also important to acknowledge that our services operate in the context of years of cuts to early intervention services. Funding for early intervention services decreased by £1.9 billion according to the research that we published last year, while at the same time spending on late intervention increased. When we were doing our research, lots of practitioners were saying that it is much more difficult to intervene and provide support to a young person once they are trapped in cycles of exploitation. It is much more difficult to get them away from that situation and also to keep them safe from those who are targeting them. It is much more effective to intervene early, but a lot of early intervention services and youth services disappeared from communities, which also coincides with an increase in the use of violence.

Those early signs when the child is groomed are often described through stages of a young person being targeted, being tested, maybe being asked to do some small things for people who are going to exploit them and then being trapped. What professionals need is to have interventions at all these different stages. The more successful they are at the stage of a young person being targeted, the fewer young people will end up being trapped in exploitation and the conversation will be very different.

Can I also add to the point about girls, but in general too? The way the systems work now, we either see a young person as a victim or as a perpetrator and offender and that is true in cases of both boys and girls being exploited in county lines. We have seen that once a young person is identified, for example, drugs are found in a girl's accommodation, the boyfriend side and potential sexual exploitation may be overlooked altogether because she may be seen as an offender. That is another element in the system that is preventing a good response to young people who are exploited. I think we should start seeing the complexity, being child-centred and seeing the situation as experienced by young people.

**Q14 Miriam Cates:** Following on from that and talking about different risk factors that make children more open to being groomed and targeted, how much is family breakdown an issue now? We have the highest rate of family breakdown in the OECD now and 44% of children have



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experienced it. That is a lot of kids who are not living with biological mums and dads and have experienced the trauma of that break-up. How much is that a factor in children being at risk?

**Johnny Bolderson:** It is high. I think it is 1 million families that are vulnerable because of that breakdown. If I can put it in a practical way to help you understand it, if you are a young person coming home to your mum and dad arguing or there are substance misuse issues, things like that, you will turn to your phone; you will turn to social media; you will turn to online gaming. You will turn to anyone else who will make you part of something like family, an OCG, a criminalised gang that will be a family to you, you are getting paid for it and you have everything you want. Those young people don't even have to leave the house to be groomed. It could be through online gaming, but they could have packages of mobile phones delivered to their house or weapons put through their letterboxes to hold and drop out of their window at another time. They do not even have to leave their houses.

Family breakdown is huge because it makes young people extremely vulnerable. They will sometimes go missing and the parents may not even notice they have gone missing if they are focusing on their breakdown side of things instead of what is happening for their young person.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** The cost of living crisis must bring pressure too. We are seeing an emerging trend where children being targeted are from families of professionals who might be out on shift work—police, nurses—and traffickers will do anything to make sure that their business is going well and they will look for the vulnerability. We are getting children whose families are not around because they are working, trying to make ends meet, and where there is vulnerability around not having money, children are wanting to provide for their family and that kind of route in for traffickers is becoming more of an issue.

Q15 **Andrew Lewer:** You have already spoken about girlfriend debt and parent debt. Could you explain a bit more broadly this debt bondage effect, its prevalence and how important that is within the overall tragedy of county lines?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** It is a massive problem. Debt bondage has been there within the trafficking models from the beginning as part of how traffickers are enticing and coercing children into different activities. We are seeing debt bondage with smaller numbers and not necessarily just money. That goes to what we were talking about in terms of risk factors; it is not just money. I will give you an example. This week we had a referral of an eight year-old who had been enticed by magazines and sweets. What happens in debt bondage in any form, whether it be money or gifts, the child thinks, "They are giving me stuff" and there comes a point where that debt has to be paid off.



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Another child referred this week was given Subway for lunch. They could not afford lunch and were given Subway and then told they had to repay the debt. That is how it starts, with the smallest numbers. In Barnardo's, we think we are getting younger children who are being enticed in with things that they don't have because of the cost of living crisis. It is a massive problem that goes again to a changing and emerging type of exploitation. We are seeing e-cigarettes and Prime drinks and we think that kind of thing might become more of a problem, where children are wanting stuff and traffickers are using that to reel them in.

**Johnny Bolderson:** It is a matter of understanding that it is a business model and it has so many factors to it. It is a matter of understanding the currency of debt bondage. A young person can get a bike that they have always wanted, someone will give them one and then have that bike stolen. They will say, "We have just given you a bike and you've lost it. You now owe us for that bike and now you are going to do this as well". It is a matter of understanding the currency of debt bondage for that young person.

We talk about the boyfriend model. If the boyfriend had the initial debt, it is bringing the girlfriend in in some way where they both have to deal drugs. What the gang will do is use the authorities, ring them up and say, "There is someone dealing drugs down there. Can you go and arrest them?" The police will arrest them—the boyfriend and the girlfriend—and now the girlfriend has lost the drugs and the debt is imposed on the girl as well, then of course it goes on and on. There is so much. The main problem is debt bondage. How to solve it is a massive dilemma. The young people cannot just pay it off. The exploiters are not banks. They can create whatever debt they want and they can put whatever sanctions they like on that debt, whatever interest they want on it, and it is very difficult.

Understanding the currency and the role it plays in exploiting a young person and how it can impact their family is massive. If we do a rescue on a young person and they possibly lose maybe £20,000 worth of drugs to the authorities and we take that young person home, they are at massive risk. They have just lost a large amount of drugs to an OCG, a criminalised gang. What are we going to do? That is huge. It is going to go to their family, to their pets, to everything. It will impact the whole family. Debt bondage is very scary.

**Susannah Drury:** I agree. It quickly becomes an issue for the whole family. We have a lot of parents come to us and say, "What on earth do we do about this?" They are desperate to help their child to escape so they are saying, "Shall we just pay this off?" As Johnny Bolderson was saying, there is almost no point because that will just alert the exploiters that there is potential to get more money from that family. They need to keep that young person in debt in order to keep them under their control and coercion. It is very difficult to know what the best way out is. We have had calls from parents who are just terrified in their own homes





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because they have been contacted by the exploiter saying, "Your family owes us money and we are coming around to get it. I know where you live and I have keys". How terrifying is that?

This is very serious stuff and it does not feel as if we have quite the right way through it because of course if the police find a young person with drugs on them or large amounts of money, what choice do they have?

**Q16 Chair:** Do the police have the powers that they need to go after the people behind that, if they come across a situation like that, rather than just the person at the end of the chain?

**Susannah Drury:** There are quite a lot of different powers that the police have. There are a range of them that are already being used. There is a recent case in North Wales of a young person who was 14 who arrived in the area not having any connections, exploited into the area through county lines, who was found by the police and did not want to disclose anything. The police used their phone to track back and gathered lots of intelligence on who was behind this exploitation of this young person. Through very impressive police work and links with other agencies, they managed to secure prosecutions against the 10 people exploiting.

Some of that was custodial sentences, but some of it was some of the orders that they can use around modern slavery to say that if that adult gets involved again, there is immediately another custodial sentence of five years, for example. There are quite a lot of different opportunities, legislation and different orders that the police can use.

**Chair:** It requires the police to recognise the nature of the case when they first come across it and then to long term enforce it, yes.

**Susannah Drury:** Yes, through modern slavery legislation.

**Q17 Nick Fletcher:** How many successes are there of getting kids out of this once they have fallen into it? To me, it seems like it is extremely difficult for them to break free from this, going back to Miriam's point. I am a big believer in dads. If Dad has gone, it is left to Mum and Mum is working and there is an awful lot going off there. Have you seen success stories and what did that look like?

**Susannah Drury:** Yes, and I think some of the success that we have seen comes from parents being supported and appreciated as part of the safeguarding response. That is a very important element of that. Parents are desperate to do whatever they can to help their young person and agencies involving them more effectively, because they have so much information and intelligence to share. Right from the moment of that young person being reported missing by their parent, their concerns being taken seriously by different agencies.

It can be a very stigmatising experience for a parent or carer. To some extent they can often feel blamed for their young person getting involved





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in this, when we can all see the incredibly complicated and entrepreneurial kinds of tactics to get young people involved. It can be very hard to resist. I think it is seeing parents and carers as a very important part of the solution and that they are listened to. They know their young person and what might help most. Sometimes what we have seen can be helpful is for that family to be supported to move. That is not always the best answer, but it can be an answer. It can be incredibly disruptive of course for the rest of the family—moving schools, moving home, parents having to move jobs—but sometimes that can be a useful tactic to use.

**Iryna Pona:** I also think that long-term support for a young person plays a very important role in cases where there is success. Very often at the beginning of working with young person they don't recognise themselves as being exploited, because it is part of their grooming and coercion that they are made to believe that they are making a free choice. Obviously they cannot just walk away from the situation, so the choice is not free.

That long-term journey, where someone is there with a non-judgmental approach, who understands the impact of trauma on a child's behaviour and is also able to advocate for a young person, whether it is in the situation where a young person comes into contact with the police or law enforcement or whether it is access to education, a lot of these young people will be excluded from school. They won't be in education, employment and training, so it is helping them to develop alternatives that they will be excited about, that they will see themselves in. Whether it is getting a particular profession, business opportunity and so on, I think that is a big part of success. It helps when the perpetrators are taken out of the picture, of course. A successful law enforcement action against a perpetrator is very important when we talk about any type of exploitation.

Just to add to the question before about vulnerability and debt bondage, we also see quite a lot of young people developing different addictions as a result of grooming. Debt bondage may be the result of them being given drugs and alcohol. Vaping is a way of grooming young people. They may be then asked to repay that debt by doing not just county lines—county lines is just one form—but shoplifting, stealing cars and other things.

As a result of that, young people can be involved in all different types of criminal exploitation. I think that is important to acknowledge, to be able to identify and to take action against those people who are grooming young people, particularly through the use of alcohol and drugs. Probably for early disruption there is not enough being done by police and safeguarding agencies. Disruption usually comes when crime is committed and exploitation is deeply present in a child's life.

**Susannah Drury:** Just to add to that trusted adult model, I think we would all agree with that and we all have services in our own



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organisations that provide that. We provide one in a local area and the main target is young people who have frequently been missing, but more than 90% of those are also at no risk or have already been involved in criminal exploitation. That kind of tenacious, persevering approach matters because these young people have been groomed to not trust professionals, so it takes a lot of work to build up that rapport. It takes a lot of time. By being that constant presence for them, by advocating, supporting, making things happen, opening doors, getting them other support, but getting them to see a more positive future and alternatives, our service has seen some incredible impacts.

For us, 80% of the young people we have supported have reduced or stopped going missing completely, which is obviously a sign of much reduced exploitation. A large majority have also seen real progress in terms of their safety, in terms of self-defined, "What would being safe look like?" and their wellbeing in terms of having better relationships perhaps with their family or having better mental health, having been able to access some important support to deal with some of the trauma that they have experienced. It does work, but the challenge of course is when budgets are stretched, it is long-term work that can be quite expensive, but it is one of the most important ways to help young people who are entrenched to be able to escape and feel like they are on a different path.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** I completely agree with that. Our services provide that consistency and that trusted adult, as all our services do. The point of change for children, often when we ask them, "When did that change for you?" it is, "It was when somebody believed me and their actions believed me as well". It is that movement forward, as Susannah was saying, that shift of the balance of it being towards the trafficker, the exploiter, the groomer, to the trusted individual that is walking that walk with the child is so important.

The youth services of quite a few years ago and the budget cuts, we would be pushing for more of those youth services or the localised organisations, grassroots organisations that are doing that one-to-one support to get that longer-term funding, because they are doing incredible work in regards to building that trust in a relationship with a young person.

Going back to the original question around debt bondage, I think we need to start earlier as well in terms of the education of children around debt bondage. We need to start at primary school looking at money, what a debt bondage is and all of those things in an age-appropriate way. We need to make it part of our educational culture to understand that, so children have the ability to recognise it because I think that is where a lot of the exploiters are using that vulnerability, the naivety of children to draw them in. If we had a bit more of that tenacity right at the beginning of an education, down the line we will see a lot less children being identified—



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Q18 **Chair:** What form would you see that taking though in terms of something that is age appropriate for primary school children? Is it more basic financial education or is it specifically along the lines of what we used to have when I was a child, things like the stranger danger campaign and so on? Are there things like that that you think children should be taught about, the ways of which—

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Yes, that is exactly what I was thinking about, that stranger danger. I have a five-year-old and it is ingrained from the beginning. As he goes to school, stranger danger is there. Could we put something more in around that culture, particularly as this an epidemic in terms of criminal exploitation of children? What could we do that is age appropriate to teach our children, but build on that over time?

**Johnny Bolderson:** I think, as we all say, we have to see it through the eyes of the child who is being groomed. They have possibly worked with a gang for a certain amount of time, they have everything they wanted. All of a sudden they are in a police raid. The police barge through the door and take them to a police cell. They may be very polite to them, but the child has just seen someone come into their house, storm in and take them away. They are not going to open up to them and say, "This is who I am working for. This is what I am doing". They are seeing them as the enemy, unfortunately.

We are seeing in young people who are victims of exploitation that they will have the voice of a criminal but they will have the heart of a victim. I think that is what we are talking about. We need that time to work with that young person to reach these soft milestones of being able to understand their background, why they have been exploited, how they have been exploited, the understanding of their role in a county line, understanding that they are the ones taking all the risk while somebody else is sat there taking all the money. It is understanding that they are being groomed, they are a victim of exploitation and then getting an exit plan for them. We have to focus on the eyes and the voice of the child.

Q19 **Andrew Lewer:** The references you are making there to people being exploited is quite important. It builds on from this debt bondage, a major element within all of this, to the sort of pyramid scheme of exploited and exploiters here. I am interested in how you deal with the so-called alpha victims. That is where someone is exploiting other young people, but may have someone putting pressure on them as well. I know we will all say that is terrible and they are victims as well and we need to help them and so on, but where are the lines to be drawn in terms of tackling and punishing people who are exploiting other young people, even if they themselves are being exploited?

**Johnny Bolderson:** That is a tricky one, because it is like a career now for these people who are coming in. Unfortunately, they will have been exploited and groomed at 15, maybe even younger. We have seen drug buyers at seven now who are involved in these gangs. It is getting younger and younger and younger. They start at 15 or 16. They have had



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pressure put on. They know how the system works. You will then see 30 year-olds who are, like you said, now at the top of the pyramid who have done all this stuff, but they are still in some complex way a victim because they were exploited at an earlier stage in their life.

We almost need some sort of system where specialised navigators are sat in these areas, schools, A&E and police stations, anywhere where they are specialised and on call. They can be there when the young person identifies an issue or is picked up in a certain situation, but they are specialised around that.

**Susannah Drury:** Yes, I think one of the things that we see in our service is siblings being at risk from being pulled in by a sibling who is being exploited. They are being put under pressure, coerced, forced to do this under threat or experience of violence. In line with what Johnny was saying, it is almost that we need to see all these young people as victims who are sometimes offending, so victim first and look at the other stuff around it as part of that exploitation. It is a very challenging thing.

One of the things that we often hear from police forces is that if you only ever treat young people as victims it perpetuates the model, because it makes it much easier for the exploiters to get the young person back out of police custody or whatever and continue exploiting them. Therefore it is a very challenging area, but you have to realise the level of violence and coercion that happens to these young people. You cannot imagine that they are making an informed consent or choice to do this, even if it is bringing in peers to also be exploited. They are being forced to do that.

**Andrew Lewer:** They are themselves sometimes being violent to other young people to order.

Q20 **Miriam Cates:** At the moment, what is a kind of common sentence for let's say an 18 year-old who is arrested and charged for a first offence? What is generally the sentence given?

**Johnny Bolderson:** It depends on a lot of factors. If it is their first, it could be a year. It depends on what drug they were found with, if it is class As, if they were willing to co-operate with authorities, what the situation was when they found them. Were they found as part of a police raid? Were they found in a trap house? Were they found cuckooing? It depends. What Susannah was saying was exactly that: we need to look at how we prosecute the people who are doing this higher up. Their sentences should be around child abuse. Maybe we should be looking at that.

Q21 **Chair:** Is that being used?

**Johnny Bolderson:** I recently saw a case in North Wales where the gang boss was charged with child abuse and modern slavery. No doubt that criminal was absolutely devastated and could not believe that was the reason he was getting charged. Would that put people off? It should be happening anyway. It should have happened a long time ago because it



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is child abuse and modern slavery because they are putting these shackles on these young people in these county lines.

**Q22 Miriam Cates:** But much stricter sentences for the people at the top along those lines, so adding drugs, violence but also child abuse and modern slavery could potentially be a deterrent or at least keep some of these people behind bars?

**Johnny Bolderson:** Yes, and I think they are complex victims, but there is that point where, "You have had plenty of opportunities and perhaps support at some time in your life to make a different choice. You have had agencies support you but now you have decided not to do that and you are at the top of the game, 34 years old. You have sanctioned all these hits and stuff like that". That is the point where you have to get that person, "Right, child abuse, modern day slavery", bang.

**Iryna Pona:** It is also important to acknowledge that they need therapeutic support if they are victims, even if they are offenders. Something like violence may already be normalised in their life and they have probably witnessed so many violent situations that have impacted on them. Very often they do not get that support, so it is very difficult for them in the long term to deal with what they experience. Similar to how we provide to support to other victims, I think those who have experienced criminal exploitation should be provided with therapeutic support. The trauma they have experienced should be recognised.

**Q23 Andrew Lewer:** We have talked about schools already and you are talking about stranger danger and financial education and so on. How effectively do you think teachers are able to spot and prevent this and what support do teachers need? What resources do schools and teachers need and what do any of you provide in terms of guidance and help to schools or feel should be available to schools to do that?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Schools obviously play a very key role in identifying children as victims, particularly when you are looking at earlier intervention as well, where the indicators might be there that a child is getting into criminal exploitation. We have all done toolkits. We have worked together, collaborated on toolkits and raising awareness. Those are available to schools.

However, I think it goes to the capacity and ability of teachers. What happens for a teacher when they do spot an indicator? What do they do at that point? Thresholds in terms of child social care and just that integration of a multi-agency support for that child, that is where we see things falling down. It is the information sharing; it is the support that teachers can get. Where do teachers go to get support and how does that all play out? It is a real problem. We find in our services that teachers are not part of strategy meetings with children. They are not part of looking at what the support packages should be in place for children.



There is a lot more that can be done, but it should not all be put on the teachers to recognise that. It needs something additional. It needs what Johnny was talking about, navigators or specialists who are assigned to schools who can help with those things, to catalyse some of those conversations that are needed.

Q24 **Andrew Lewer:** Do you do that as a charity?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** We can do that. We provide some guidance but we need a referral from the national referral mechanism. We are currently working very hard with social care, criminal justice and immigration. We do not work with education directly, but education are not first responders to the national referral mechanism. If they spot it they are looking at a referral to a first responder, so you have layers of referrals that are needed once a teacher has maybe spotted something that doesn't seem quite right.

That is the thing with indicators and it goes back to key risks. It might be something that just doesn't feel right and they are trying to understand what the context is for that child. Also you have primary, where you have eyes on a child in a class, but once you get to secondary school you are moving around classes, so how does one teacher pick that up? Are they talking? Where is that specialist support for those teachers if they do see something there?

**Johnny Bolderson:** If you think about it, the teachers are the only statutory agency that has contact with almost every child in some way. The curriculum is very heavy. They are under a lot of pressure already. It is a catch-22. We have created a resource, which is to support teachers with understanding county lines exploitation, so we are delivering a package—hopefully soon—that will offer that support around understanding exploitation and grooming.

We have been contacted by lecturers from universities and secondary schools, reaching out to us and asking, "Can you come and talk to us, please, about county lines and what the indicators are?" so there is a clear need for some knowledge-building there. I think we need to understand that the teachers are under pressure and they probably have all the contact with that child at all points.

Q25 **Mrs Drummond:** A lot of schools finish at 2.30, so you have a huge number particularly of parents who are working. Would it help to have an extended school day?

**Susannah Drury:** Yes, school is often a very safe place for young people and a very important safe place. If there are opportunities to stay and get involved in positive activities that could help. It is unlikely to help the young people who are already being exploited and entrenched in it.

Just leading on from what Johnny and Rebecca were saying, we do safety planning, confidential support to a staff member from school or perhaps a college where they are worried about someone. We will bring in that





county lines expertise and get them to think around where they need to share that information, what they can do to ensure that child can stay safe because often the school, the college is the safe place for that young person to be where there is that positive supervision of them, so I think it can be a very good thing.

Linked to that, one of the issues that we will probably come on to is exclusion. One of the challenges with a young person who is excluded is going to alternative provision, which can often feel quite unsafe, fewer hours, so less supervision again. One of the proposals that might well work better for those young people is if alternative provision was connected to a school, so that there is that continuity in terms of the staff that they know and who know them and still being involved in their life, so they don't feel as though they are being rejected and thrown out, never to be seen again. They are still part of the overall school, but kept separate for whatever reason, if that is needed to be done.

**Chair:** Effectively you are talking about schools having their own alternative provision units attached rather than—

Q26 **Mrs Drummond:** Some alternative provision is extremely good and it is turning children's lives around because they are not getting on at school, so it would depend, wouldn't it?

**Susannah Drury:** Yes, there is not one size fits all, for sure.

**Iryna Pona:** I think it is very important for schools to be supported by social care and police and maybe the voluntary sectors and others working in that area when we are talking about criminal exploitation. What schools will notice is a change in a child's behaviour maybe. Then you have behaviour management policies and responses that may sometimes end up in suspension or exclusion of the young person, while the actual picture in the child's life might be much more complex. They often do not have that information, so there should be something like an expectation when they are thinking about suspension or exclusion to involve young social workers into assessment of need.

There is also a contextual safeguarding issue. We know that education is not a statutory partner in local safeguarding partnerships and very often they would not have the necessary information about all the contextual safeguarding issues. They will not have information about individuals posing a risk to children or particular areas being targeted and so on. It is much more difficult to them to think about the role they can play in safeguarding or maybe even sharing some of that infrastructure. That is another aspect that needs to be addressed. The prevention programme that works with police and other agencies locally to identify where things are not working and develop solutions, they have identified that as one of the gaps in some areas that needs to be addressed.

**Mrs Drummond:** It is quite shocking that schools are not part of the whole safeguarding thing.





Q27 **Kim Johnson:** I was just going to pick up on that point because teachers are there to teach and we know that throughout the pandemic they have taken on a myriad of different roles. I want to ask the panel whether you think it was unacceptable to expect teachers to take on these extra burdens without the extra support being available within communities to support these children who are being exploited.

**Susannah Drury:** I am married to a teacher so I have a very particular view on it. I asked him, "What information and what training have you had?" His view was he has had enough training and information to know what the risk factors are, what the signs are and what to be worried about and then to pass that on to someone. I have no doubt that safeguarding is such a big part of teachers' roles now that it is a challenging thing. As you say, teachers are there to teach, but it comes back to that point that Johnny made: they are the professionals that see all of our young people every day, but it is bringing that support in. They might identify something, but then it is being taken off their hands as an issue to be dealt with. I think that is where the gap is. Teachers are a very important front-line service of identifying it, but it is making sure that there is resource that enables the teacher to focus on their main role.

Q28 **Kim Johnson:** I want to pick up on the teacher training role, given that child exploitation is a growing issue at this moment in time. Johnny, you mentioned about working in particular areas, so I want to know whether you are working in any universities with teacher training to look at these issues at a very early stage.

**Johnny Bolderson:** We have been contacted by a university in Greater Manchester. I think he is a lecturer in mathematics. He has come to us and said, "Can you please come and discuss with us about the indicators?" At first when we launched the service we did not think that a training package would be suitable, but it is and I think it can be very impactful, especially to teachers and lecturers as well.

As Susannah said, they are key and the responsibility they had to take on when the pandemic hit was massive. The responsibility they had was everything. That link between school and social care and other professionals is missing. I think you are totally right, Susannah, that that is where the downfall is. If we could have that provision, if we had maybe navigators or somebody who is in that school or could be directly the link to teachers, I think that would maybe cover those gaps slightly, but I think the pressure put on them was incredible.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** We have seen this through social work training where we have advocated for and pushed that social work training should cover aspects of exploitation and trafficking. It is good to get that fundamental awareness in, but one of the things that we do see is once you have that awareness, you become a bit stuck on the key risks that you might see and you do not have the up-to-date information. Where are you getting up-to-date information that is seen through all the



services that we run? Where we are seeing the new ways in which traffickers are exploiting children? How do you get that information to that frontline provision so they can see those indicators?

I think that is where it sometimes falls down in terms of awareness-raising. People can tick the box. They have done their awareness; they have done their training. Particularly for teachers, how do we get information to them so that they can spot those indicators very soon?

**Q29 Chair:** Every school has a designated safeguarding lead. Should they not be points of contact for this process or for your navigators, effectively? Surely that is a logical tie-up that should be taking place.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** I was talking about this with my team yesterday in regards to could that work. Safeguarding leads have an enormous amount of work as well within a school. Also you have a sense of an isolation of a school, but the county lines model, the criminal exploitation is happening in a local area where there are lots of schools that are probably seeing children that have been exploited by the gangs in that local area. I think there is that: who catalyses, who brings all of that information together, looking at it in a local but also a national context of what is being seen? It is a transient crime. What we are seeing in London will push out to other cities and urban areas and those indicators are helpful in order to identify children, but how do we get that information out? Who owns that information and who acts on it is a very difficult question.

**Susannah Drury:** Can I just add to that? It is sharing that information with parents and carers as well. It is not just with the teachers because one thing we know from all the parents and carers we work with is they don't see these signs. They don't know that this is a risk factor of county lines. They have a young person who is suddenly angry, withdrawn, focused on their phone, and obviously these are all behaviours that are not that unusual for young people of that age in terms of what a lot of young people go through, but it is perhaps more extreme.

Parents and carers may not spot these signs until things have reached an entrenched basis, so I think schools are a very important way of providing a space for parents and carers to get better information of not only the signs, but what to do if you are worried, who to report to, what support is available. All of those things are important for parents and carers as well.

**Q30 Nick Fletcher:** I was just going to hit that point: do you think it would be a good idea for parents to be brought in for a parents' evening just on these issues and what to look out for? Because literally there will be so many parents out there who have no idea what county lines are about. It is almost a Hollywood movie, I reckon. They have absolutely no idea. We put so much on teachers and they have a job to do and they are professionals, but we don't put enough on parents these days. We seem to be taking more off parents, where I believe we should be putting more



on to parents, but we should be helping them with that too.

**Susannah Drury:** Yes, and I think it is a partnership between schools and parents on this, so it is for them to be going through that together. One of the things we found in the pandemic when we did do some training for parents and carers is that it worked very well because you could do it at a time when even if they have childcare responsibilities, they can join online. They can do that anonymously; they don't have to put their camera on. If they are worried about, "If I turn up to this session on county lines are people going to think that my child is involved?" You can do it in a way that makes it much easier to access and does not feel there is a risk of being stigmatised.

Q31 **Chair:** Isn't the risk of anything like that, which is voluntary, that you probably get the parents who need the help least who are the ones who come forward and the ones who need the help most are the least likely to be able to access it and engage? That is always a challenge, I think, with these issues, but reaching more parents cannot be a bad thing in and of itself.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Reaching them earlier as well, not just when there are problems but from a much earlier stage. When we talk about county lines, we are talking about criminal exploitation and criminal exploitation encompasses county lines. It doesn't start as a county line. It starts with localised drug dealing or criminality. I think that is where parents might not be able to have that kind of understanding. If we do that from a much earlier stage and give them those kinds of aspects, it might help them not progress to that county line model.

**Iryna Pona:** It is also important to remove the stigma. Very often parents may be concerned, but they don't want to go to social care or they don't want to go to school because they don't want to be judged as being bad parents, because a lot of social care involvement is being seen as maybe not being good parents. Therefore I think we need to communicate the message that, "It is okay to seek help, and you would need support from other agencies when you are concerned about criminal exploitation".

**Johnny Bolderson:** If you had a navigator—it is just me thinking ahead—that could be the cushion between the school, the safeguarding lead and the parents, if you could create that relationship across there and navigate the comms. It is almost like a family liaison officer where they say, "Look, I want to talk about this, I want to talk about that and keep you up to date about this theme and trend that is happening at the moment". That could be something that could build that bridge between parents and teachers possibly.

Q32 **Kim Johnson:** Rebecca, you mentioned earlier about the impacts of funding cuts and the ability to deliver services. We know that 30 years of austerity has seen significant cuts in the police and in youth services and you have already mentioned that those most at risk live in deprived



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communities. What I want to know from you, Rebecca, is what needs to be improved in terms of multiagency work so that that funding that is available is used more efficiently.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** I think everybody would agree on this panel it is the longevity of that funding, because you can look at a localised area and look at what is needed, you set up your service and you recruit your staff. You get going and then a lot of the funding that is given to NGOs that do a lot of this work is one year, maybe two years if we are lucky, three years. By the time you have that service embedded you are known in the area. You are known for what you do and you start to build that trust with children and young people, then your funding is cut and you have to start again. Therefore in terms of multi-agency work, where you have the statutory partners who are there to stay, it is the catalyst, which are the NGOs doing those services that are able to be those eyes and ears.

We talked about trusted relationships. They tend to be the ones that are either building those trusted relationships directly with children or working with the professionals indirectly to make sure they are having that kind of trafficking aspect around children's care.

**Johnny Bolderson:** Yes, I agree. If you do look at a year's funding you literally will get about six, seven months probably of very good work out of that, because you obviously have to do an exit plan around month 9, month 8 possibly, to support those young people that you have been supporting. I think longevity of funding is key, yes. I will just say that, basically.

**Susannah Drury:** Just adding to that, obviously we have already spoken about a lot of these young people being drawn into having substance misuse problems as part of the exploitation, as part of the control, and obviously those challenges and then accessing treatment and support. I would say mental health as well, because we all know through the pandemic of the growing demand on mental health services. Yet a lack of funding means that that can be a real challenge for young people who we are trying to support to get out of exploitation, to have the trauma that they have experienced and to have that support that they need, very specialist mental health support to help them deal with that and be able to move forward with their lives. That can be a real challenge to access. It is one of the things that we are always advocating for for young people, but we know that the waiting lists are huge.

**Johnny Bolderson:** That is the problem with the pandemic. The need was so great that the threshold for services was increased. Also to reach that threshold you are missing a vulnerable group because normally they would be met by mental health workers or something like that. Now the threshold is so high that they are not going to meet that threshold, so there are a lot of people just under there that are going to be missed who are extremely vulnerable.



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**Iryna Pona:** I completely agree on mental health. I think it is a big issue we see in our services as well. The thresholds are high and young people are finding it difficult to access when they need it, particularly if their level of need is not meeting that threshold.

Another issue is the fragmentation of funding. There are some additional funds available for different areas, which is very good, like violence reduction units, for example. There may be family hubs in some areas, but what we see is that young people can be vulnerable to criminal exploitation in almost any area. Therefore we need to think about it a bit more holistically and strategically as to how that need can be met everywhere, not just with additional funding in one area or another, particularly around early help.

Q33 **Kim Johnson:** I think some of you have alluded to early intervention preventative work. The lack of funding that we have seen over 30 years I would imagine has impacted on these growing numbers as well. I know that some of the children's organisations—Barnardo's and the Children's Society—are very good at picking up some of these things, but how are you able to do that with limited resources?

The next question: Susannah, you mentioned the importance of schools and in terms of teachers identifying, but you also mentioned exclusions. We know that there has been a 70% increase in exclusions since 2012, I think, disproportionately impacting on black young people. What do you think needs to happen to address these problems? Those young people are in the school to prison pipeline and what needs to happen to break that cycle?

**Susannah Drury:** Yes, there is some brilliant work being done around preventing exclusion. London's violence reduction unit has a big programme on that. There are organisations like Difference, which has an inclusive leadership programme, which is all about teachers working both in mainstream schools and alternative provision, learning from both on what more can be done to prevent exclusions from mainstream, bringing knowledge on from alternative provision about how to support young people.

However, there are some very simple things. As I understand it, Just For Kids Law is doing some work at the moment about the fact that exclusions guidance does not mention county lines. It talks a lot about taking into account the behaviour that a young person is exhibiting and where that comes from, but adding in county lines to that list of things that could be causing a young person to be aggressive, withdrawn—whatever it might be—would be a very important step.

I think there is a big drive now on reducing and preventing exclusion and that disproportionality is starting slowly to be addressed from the latest figures I have seen, but it is a real issue and I think it links to adultification bias, which I am sure you are aware of, of black young people being seen as almost older than they are and seen as therefore



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more responsible for their behaviour than perhaps a white counterpart might be. It is very important to understand all of that in the context of a young person's life as well and making sure that that is not a part of any decision that is there around exclusion.

**Q34 Kim Johnson:** I think you mentioned earlier about exploitation happening to younger children. What support should be available for young people in terms of the transition from primary to secondary school in terms of levels of exploitation?

**Johnny Bolderson:** Again, that provision outside of school would be a buffer between that sort of stop gap. Like I said, we are seeing someone who is possibly seven who is a drug runner and then they go from junior school to secondary school. I think there is a need for a buffer to help them understand what they are going to be expecting to see at secondary school, what they could experience, understanding their relationships, to bring their families in as well and what support we could give with the families around that. It is a big transition between the schools, as we said. Yes, I would say that we need to look at that gap period. There are six weeks of summer holiday in between that where they leave school, have a holiday and then they go there. In those six weeks, it could be massive. Therefore we do need some sort of support around that young person in that time when they are transitioning, yes.

**Iryna Pona:** I agree. I would add that as Johnny was saying about the support during the first year at school with transition as well, also about identification and response to special educational needs. We see a lot of young people who are vulnerable to exploitation. They may have special educational needs that have not been identified and support is not provided, which exacerbates their vulnerability to criminal exploitation. I think that is a very important issue to be addressed at this period of time of transition as well.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Going back to what we said before in terms of how the traffickers operate, the points of transition are points where traffickers and exploiters will target children.

Going back to exclusion, we have had a report from the APPG on Child Criminal Exploitation and Knife Crime. Certainly in our service we have seen that traffickers are telling children how to be excluded so that they are out of the education system. There is always that kind of thing going on, so it is not just the exclusions that happen because of behaviour, but it is also being used as a way of isolating children out of the education system so they are not identified.

**Johnny Bolderson:** That is a very good point. The gangs are using exclusion as well. These gangs will fish for information. They will contact local support services to understand what is in place to support a young person.

**Q35 Chair:** Really? Have they been in touch with you?





**Johnny Bolderson:** Totally. We have recently had a phone line that has been connected and they will phone us to try to find out what support is in place possibly. That is why we have to remember it is a business model. We are talking about a lot of money that these gangs have and if you are going out there to try to challenge county lines, you are challenging a multimillion pound business. Every single drug that is imported into the UK will go through a county line at some point. It is huge. Therefore, yes, they will try everything. They will look at exclusion, they will look at fishing for services and trying to get information. Yes, you have to remember it is a business model that we are challenging.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** I think you have to think like that. A lot of the work that we do, we do not think as a trafficker would. We saw that in the pandemic, where everybody was in the same situation all at once and everybody's business models had to change. All our services had to change. It is the same for traffickers. It is a very interesting point and a very poignant point to look at. We are all on the same page and often the traffickers, exploiters and groomers are ahead of us in terms of that. Whenever we put key risks and indicators down, all of those aspects are very helpful, but we have to remain very curious as to what traffickers are doing.

Q36 **Nick Fletcher:** I want to go back on something that you said there. I have been working with a charity called Lads Need Dads. The lady that runs that charity believes that there ought to be a flagging system for young boys who do not have a dad in their life when they come to secondary school. It did a survey of 1,400 teachers. It went through them and said that the young boys that come into secondary school with no dads are the ones where there are an awful lot of issues. What are your thoughts on a flagging system that might help prevent children getting into this?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** From my perspective, flags can be helpful, but they can be unhelpful as well. There are lots of different aspects. I would say it could be an indicator or a risk factor, but what does that do in terms of identifying a child and who holds that information; where is that shared? All of those different aspects come into it if we go down any one route of a flag. One of the things that we are working on as a service is how we get information out, so that if a child is at risk how other professionals around them can understand the challenges that they face and whether there is another route that traffickers are taking in order to exploit.

Q37 **Nick Fletcher:** Don't you think it would be advantageous for teachers to know that this child does not have that role model at home and might be susceptible to someone taking that male role model place in their life, which can be these groomers that you are talking about?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Absolutely, but there are other risk factors as well. There is disability. We have talked about family breakdown. It may be creating a bit more of a risk matrix around a child to look at different aspects of vulnerability.





**Iryna Pona:** I think it is very helpful for a school to develop more trauma and child-centred approaches to all children in their school to be able to identify changes in children's behaviours and know where to seek help. Because the indicators keep changing very often and, for example, not all children are without a role model in their lives in terms of fathers. Some of them may have these role models coming from other members of the family and so on. There may be some who have both role models in their life, but are witnessing domestic violence, for example, so living in the context of domestic violence in family relationships, which makes them extremely vulnerable as well. I think developing this holistic approach in school where a child is identified if something is wrong is very important.

Q38 **Nick Fletcher:** I have been told that these groomers sit outside schools and they wait for that single child, the child who is on their own or not necessarily with some friends and there are no parents picking them up, so they are the child they go for. You said this model may have changed now because of Covid. Is this still going on or has Covid created other methods for them to groom children? You say they are doing it online, but how are they getting to these children? Do they need to get their phone numbers for that to happen or is it just through social media?

**Johnny Bolderson:** I am quite strong about online gaming at the moment. Online gaming is now seen by young people almost as a career now. There are e-sports. It is a massive, massive thing. They spend a lot of time on gaming. It is like a career to them and parents are accepting that in some way, "Fine. Okay, this is what they want to do when they are older". Online gaming, for example—I won't name the games—there are certain games that they can play. All they need is to have a connection with a person in a game room or something like that and that person can then gift over to that young person. A groomer can just send coins over for them to spend on this game, then they will send one back saying, "Thank you".

If they have that broken-down environment at home where they don't want to talk to their parents but they can talk to this person who is giving them gifts, giving them coins, giving them things to spend online, they will open up to that person. That is how the chat function starts. That is what we are talking about. The business model is so big that they are not thinking, "Right, to exploit a child or groom a child is going to take two days". No, we are looking at the long game here, so, "I am going to put maybe 50 to 60 hours into trying talk to this young child and try to make sure this young person or vulnerable person understands that I have them emotionally".

It is all about making that emotional connection with that young person, that need, by giving them presents and giving them gifts all online. Without leaving their bedroom they have been exploited, so I think online gaming is a real, real problem. I really do.

Q39 **Nick Fletcher:** This goes back to the education point. It goes back to



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doing everything that we can to protect that family unit, because we know that is obviously the best unit for children. Where there are two parents it just makes life easier, doesn't it? You have two people there looking out for the child. I did not know until today that what you have said is happening. My kids are grown up now, but I did not know that, so that education piece and that family unit, surely to goodness that is where we should be putting most resources, do you not think?

**Johnny Bolderson:** It is very, very complicated because of that. Yes, I totally agree that parents should be able to have more support and understanding around that. Obviously if they do not have a role model, but they have a very strong mother or father, it doesn't matter. It is unpicking that understanding around the dangers that they might be seeing online.

It has to also come from the schools, it has to come from professionals like ourselves. It has to come from organisations. Provisions are available to them. We all have to be singing off the same hymn sheet and understand that it is extremely organised. There is a lot of money involved. It is extremely dangerous. We do have to understand that, the dangers of online gaming and social media. Everything goes through social media, the majority, I think.

**Susannah Drury:** It is almost seeing it as a public health issue. It is that prevention in the first place, so educating parents and carers to make sure that if your child is online that they are doing it in a private space so they can only speak to their friends. It is the early intervention and support that is put in, for schools spotting the signs, for parents and carers spotting the signs and if it is happening that they know what to do. Then it is a trusted adult model and the enforcement as well. It is everything. It is the full package that you would use. You need good work at every stage.

The other thing is not to see county lines exploitation as a separate thing from other forms of exploitation. We have all spoken about child sexual exploitation, financial exploitation, and what is perhaps most needed is a cross-government all child exploitation strategy because it is so fluid. These are not siloed issues. They are all connected. Therefore to have a look at that from prevention, early intervention and more targeted support for those who are involved and the enforcement side, looking at everything in the round.

Q40 **Chair:** On that point about a cross-government strategy, we had a very interesting session with the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Obviously one recommendation was for a national child protection authority. We have had some mixed feedback as to what people think about that. On the one hand, cross-government and co-ordinating I can see the attraction of. On the other hand, I guess there is a concern that if you have an agency that takes responsibility for that, the agency of everyone else in this space is somewhat reduced. Where would you stand on that? Do you think there is an argument for a higher body being



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created to focus on this to try to co-ordinate efforts?

**Susannah Drury:** I do not know if I know the answer to that. All I would say is I think where county lines has been focused very much on is this kind of Home Office first and perhaps the enforcement piece has been at the forefront. Therefore it has been a bit more challenging to work on the other end of things that we have been talking about today.

That cross-government approach, for Home Office of course we need that enforcement activity and for DfE of course it is a child protection issue. It is a school issue, it is a care issue. It is bringing Ofsted in and bringing all of these agencies together. I don't know if there needs to be a primary agency. It is more that this is an issue for all of us and the siloed working approach just does not work because, as we have all spoken about today, this is a business model that is very fluid, very reactive, very responsive and very agile and if we focus in too much on one area they will just move.

Q41 **Miriam Cates:** I think you have probably answered this already, but just looking at local government youth offending teams and the Children's Services Department, do you think they have the necessary expertise and funding to succeed? I think we have established that we could do with more funding, but in terms of the expertise, are they heading along the right lines?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Awareness is always there, but it is a bit of a postcode lottery in terms of what local authority, what police force and what their understanding is of things like exploitation and county lines. Certainly for our services we find we are working with some very good local government agencies that really get it and then other local government agencies where we have to work hard to raise that awareness. I think where—

Q42 **Chair:** Can you give some examples of local government that is really getting it?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Wales is one of the areas that we work across and because of the devolved nature of Wales it means that we are seeing some very good work happening across there. Other local authorities that we are working well with are Solihull, lots of different local authorities that we have built up quite a relationship over. We have been working for around eight years now. That has started off with that awareness-raising. It wasn't like that at the start. That goes to the point around funding. It has taken quite a lot of engagement and training with local authorities to pull that understanding in.

It goes to what Susannah was saying as well. There are emerging trends all the time, so again, how do you get that information out and where are the trusted organisations that are delivering that information so that it makes a difference?

Q43 **Nick Fletcher:** Doncaster Council has done some very good work on this



and it has the virtual headsets. You become the young person within this organised crime and within county lines and the cuckooing that goes on in people's eyes. It is immersive. It is about 20 minutes long. It is hard punching. It scares you to death. I am going to bring Doncaster Council down here and do a session on it. It is trying to put it out and I would suggest if you have not reported on Doncaster Council that you should because it is doing some excellent work.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** That kind of experiential learning is very helpful in looking at what choices children have. We work with a lot of Vietnamese children. We have done something around a cannabis farm and how that child has been trafficked and a similar journey that they take, where we present professionals with the choices and the lightbulb moments are when that happens that child has no choice. I think it really does change how professionals look at their support and how they safeguard those children.

**Johnny Bolderson:** We do need to get creative. I do agree that we do need to find some sort of creative model that does impact that lightbulb moment, which does cause that spark for professionals. I think with the pandemic, with professionals and children in social care, there is professional burnout, if you think about it. I was a prison officer for 10 years and the stuff that you see, you do get burnout and you get desensitised. I think we will get a lot of social workers and professionals that will get desensitised by a certain amount of things. Obviously that threshold, that criteria that they would normally act on may not be the same response you normally would get. That is quite an issue.

Also with the NRM—I know we are going to talk about that as well—and linking that to children's social care. I have worked with cases where NRMs, the referrals have been put in, but then you go to speak to the social care and they are not even on a child plan, they are not even on a CIN plan because there is no link up. It is all about communication, isn't it? I think there is something around maybe the burnout of professionals. It is key. The pressure is unbelievable.

**Chair:** I am going to have to accelerate us a little bit because we are not going to get it all in. Iryna.

**Iryna Pona:** This is a slightly different point. I think another aspect is disruption activity against perpetrators at a local level. At the moment it is a big gap and it is not happening consistently. There are a range of measures, such as child protection warning notices, which can be used when a child goes missing. There are sexual risk orders and modern slavery and trafficking risk orders and they are not used to disrupt that exploitation early. They may be used, there are some examples of good practice, but we do not know the numbers. There is no escalation from disruption to then breach and prosecutions very often, so I think that is another area that needs to be improved locally.

Q44 **Chair:** Thank you. The Government describes these interventions—and



you touched on this, Susannah—as following a public health approach, but of course many interventions rely on enforcement and that is also where this disruption point comes into it. How does that impact on the work of non-police partners and educational institutions? I guess that constant tension between a public health first approach and the need to have the hard end of enforcement is a big part of the challenge here.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** From our perspective, it is information sharing that is key in order to see how—

Q45 **Chair:** How does that work with data protection rules, the information sharing?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** It is safeguarding. I think this is where there is a lot of miscommunication around it. We run a 24/7 support line to take referrals of children, and one of the difficult, challenging parts for that team—an amazing team—is getting the right information so that they can look at the risk for that child, put the safety plans into place and get the professionals around those children to work and make decisions in their best interests. We get flagged all the time that it is data protection, and safeguarding supersedes data protection in that. We have to get that understanding.

In terms of the serious violence duty that commenced in January, we have primary and secondary organisations that are involved and we miss out health and education. We have talked about education today and the primary role that it does play, but we do not get involved at that level when identification of children is happening. Certainly for health, for example, in Wales the NHS sits on our devolved panels that make decisions about the NRMs and whether children are getting positive, reasonable and conclusive grounds.

One child we have had recently disclosed to a psychiatrist that he was being asked to do certain things online. They explored that and were able to bring that to the table to make that decision and that child got a positive, reasonable and conclusive grounds decision that he was being trafficked. That was a key part of that understanding.

When we are talking about that information sharing and how agencies work together, we have talked about the complexity of exploitation and we have to look at the complexity of how we communicate together.

Q46 **Chair:** Does the lack of a statutory definition of criminal child exploitation have an impact here? Would a clear definition be useful?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Absolutely.

**Johnny Bolderson:** Yes, totally.

**Susannah Drury:** It is almost stage 1 of information sharing and of working together, having that shared understanding of what we are talking about here. It feels like a valuable thing to have. I am mindful



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that we need to make sure that it is not too narrow because of what we have discussed today about the model changing all the time.

Q47 **Chair:** It needs to be a broad enough and flexible enough definition to encompass things, but clearly you would want that set out somewhere in statute?

**Iryna Pona:** Yes, definitely.

**Susannah Drury:** Yes.

**Johnny Bolderson:** Correct language, yes.

Q48 **Miriam Cates:** We have talked about local authorities, but moving on to policing, have you seen improvements in the policing of county lines? If so, what does that look like? Again, does it vary from postcode to postcode? Specifically, could you comment on how neighbouring police forces work together? One of the key vulnerabilities that these gangs are exploiting is the fact that they are crossing authority lines.

**Susannah Drury:** I think the awareness is so much higher now across the whole country. It was seen as a city issue and some smaller towns where there were very well-known county lines. Now I think there is awareness across the board from police.

There are some things that make their job harder. As you say, it is that joining up of information, which can be hard because they work with different systems and different approaches and so on. It is recognising that, but there are things like—as we were talking about earlier—out of area placements. If a young person is placed in an area, there are good reasons for this but the local police force does not know about that. It is about whether there is more information that could be shared.

Another area goes back to when we were talking at the beginning about return home interviews. Those are the responsibility of a local authority, and we know that information sharing has got better with the police when there is information that could be linked to crime or could be linked to exploitation. It still can be quite patchy, so it can be quite frustrating for the police that they are not getting that information about a young person who is at risk, which could form part of the picture if they go missing again for the police to know that there is that risk or knowledge of exploitation that could help them make their risk assessment and in their response to help find that young person.

I think there are always going to be challenges between police forces. Again, it links to things like having a national definition, which would make it easier for them to work together on it as well.

**Iryna Pona:** I think the county lines co-ordination centre plays a huge role in helping different police forces work on investigating county lines, but also focusing on the safeguarding response to children that is needed.





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It does not mean that it is always happening and there are still different approaches in different areas.

Some of our projects, particularly the disrupting exploitation project, worked with police forces in London in helping bridge that information sharing at the point of arrest. Very often when a young person is arrested, police will not necessarily go straight to a local authority to ask about any other vulnerabilities and what support the young person may need. Being able to do that, they develop a list of questions that can be asked back to the local authority to help them identify and speak to a young person in a way that would allow the young person to engage with police and with others. I think that is important.

The cross-boundary issues still remain. Of course if it is co-ordinated then it is easier, but identifying those young people for the first time, for example, when they are found in a different authority when they are missing, we still do not have a national missing persons database, for example, to easily identify a young person going missing from one area and being found in a different one. Not all young people who are placed in out-of-area placements will have information shared about them, about the risk of going missing or the risk of exploitation. There are still good examples, pockets of practice, but it is not yet universally happening across the country.

The definition definitely would help because in recent years, because there has been so much focus on county lines, I think a lot of police forces and local authorities are very much aware of county lines. There are still gaps in identifying and knowing what to do and where to refer and the lack of services. But other types of criminal exploitation are not identified and there is not always that thinking that if a young person is found to be involved in some criminal activity is there someone behind it. Very often shoplifting may be a first step towards being exploited through county lines models but it is being missed, so that broader definition of child criminal exploitation is definitely needed.

**Rebecca Griffiths:** Absolutely. I was talking with my team yesterday and they have been to some meetings where they are talking about that criminal exploitation, that early shoplifting as part of a strategy meeting. Somebody has said, "Is it part of a county line? Because we cannot move that forward unless it is part of a county line" so that knowledge and understanding is still something that needs to be pushed on.

Going to police forces, we see different awareness of the legislation but we are also looking at courts because we can have all the policing strategies that are happening, but once that gets to court, do the courts know, does the judge know, does the solicitor know the legislation around trafficking and what is available to that child in terms of defence?

**Johnny Bolderson:** As a new service that we rolled out last year, I was taken aback by how much the police really wanted to get involved, wanted to understand and the awareness. I was taken aback by the





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amount of engagement that the police put into trying to understand what the support was, the rescue service that we have and everything like that.

The only problem that we have, I think, going forward is that we have four regions. We have an evaluation linked to us and we want to be able to get all the data from the young person right from the beginning all the way down to the end and follow that journey. We also need then if there has been any accounts of any police callouts to that young person, any missing periods from that young person, and to get that consistent data and recorded data from the police is a very difficult thing to do, especially over four regions. That would help us paint a real picture of what works, what does not work and what needs to improve.

**Chair:** I will come back to Kim Johnson briefly on the Modern Slavery Act.

Q49 **Kim Johnson:** Maybe Rebecca could answer this question. Do you believe that the Modern Slavery Act is working as it was intended regarding county lines?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** I think that it has been very supportive of the work that is going on around modern slavery. In some aspects of it, it is not going far enough or it is being a bit more watered down to what was originally intended for the Modern Slavery Act. There are ways in which the legislation has worked well and we see some good pockets of work that is being done. For example, section 45 is being used well, but there are other areas where it is not. A lot of it goes to awareness and a lot of it goes to interpretation as well. We talked about the statutory definition; that would be helpful. Particularly for our services, there is an interpretation of the legislation that can be unhelpful sometimes, but at the same time we use it to advocate for children and young people so we would say it is supportive as well.

Q50 **Chair:** What do you mean by interpretation of the legislation can be unhelpful?

**Rebecca Griffiths:** I am thinking that the section 45 defence sometimes can be interpreted from a lens that different agencies might take, maybe a more law enforcement lens, where we would take a more safeguarding lens. Those interpretations happen. We have heard in policing, for example, where section 45 has been squashed a little bit, seeing it as a "get out of jail free" card for children and young people. The reality that we are seeing from children and young people is that about a third of the children who we work with do not want the section 45 defence to be used because they will be seen as snitches and it will reflect back on them. Those people who are making those determinations and those choices for children in their best interest need to work with those children to understand what is going on, but there is a propensity to think that the child is using it in order to get off scot-free and it is not the case whatsoever.



Q51 **Kim Johnson:** Can I ask about the national referral mechanism that some of you have alluded to as well? How well understood do you believe it is?

**Johnny Bolderson:** I think it is a good thing to have in place. It needs to link up with children's services and social care. As I said, we can have a referral going to the NRM but it does not link up with children's social care. They will not be on a child plan. There will not be any support around that young person, which does not make sense because you have referred them to the NRM. There is that breakdown in the triangle or the circle of professionals and we need to make sure that co-ordinates a bit better.

Touching on the Modern Slavery Act quickly, I do not think there is enough prosecution around that. It would be positive to see more of that. Then going back to the NRM, I would say that it does not link up with the professionals.

**Susannah Drury:** It is really slow, we know that. I am sure that you are aware that it usually takes more than a year to get that conclusive decision. I think that Rebecca touched on earlier the local pilot model of local decision making that is quality assured by the Home Office. That feels like it is quite a promising approach rather than everything going through to the Home Office. It has limited resources to process these things and it does not have the local context that local professionals working on those decisions will have.

**Iryna Pona:** Definitely, and some support for a young person would be important. At the moment it is not happening. It is very patchy.

On the Modern Slavery Act, I completely agree on the point about the low number of prosecutions. There is also still a lot of expectation of a young person making a disclosure and talking. I think there needs to be more victimless prosecutions where agencies, police and others use disruption measures and other information to build evidence for prosecution under the Modern Slavery Act. We have seen where there is modern slavery, but not necessarily a prosecution for the modern slavery. As a result, for example, the perpetrators may not be given the modern slavery and trafficking prevention orders, which are given when they are convicted of modern slavery crime, so when they exit the law enforcement prison system people will not necessarily see them as potential perpetrators of modern slavery and other young people will be at risk from the same perpetrators. It is important that this Act is used because it is there to protect victims but also to prevent other children becoming victims.

**Chair:** Thank you. I think we will have to wrap up there.