HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Child exploitation and county lines, HC 1114

Tuesday 4 July 2023

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 52 - 119

Witnesses

I: Bali Rodgers, Co-founder and Director, Refocus Project; Lennox Rodgers, Co-founder and CEO, Refocus Project; and Junior Smart OBE, Founder, St Giles Trust.

II: Commander Paul Brogden, Lead for Gangs and County Lines, National Police Chiefs' Council; Jahnine Davis, Panel Member, Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel; Mark Kerr, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Children's Homes Association; and Simon Ford, Head of Community Safety, Southend-on-Sea City Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Bali Rodgers, Lennox Rodgers and Junior Smart OBE.

[This evidence was taken by video conference]

Q52 **Chair:** This is the second session on child exploitation and county lines. Today we will be hearing evidence from Bali Rodgers and Lennox Rodgers, the co-founders and directors of the Refocus Project. You are very welcome. On the screen we have Junior Smart OBE, the founder of the St Giles Trust. Thank you for joining us. I will start by asking each of you to briefly outline the work of your organisations in this area and your own experience of the area. Perhaps I could start with Bali or Lennox Rodgers.

Bali Rodgers: The Refocus Project is a crime prevention and intervention service. It has been going for the last 18 years. It was birthed from Lennox Rodgers's experience of coming out of prison and being unable to get a job due to his past. Somewhere along the line we met and I helped him to develop Refocus and we continued the work, working with young people.

We have worked with outreach and one-to-one services. We have done schools prevention work and prison work. Primarily it is all about awareness and prevention, but we have worked with high-risk young people as well over the period of the last 18 years. It is sometimes commissioned, sometimes not. It is very charity-based and on the ground.

Q53 **Chair:** Lennox, can you say something about your experience in that and how it led you to want to help others?

Lennox Rodgers: Yes. When I came out of prison I was asked to talk to a local south-east London gang, which was committing all sorts of crimes, county lines and using weapons. I was asked to talk to them about my lived experiences and they sat and listened. There were about 40 of them. They sat and listened to me for about two hours and they were in shock. I looked at their faces and they just looked like little kids. I thought, "Wow, how can I encourage them not to walk down the same path as me?" From there, Refocus was birthed after having a conversation with Bali about what I want to do for these kids. I said that I just wanted them to refocus their lives. Bali said, "Perhaps that is the name we should call the charity, Refocus".

From that talk we managed to rescue a lot of young people who just wanted to come out of the gangs. They didn't want it. They thought, "Wow, if that is what his experience is like, if that is what the consequences are like, we don't want it," and so the gang started to disperse.

Q54 **Chair:** That is very impressive. Do you think that you would have had a hearing from that group of people if you had not been through what you

had been through? That was presumably essential, your lived experience in that respect.

Lennox Rodgers: It would have been very difficult had I not been in two gangs myself, been through the care system, been kicked out of many schools and been sexually abused and raped, and the racism. If I hadn't had some of those experiences, it would have been very difficult. From listening to my experiences, girls as well as boys volunteered information. The girls were sexually abused and raped in the gang and they were able to talk about it after I shared my lived experiences. Girls are a subject to do with county lines and gangs that is not talked about enough.

Q55 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Can I bring in Junior Smart at this point to talk about his organisation and his background in this as well, please?

Junior Smart: Good morning to you all. Thank you for having me. I am very impressed by the work of Refocus. I happen to know of its work and have been an avid follower of its amazing work for quite some time.

My background is not too dissimilar to the young people we are trying to help. Similar to Refocus, I have that lived experience. Yes, unfortunately I was sent down in 2001 for a drug-related offence, for which I originally received 12 years, which was later knocked down to 10. Literally from day dot in custody I decided I would do as much as I could do to help other people who were caught up in the same situation as myself. My case was quite well documented. No legal team would even attend the police station, so I was at this place where I was like, "Okay, if there isn't help for somebody like me, then there should be."

That led me to a journey of change that first started with the Samaritans. I became a prison listener. I was helping people who were struggling in coming to terms with their sentences. I then went on to do many different bits of work, one of which was mentoring young offenders over in Rochester Young Offenders Institution shortly after there had been a riot. That brought me face to face with the reality of the lifestyle that I had been a part of.

The connection from there led me to St Giles Trust, which I have to say is an amazing charity. It is the sort of charity that would come into a prison and meet somebody like me, which it did. I was later given an opportunity to sit and interview at St Giles Trust six months before my release. I sat the interview and I got it. That job was to establish the first intervention around gangs using ex-offenders. Despite its disbelievers, people thinking that it was too risky and that it would not work, SOS, the project I developed, has gone on to reach thousands and thousands of young people and their families who have been caught up in this terrible situation that we have with young people and violence, peer-to-peer violence. I have spent close to the last 20 years of my life engaging, with the support of a massive team now. SOS is huge.

I also developed SOS+ in 2008. Back then we had record serious youth violence on the streets, numbers that are dwarfed by today's standards, it has to be said. I developed the first schools intervention project, which does exactly that. It goes into schools, colleges and pupil referral units and for this last year alone we have reached over 90,000 young people through school sessions. We are imparting real tools to young people.

I agree completely with what the other witnesses have said. The reality is that young people do not have people they can talk to. I feel very sorry for young people. There is so much misinformation out there around what happens when you are carrying drugs, what the consequences are and what happens when you are stabbed. I have asked kids, "Is there a safe place to stab someone?" and on average around 90% of people will say, "Yes, there are safe places to stab". That is the wrong narrative for them to have.

When they realise that we are the real deal, they start opening up and they ask questions that they could not ask of a teacher, a parent or anyone else, but that they are likely to ask of their friends. That is why I think that lived experience, as dark as it may be—I am sorry to hear about his experiences with all sorts of trauma and abuse, mine too—it is to realise that that lived experience does have value. I am sure that the Committee has heard from the police time and time again. They will say, "We cannot arrest our way out of this," but from the young people's perspective, who can they trust? Who can they turn to? That is where people with lived experience have the edge and they should be included in the discussions because they know what the solutions are.

Q56 **Chair:** Trust is so important in this because you have young people who are looking to gangs sometimes to provide that support and authority that they do not get from elsewhere. Can each of the members of the panel talk a little about the main factors that you find draw people into county lines and gangs in general?

Bali Rodgers: Having worked in Refocus for 18 years, we went on a mission to start working with children at a younger age. We talk about early help, but I am talking very early signs when they are in school and they are showing reasons why they don't want to be going to classes or are falling out because of their behaviour. We did that intensely for 95 young people we worked with for two years. We picked up that the primary issues were money, which was a major issue, and domestic violence. I am talking at primary school transitioning just into secondary. These were the issues. They were getting into fights. They were learning their way of being able to defend themselves. They were falling out of class because they had neurodivergent issues that were not being addressed and they had not managed to get a diagnosis before they had moved into secondary school. Unfortunately, even if they had, they were not being managed or supported and the families were not being supported.

My expertise is that I am a counsellor myself. I have worked in therapeutic backgrounds for years. I have run rehabilitation centres for women and drug addictions so I was very much about wanting to address the issues at the root. The root is that the struggling family has no support and unless we develop wraparound support for them at the earliest stages—I am not talking when they have been excluded, I am talking before. Experts like us see what is about to happen and that narrative that is about to pan out for that young person. Even before they have been excluded is where we need to address the issues, not after. After is too late. Things have already become embedded. We can change behaviour before that stage. You can learn behaviour; you can unlearn behaviour, unless it is too late. There are too many benefits to not changing for the young person when they have gone far away down the line to being drawn in.

That is my passion, which is why we have set up the Safer Communities Alliance, which is a sister organisation that I run. It is an umbrella organisation that captures the stuff that Refocus is not able to, which is to provide microwaves for leaving carers who cannot eat because they cannot afford the electricity. It provides clothes for their first month of employment. In partnership we are working on developing some of the underpinning things that are creating that environment where children end up involved in crime. We find that the families who are struggling the most are like the ones I said, around domestic violence, war-torn issues that are not being addressed, generational trauma that is coming over from not being addressed in school and not being addressed for the whole family.

What is missing in all this is that we are not looking at the family. We are just looking at that one child and trying to tick the box of what we have done when we have been given the funding to do it and that is it. What we are not looking at is that wraparound support, which is what the Safer Communities Alliance is doing now. I have been funded to develop that wraparound but on a small capacity. We cannot do that on large grants and big commissioning. It has to be localised. It has to be about developing local villages again and people looking out for each other.

The only way you are going to develop that culture is to encourage that localised support and encourage small organisations. I love St Giles Trust. We know Junior. The smaller organisations have the capacity to stick around for years. The larger ones not necessarily because of the pressures of the targets and the money to keep themselves as big as they are. I have done both, but personally I am going to—

Chair: You need that to really reach into a community.

Bali Rodgers: Yes, and embed yourself, because the young people are there and that continuity for that young person is there when everything else has gone, funding has finished and targets are gone. The service is still there. Whether we have been funded or not, we have stayed there.

Q57 **Mohammad Yasin:** I want to pick up your thoughts on this. In the last decade or so, 760 youth centres have been closed and 4,500 young people's jobs have gone. One of the ways to keep these people away from falling into the wrong hands is to keep them busy. The youth centres are not there. They have nothing to do, especially after school. They fall into the wrong hands. Do you agree with that?

Bali Rodgers: Absolutely, 100%. In this report we asked 10 of the young people that had been involved in county lines what they felt the solution was. One of them wasn't the run-of-the-mill youth club, it was something that was engaging, something that they needed that was going to give them some optimism. They already had neurodivergent issues; they had fallen out of education. They did not feel that they could pursue English and maths, so they had made the choice to slip out, and they are drawn into county lines. They felt that they needed something that was more engaging for them and relative to them.

The only way you are going to get that is if you listen to young people and let them be the ones to set this up. We have a young person we have employed who wants to develop music. He said the only way that children like to express themselves is through music. They want to express their trauma. Trying to set up something for music is a nightmare because it has to come under the umbrella of a youth hub and a youth club, but what does a youth club look like? We have to be where young people are at and develop things from where they are coming from rather than have our concept of what youth clubs should look like.

I have a comment that I was reading on the way here and it says, "Not the run-of-the-mill snooker club, snooker table and table tennis. We want somewhere where we can sit". We have set up a forum of 16 to 25-year-olds who sit there and say, "We would like a master class in how to set up a business. We would like a master class on how to develop a recruitment agency". The perfect job for them, all entrepreneurial, so why don't we tap into their skills and help them with it and meet them where they are at? That is what the alliance is trying to do.

Q58 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. Picking up on the question about wraparound care, we have seen vast amounts of money issued to the police for tackling county lines and a massive reduction in funding to local authorities and third-sector organisations. Do you think that there needs to be a rebalancing of that funding to ensure that there are those preventative and early intervention opportunities?

Bali Rodgers: 100%. We have families whose children we see because the families are struggling. They have little children and we are watching them grow up and pursue that lifestyle because they do not have the support with social services to manage those young people. Instead they are being put in care and the parents are being criminalised. The parents are being charged and sanctioned for not letting their kids into education. We need that support, communities on the ground that are always going to be there. We are talking about relationships. If you have a relationship

with a young person and you continue to be there, they will continue to come. We need money.

Junior Smart: There was quite a bit there. The lady just talked about policing. We have been fortunate to do work with the police and to work in partnership with the police in various areas. It is a bit of a paradigm. The officers on the ground, the ones that I have come across, they largely want to know what the solutions are. Like, "Jay, teach us, show us how to engage with these young people". They appreciate that it is complex. They appreciate that it is not a quick fix.

However, culturally the frameworks they are working with are dated. Officers do not get promotions based upon how many community members they work with. They do not get commendations for how many young people they connect and engage with. They get commendations based upon the amount of arrests that they make. What this leads to on a frontline level, if we consider the debate that has been happening recently around stop and search, we have to appreciate that it is quite damaging. For the young people, it is quite a shameful experience and young people's voices are rarely taken into account here. On the other hand, we expect the young people, when it comes to the likes of county lines and child criminal exploitation, to speak up and speak out about it.

You then have to ask yourself, "Hang on a second, who is coming up with these ideas?" Because every single thing, even from John Pitts's research back in 2008 where he was talking to the young people directly, they were saying, "We do not talk to the authorities. We do not trust them". Young people are scared about what happens if they talk to the authorities because they will be deemed a grass. The fear of repercussions against young people and their families is very serious and it is very real to them. How do we go back to rebuilding that? I agree with Bali. This has to be about relationship building.

Another thing that has to be mentioned and that has not been mentioned so far is the role that social media platforms have played in the proliferation of these groups. The amount of excuses that we routinely hear from these social media platforms that their platforms are not being used; however, I can honestly say to you that I see serious incidents happening online practically every single day. This is the reason why young people's voices should be in the room because they will tell you that every single platform is being used to promote violence, to promote what the gangs are doing and to groom individuals. We have seen every single social media platform being used to groom and recruit young people into, for example, financial exploitation, county lines exploitation and sexual exploitation. The list goes on and on. Again, we are not seeing anything happen there around that.

What happens when young people have limited availability of choice—especially now where the cost of living crisis is so high—is that often young people say to me, "I hear what you're saying, Jay. I know what

the consequences are, but if I am doing what I am doing, mum doesn't have to worry about where the rent is going to come from. Mum doesn't have to cry. There will be less arguments in the house because there will be more food on the table. I can provide". That is very uncompromising.

For many people, it is quite easy to say that this does not exist and we can vilify the parents. We can say to the parents, "The reason why you are in this situation is that you are not doing enough". I put it to the entire Committee that there are some people who are not starting on the starting line with everybody else; they are miles behind. A quick example of that is right now there is a lady I am working with. There is violence happening in her community and she wants to move in order to keep her son safe. However, she has rent arrears and that means we have to deal with the rent arrears first. She has to be six months out of that before she can even consider bidding on another property offered by another council to move. That is six more months. In fact, we have to get her access to that money, which is often going to come from having to work longer, which means there will be less parental presence in the house. This is just one example. This is the reality of many of the families we are working with. It is not isolated to a small minority of the population. This is an increasing majority.

Chair: Can I bring in Nick Fletcher? I think what you said about exploitation online and through social media very much chimes with what we heard from our previous panel. That clearly is a matter of great concern to the Committee, so any more detail you can give on that will be welcome.

Q59 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for coming today. It is good to see you. This is a subject that is very important to me. I run a role models programme, so I go into the prisons, but I also go into the schools and talk to young people and people who have already made some choices that have not turned out best for them.

With regard to interventions that prevent children entering this, you have spoken quite a bit about family and youth, but do you want to expand a little more on that, on what maybe we can do as Members of Parliament and what councils can do? What about parents? Do you get the chance to speak to parents? They are the ones who are right in front of the child, aren't they?

Bali Rodgers: There are two levels. You get the lower-level families that we have targeted over the winter period. The local authority funded us to do the warm hub approach. Because I work so closely with the crime prevention agency, which is Lennox and his team, we had his families that we targeted for those warm hubs. We managed to support a lot of them at an early stage with budgeting, housing issues, domestic violence, moving families from areas, trying to help them with their debts so they were allowed to move areas.

All that stuff is very hard for somebody like a service that is crime prevention because they are busy working with that young person. That is why we set up the alliance—because it focuses on the family, it focuses on the siblings. We know that siblings play a key part in this because of learned behaviour once again. They are likely to follow if we do not capture them, so we try to capture them even younger. We are trying to put on programmes out of school, holiday clubs and activities, but we are saying to the schools, "Do not give us anybody but those who you know have ACEs, adverse childhood experiences". We want those young people. We want them to feel that they belong. We want to develop a village for them so that they do not go down the same road as their peers.

You have to be working alongside services like Refocus and St Giles Trust if you want to do this. You cannot just set up family hubs. I know the family hub approach is very much the in thing at the moment, but our family hub is bespoke. It is bespoke because we are targeting the vulnerable families that are likely to go into—or their children are likely to go into—crime. The only way you are going to do that is partnership working with schools. Schools need a lot more education about what younger grooming and exploitation is because they cannot see the signs. Obviously lived experience workers can see the signs, so you go in and you are able to provide that education.

The other side of it is the police. We have talked about the police a lot, but the police really want to work with us. The problem is they change so regularly that the relationship they are building—we bring young people in deliberately on the day that we have our local beat there because we want to break down barriers with them, but they change. They are constantly changing. It does our head in. How do we develop it?

Continuity is key and the only way you get continuity is if you get long-term funding. We get six-month grants as a small service. What can you do and guarantee you are going to give a funder with six months? Eighteen years of evidence, which is what we are running on, is reputation, families dropping in, "I remember you years ago, Bali, in school. I need to speak to you". Entrenching this provision into the community and having that localised service is key. I am singing from a different hymn sheet. Lennox probably has a lot of different things that he would like to say.

Lennox Rodgers: For me, some of these young people are badly out of control and the parents are at their wits' end. You can put things in place to help them while they are in the community but they are still at risk. You have to have places where you can almost, for want of a better term, deradicalise and unpick that negative behaviour. They need therapeutic help to tackle some of the traumas and issues that they have faced. They have to be there for a time. It needs to be a secure place so they are safe. It needs to be a place where you can teach them life skills, have a supermarket, a healthcare centre and education and training facilities.

You have to have specialist psychologists and people who can deal with their type of trauma.

They can progress to get an education because they have had that help. You give them that college-type education where they are doing education part of the day and practical the other part. You get employers involved to offer them employment. In this complex place that helps them, you help them with housing. There will be places that some of the older young people can learn to live. They will have help to be able to manage in society. They will not be a target for the gangs because they will have a different mindset.

The cost of all this is not as much as what it costs for a child's life. We are saving lives. I was part of a model like that in my youth and it worked. I am still part of a group of people who were in that model with me. We are on Facebook and we still talk about how things used to be, except that it was a bit stricter back then. I feel that we need to have these places. You can use this model to tackle mental health issues and addictions. If you invest in the right people and the surroundings where they can learn to live a better life, then it will go a long way in reducing county lines. A lot of gangs are investing money to make money, giving away stuff, and we need to invest in the young people. We need to invest more in their education.

Q60 **Nick Fletcher:** Do you think that we should be investing more into families though? Do these county lines prey on broken families, on that child who does not have that stable home?

Lennox Rodgers: They have come from those backgrounds.

Nick Fletcher: Yes, and if they see that you have a close-knit family, that you see mum and dad together with that child, it is very difficult to break into that.

Bali Rodgers: Young people, as they get older, will want to pay their fees for uni, so that is not about targeting vulnerable families, but we have to do both. You have to do the early and you have to do the later. Lennox is talking very much about rehabilitation for those who are embedded into that behaviour because that is what helped us, helped me, helped Lennox, and in a way probably helped Junior.

Lennox Rodgers: The common denominator is money. Everybody wants money. I talk to a lot of young people and regardless of their backgrounds that is what it is about. There is always a demand for drugs. Drug users are using the drugs to help cope with life, among other reasons.

Bali Rodgers: It is a major issue.

Q61 **Nick Fletcher:** Are we glamorising it in media and TV? Are we glamorising gangs? I have said this before and it has not gone down very well, but I genuinely do believe that what young people see on TV they

want to follow and that is a huge influence on their lives. Do you agree with that?

Chair: I can see Junior is waving from the screen, so we must let him in. That is the problem with being on screen when we have other people in the room, but do come in.

Junior Smart: I definitely agree with the last commentator. I think we are in a negative space at the moment where I would not call it necessarily gangs, but I would call it the criminal activity is being glamorised. We see this as a ripple effect. I agree with Bali and Refocus on this. What is the underlying need here? The underlying need here is money. The reason we have failed is that social media has given people a means where they can generate income by posting the most shocking and harmful content.

I am not going to mention any names because I think these people have had enough airtime already, but if you see some of the proliferators of some of the content their argument is always, "Well, the social media platform is there. I know that if I post content of me harming someone or threatening someone, I am going to get more views and therefore I can generate income", but why do they need that money? They need that money because they need to make money to get out of where they are. I want to bring it back. The reality is that I have never worked with any young person who has not had goals. They all want the house and the car. They all want to see themselves as the boss. They want to see themselves as in control, but they lack the means to achieve that.

It is a dangerous narrative that we always say these things are missing from the family home. If you look at all the recent reports from Rescue and Response—and St Giles Trust is a part of that amazing service, engaging with people who are involved in county lines— you see that these groups are focusing on people who come from dual-parent households. One young kid I was working with, the mum is a researcher and the dad is a carpenter. He gets two holidays of his choice a year. How did he get groomed? How did he get pulled into it? What were the spaces?

If I was working with a young person and I said to that person, "Show me your time. What are you doing with your time?" I would be able to tell very quickly the likelihood of them being recruited or drawn in. That leads back to an earlier argument we had about where the young people go, where young people associate. I was visiting a youth club a couple of weeks ago where 90-something children showed up on that one night alone. The question is: if that youth club was not there, where would those kids be? They would be online, perhaps in the carpark, they might be hanging around on the street and that is only going to lead them to a situation where they may get stopped and searched. They may become criminalised as a result of that. This is one of the things that St Giles does so well. We have always engaged with the young people and their families. It is that joined-up approach.

The parents are often presented with situations that they do not understand—for example, an online repertoire and the risks that come with that. Often you might have a parent thinking their son or daughter is safe and the reality is far from that. A big question is asking parents out there, "What is contextualised safeguarding?" Most parents would not have a clue, but from a practitioner perspective that is absolutely everything. Where does that young person feel safe, and not just safe now, but safe at different times of the day? That just shows how much of a lack of awareness and understanding there is within the space. That is something again when we go into schools and we are talking to parents in the sessions. I think there is a gap between what knowledge is there and what knowledge is widely understood.

Q62 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for that. I have one more, then we must move on. Sorry to rush you. What interventions work to best help young people once they have become part of an organised crime gang? How do you get them out?

Bali Rodgers: That is the high-risk point.

Lennox Rodgers: It is very hard to get a young person out. They must want to come out. If they do not want to come out, then you are going to be working against the wind. If they want to come out, they must cut themselves off from all the social media. Sometimes it is very difficult because they must stay in the same area. What I have to do in my line of work is empower the young people to cope in difficult situations, whether it be coming out of a gang, living in a home where there are negative influences, or be in that school, having all sorts of issues with no help available. How do you cope when you are in a situation such as that?

I teach them how to cope in very difficult circumstances. Coming out of a gang there is not a one size fits all. Just to draw a distinction, there are county line gangs, but there are also groups of friends who do county lines or just sell drugs. Some of them are not targeting children. To get a young person out of a gang is very hard. You must work with them a few times a week and work with the families and guide them down a particular process, depending on their situation. Sometimes they may have to move.

Covid was a perfect opportunity. Some of the people we helped had to say, "He is not around because he has Covid". Their friends can be trapped by some of these gangs and you must help them make a lot of changes, but it is very hard. Everyone's situation is different. You need people who have been there and done it to help guide them along. Apart from the families and young people who need help and support, we need help and support to continue to do the wonderful work that our services are doing.

Bali Rodgers: The amount of work that goes into it, I will give you an example. Lennox has spent probably one month helping a young person who came out of prison who was very keen to change. We babysat him in

our offices, we made sure he stayed with us everywhere he went until we managed to get him somewhere where someone was prepared to take him into employment. That took four weeks. Lennox walked into God knows how many shops or places before he found someone that was prepared to take him on. All that extra work that goes into that one person is not just the amount of money that we have been given for that one person; it is all the cost recovery, the investment that we have put in, night and day, to that particular person to rehabilitate their life. It is all the extras that are not considered. That is why if you have that continuity it becomes part of a culture that young people feel that they belong to and that they can continue to come to.

We have had about 25 young people in the last three years turn up on our doorstep because once upon a time I was counselling them in school when they were 11 and four or five years later they have sought us out. They have even contacted us from prisons and school, "Anybody know Lennox or Bali? Anybody know Refocus?" and they have turned up on our doorstep and said, "It is time for change. I want to change now". How would that happen if a service is given funding one minute and they are gone the next? Who would they go to?

Chair: Junior, I know you want to come in, but I am going to let Ian ask his question because I think this is pertinent.

Q63 **Ian Mearns:** I think it is absolutely pertinent because it is about security of funding. How are organisations such as St Giles and Refocus funded and is the funding secure and sustained? Do you feel there is a case for investing more in organisations such as yours? I am sure that you do.

Bali Rodgers: Yes, 100%. I think it is more about the fact that you can—

Ian Mearns: I will bring Junior in first.

Bali Rodgers: Sorry.

Junior Smart: I agree 100%. I personally would like to know who is doing the sums that are saying X, Y and Z is how much is needed in this space. The ideology around the amount of funding compared to the need is just unbelievably low. You cannot even touch the sides. How many different reports have been done around county lines? To be honest, nobody knows how many young people are involved. The reality for us at St Giles is to create change. Let me just say this: across our county lines child criminal exploitation services we have been very fortunate. We have been able to see around 70% of those that we have worked with be able to engage, leave and potentially exit the exploitative groups that they are in.

Here is the truth of the matter: that work takes hundreds of hours to do. It is not a conversation. It is not something that can be delivered over lunchtime. It is not even something that can be delivered an hour every month for a year. This is intensive work. Anyone who knows the reality of

working with these young people knows that the static factors, the dynamic factors, the threats to the home, the threats to the siblings—this is not just me saying it, this has been evidenced by report after report—it takes funding to do it.

Q64 **Ian Mearns:** Junior, I know there is not enough, but what I want to know is where does it come from? Where does your funding come from and how sustainable is it?

Junior Smart: The reality is the funding that is out there is largely reactive. We can compete for funding pots. We are still largely dependent on a lot of donations. I think a lot of the institutions have woken up to the fact that they cannot address this by themselves. The reality is that it leaves organisations competing over funding to deliver work. What that removes from it is the creativity part of it.

One of the great things that we were able to do at St Giles is look at custody suite work. When kids are arrested and drugs are seized, that is going to create a drug debt. That is going to have consequences and repercussions on that young person and their family.

Q65 **Ian Mearns:** What proportion of your funding comes from public funds and what comes from charitable donations?

Junior Smart: This is something we need to check, but I think the larger amount of money comes from the public purse in terms of the work around it. In terms of donations, there would not be enough there to meet the demand, although we are absolutely grateful for any donations we get.

Q66 **Ian Mearns:** It sounds as though you are bidding against pots of money all the time in order to sustain yourself.

Junior Smart: Exactly, this is the crazy thing. You might have an organisation such as Refocus competing against a larger organisation. You have heard it. It does terrific work, but there is not the money there to upscale and replicate that work. It is the same thing for St Giles. We are in a competitive situation, when what you need in that space is organisations working together because you need that space. My biggest concern is always the phone calls that I get from the families that are outside of the areas that we are funded to do the work in. The funders, as great as they are, are not going to say, "Okay, we have given you the money so you can do some work over there as well". That is not how it works. We have to stretch ourselves and no one wants to let a family go, no one wants to let a young person who is at risk go, but that is the reality.

Can I make one more point? There is something else that must be said: a lot of agencies that are out there are saying, "No, we are all right. We are okay" but that is not what is happening with them working with reduced funds. What we have seen—again, this has been evidenced by report after report—is the thresholds have been increased and raised, so now

you cannot make a referral to someone who is on the cusp. The different services that are around that partnership will not work with that young person until they are criminalised, until it is too late, and then we have lost a massive space where work could have been done to prevent. All that happens is that the issues with that young person show up later in other services—police, prison and rehabilitation—which we know is a negative revolving door.

Lennox Rodgers: We have had to dip our hands into our own pockets. We sold our house to get funding to help kids and families. Bali works tirelessly fundraising.

Bali Rodgers: Yes. That is the dilemma, isn't it? You end up fundraising when you want to be on the ground helping some of the families. You do not get that time because you can't buy experts in because you do not have the funding. I help a lot of small charities fundraise, by the way, the ones that you were talking about, that need to be youth diversionary projects. That is what I am trying to do now, empower them to empower young people. Right now, however, Lennox's salary is half-paid by a funder and that is secured for two years. Right now we have a young person, half of whose salary is funded right now, and half of our office is funded. That is Refocus. To be honest, most of our income comes from donations and charitable grants. We have done commission work in the past. There is a lot of bureaucracy and a lot of politics with commissioned money and we like to keep out of it. You cannot be young people led if you are led by the Government. You cannot; it is impossible. What young people want is very different from what the Government wants, and what the Government gives you is what you have to do with that money. We resist that sometimes. We are just being honest because we need to. We do not have long in our lives now and we want to do the best we can by young people.

One of our biggest issues right now is where we are getting a lot of young people dumped on us by public services, who only have six sessions with a young person and need an exit strategy. They contact us, send over the referral without even checking with us and we say to them, "I'm sorry, but you have had no discussion about this young person". "But we thought Refocus would take them." Why? The concept of what a charity is is not that we are free; it is that we need to be paid and we need full cost recovery as much as any other organisation.

Q67 **Ian Mearns:** That is problem number one, isn't it?

Bali Rodgers: At the moment social services are dumping a lot of young people our way in early help without giving us any funding and hoping that we will take them on by fundraising. We value our service and believe that we are worth a hell of a lot more after eight years.

Q68 **Ian Mearns:** Would I be right in thinking that at the same time as doing that, by making a referral and passing them on—which you do not have the capacity to take on—they are not only passing the problem on but

they are also passing the blame on because, "I just made the referral"?

Bali Rodgers: We become the fall guy. We become the fall guy a lot because they have run out of money and then we are the ones with the problem.

Chair: We need to wrap up this panel soon so I will bring Andrew Lewer in to ask the last couple of questions.

Q69 **Andrew Lewer:** On Friday I attended a conference on county lines in my constituency, Northampton. A young man, Jack Bott, who is a teenager, organised it from his school, Quinton House School. It brought together the local Hope Centre, the homeless centre, the university, the police, West Northamptonshire Council and all the local schools. It was clear from that that working together and that co-operative approach is important. How can that best be achieved? What do you think some of the gaps are in getting that working together to be a success?

Bali Rodgers: Collaborative working becomes competitive sometimes because of the very thing we are talking about, funding. Unless you are all coming from an even playing field with everybody having had the same amount of money or whatever they need to provide that provision, it is very hard to work in partnership. If you can work in partnership, we always recommend it. We have about six or seven services that work around Refocus and I co-ordinate them and get them collaborating around those young people to make sure they are looked after. To do that takes a hell of a lot of work, but you have to come from the same playing field. If somebody has money and another person does not, your provision will be very different.

Lennox Rodgers: I have seen it work in communities working together. We need to encourage communities to work together. I have seen families picking up other families' kids while the parents are working, feeding them until they get home and stuff like that, watching out in their community, in their little neighbourhood, for everyone's kids. We need to encourage communities to do that more.

Bali Rodgers: That is what we are trying to do. We have mothers—I have helped their young people and Lennox has helped too—and those mothers have come back into the Safer Communities Alliance and are helping some of the other mothers. It is coproduction. If we don't get coproduction, it is pointless. We need people who have been there going back in and investing into communities. They are the ones that know. They are the ones that are able to hit the need because they know what it is and they are engaging with those families and parents who are struggling with their young people now. That is what we need.

Q70 **Chair:** Junior, I will bring you in about working together and how that can be better achieved between all the different organisations involved in trying to help to tackle county lines.

Junior Smart: Just prior to when Covid hit, St Giles organised the first county lines link-up. That brought together partners for Essex. We followed the county line all the way from London through to Suffolk and brought together partners from across different organisations. We had youth offending teams, the charitable sector and other frontline organisations. The argument was as simple as this: these organised criminal networks do not constrain themselves within borders. They are not scared of sharing information. They pride themselves on the speed and efficacy that they are able to do it with. The reality is that organisations, statutory and voluntary, should be working off the same remit.

If the violence is that prolific, just because a young person is a victim outside your area, it should not be less of a concern to you than someone who is in your area. That is the biggest issue that we have, that and funding and the bureaucracy. The reality was that we held this event, there were a lot of a doubters, but at the end everyone said, "Do you know what, this actually makes sense. We should be sharing information," and that was a massive win for us. The reality is that with that event, I have not heard of anything similar in nature since that time. The very fact that you said yours was organised by a young person speaks volumes because obviously he or she, they want that. They are scared. What does that speak to? Absolutely, I think young voices should be included—I have been saying so from the start—with that lived experience, but also bringing together organisations.

Can I say one other thing? One of the reports said that even the police systems from different areas do not communicate with each other. That is something that has to be changed. How on earth can that ever be workable if we are to stop the criminalisation and the exploitation and sexualisation of the young people involved in this? That is the key, besides funding, removing the bureaucracy and making everybody work off one template. CCE is not statutory. It is not recognised across the board yet. That needs to change, getting people around the table to tackle this.

Q71 **Andrew Lewer:** Thank you very much. That was some final thoughts and recommendations from Junior Smart. What about you, Bali and Lennox? What are your final thoughts about the best or key thing we can do to tackle this?

Lennox Rodgers: We need to get our services into schools more. We need to pick these young people up at an earlier stage. It is very difficult for teachers and police and prison officers to deal with everyone's problems. They are there to do a particular job. You probably need other outside agencies to help in schools to deal with some issues. Take things like stop and search. I do not even think that the police should be the ones doing stop and search. I think it should be a completely different company that is spread across the country doing that. I think that stop and search is good and it works if it is done fairly, but there are so many

issues. There are a lot of good police, but there are some bad ones that let the side down. I think a different company could come in and deal with that and it might look very different. You need to get people with lived experience into schools more and other services.

We need more help for prisoners coming out because there is a lot of homelessness. We need employers to go into prisons and offer work training. Sometimes they do courses in prisons and when they come out it is such a struggle. We need to involve a lot more outside agency professionals in these areas to help the regular services, whether it be the police, prison officers or teachers in schools. We need the judicial system to change. I think there should be an age limit for some judges, who seem out of touch with reality. I think we need to change some of how the judicial system works. I think that lawyers—some lawyers—probably need some education around stuff to do with county lines.

Chair: A lot of recommendations for the Committee to take away. I am grateful for that, though some of them stray beyond our remit. We need to move on to our second panel. I am very grateful for all of your evidence. It has been a very useful and informative session, thank you.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Commander Paul Brogden, Jahnine Davis, Mark Kerr and Simon Ford.

Q72 **Chair:** Welcome to our second panel. As you will appreciate, we have plenty to get through today so I will introduce very briefly Commander Paul Brogdon, Lead for Gangs and County Lines at the National Police Chiefs' Council; Jahnine Davis, panel member of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel; Mark Kerr, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Children's Homes Association, and Simon Ford, Head of Community Safety at Southend-on-Sea City Council. You are very welcome, and thank you for joining us.

Can I start by asking what you think is the scale of childhood exploitation and county lines from the perspective of each of your organisations? Is it getting better or worse? We heard from the panel earlier that nobody knows how many young people are involved. Is that a fair assessment or can we begin to set a scale on the size of this problem?

Commander Brogden: Working off the police national database, we use flagging systems around people who may be engaged or exploited through county lines. We estimate that about 20% of those involved in county lines are juveniles. Working on that basis, we would say the scale of the problem currently is around 4,000 children that we know of nationally who may be involved in or exploited through county lines, if that gives you some sense of the scale. I would say that about 20% of those are involved in terms of exploitation.

Q73 **Chair:** Would you say that number is roughly consistent or going up or

going down in terms of what we have seen previously?

Commander Brogden: It has been roughly consistent for the last four years. It ebbs and flows. We are seeing a welcome rise in terms of the age of those exploited. The average age has risen from 14 to 15. Nevertheless, it is still 4,000 too many. I hope that gives some idea of the scale of the problem in terms of its impact on young children.

Q74 **Chair:** Very interesting, thank you. Would other panellists care to comment on that or give a different view?

Mark Kerr: We are seeing a significant increase—I will constrain myself to the social care system—in the number of those becoming looked after, which a lot of them need. From referral patterns and engagement with our members across all areas of the sector, we are seeing a significant increase in referrals for sexual exploitation and county lines and criminal exploitation. The problem is that there is nowhere for them to go currently. There is a looming crisis. I find myself saying the words "unprecedented crisis" much more than I ever have in 20 years. Towards the end of this year we will be looking at a crisis such as we have never seen before, due to policy changes around unregulated accommodation, which has acted as a bit of a pressure-release valve for the rest of the residential sector.

Regulation changes mean that looked-after young people will no longer be allowed in those settings. Some amazing work by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory found that about 25% of DoL orders are in unregulated settings. They will not be allowed to be there by the end of the year. They will become illegal placements. There is no mitigation for this at the moment, and the reason for that is that the residential sector, which is regulated, is in crisis and is paralysed because of workforce issues. We are heading for a very tricky winter.

Q75 **Chair:** If that demand is there and growing, surely there are responsibilities on local authorities and other organisations to try to commission more regulated services in this space, but you are saying that it is the workforce challenge that is the prime block on this.

Mark Kerr: Yes. Unfortunately everything comes back to that. Currently I am working with Greater Manchester, Thames Valley, London boroughs, and the south-west counties, so a large number of local authorities where we have developed recruitment campaigns, the first ever in 30 years. The local authorities are committed to working with us, but it is the scale of the problems. For example, at the moment 70% of children's homes do not have a registered manager. We probably need in excess of 10,000 staff, 200 registered managers to deal with the regulation of the unregulated, but despite repeated calls we are getting no joy from the Department for Education, despite £20 million for foster care for recruitment. We have given tangible asks to try to address this with oven-ready solutions, but so far residential seems to be this forgotten sector that nobody wants to pay attention to.

Simon Ford: I would echo what Mark was saying there about, "Is the scale remaining high? Is it increasing?" I think it remains significantly high. It was only three or four years back when 50% of all police forces were reporting county line activity and now you will find that all 99 forces in the UK report county line activity. That remains the same this year and has been the same for the last couple of years.

I hear what the Commander says about 4,000 children involved, but that is police figures. When you look at some of the figures that are being generated, recent research by the Children's Society suggested 12,000 children are involved in county line activity. That still is nowhere near what it suspects, around potentially 200,000 in the UK, that are involved in some aspects of county line activity. I think that is where we are at the moment in terms of demand.

When you look at my own patch in Essex, in 2017 we had 15 young people under the age of 16 arrested for drugs and county line activity. A year or so back—2021, 2022—that figure had risen to 56, so I would suggest that the scale is certainly increasing.

Chair: Commander, you were nodding along to some of that.

Commander Brogden: I think that is a very fair assessment. These are only the figures that we know of. Like I said, there are hidden figures here. Just to give some further context there, our safeguarding of children has dramatically increased. In 2021-22 we safeguarded 575 children; in 2022-23 it was 1,578. Those figures are increasing and it indicates we are still yet to understand the full scale of the problem ourselves.

Jahnine Davis: Could I come in there? While of course the focus is on county lines, sometimes that might be the presenting issue or the issue that has been responded to. However, thinking about some of the cases we receive at the panel, these children have experienced intrafamilial harm in the home; they are experiencing other forms of harms that are not necessarily identified much earlier. It is only when they become involved in or impacted by criminality much later that you see this involvement or intervention. When we think about statistics and reporting, sometimes that can be skewed because the focus is not necessarily acknowledging all the other forms of harms those young people are experiencing or have experienced previously.

Q76 **Chair:** In terms of those harms, do you see that as a worsening problem overall or is that something that is impossible to tell because we just do not have the data?

Jahnine Davis: It is very difficult to tell. From a panel perspective, what we see time and time again with our cases is some of these children and young people are in plain sight but they have only, as I said, become involved, or attention around what they are experiencing tends to be much later. There is a real lack sometimes of exploration and curiosity

and consideration of some of the experiences they have been encountering much younger. Some of that is in relation to how bias plays out, into which groups of children are more likely to be perceived as being vulnerable and how that influences our safeguarding responses and decision making.

From a panel perspective, while of course we see county lines as an issue, we are clear that it is not the only issue and there are intersecting issues happening as well.

Chair: All the evidence we have heard suggests that children who end up being exploited by county lines have often gone through other traumas or adverse experiences to get there. Obviously, as we have just been engaging with the previous panel, earlier intervention on those other issues would be helpful in addressing that. I will bring in Kim Johnson.

Q77 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. I want to pick up on the issue about that level of inconsistency because both Paul and Simon gave different figures. Is that replicated across police forces around how information is gathered so we do not have an accurate picture of the issue at the moment?

Commander Brogden: The HMICFRS report around county lines indicates the accuracy of data. That is one area we are focusing on. You mentioned about the police national database getting some consistency on the use of flaggings and markers around how we understand the scale of the problem. Obviously I work across all 43 Home Office police forces as well as British Transport police. There is a regional structure co-ordinated through the National County Lines Coordination Centre. We work together to try to get that data as accurate as we can, but as you will be aware, it is not always infallible. I would like to think the data are improving with the accuracy, but there is always more work to do in that space.

Q78 **Kim Johnson:** Jahnine, you mentioned the issue about bias and racism and the adultification of black children, so I just wanted to know how they are dealt with. Are they seen as victims or are they treated as criminals?

Jahnine Davis: It depends, but the reality is when adultification is present it means that children are not necessarily acknowledged in relation to their vulnerability. Instead you see this increase in culpability and responsibility impacting on how they are then responded to when safeguarding concerns are present. When we look at some of the cases we receive, what you tend to see is the core focus on criminality and a lack of focus around what they may have experienced throughout their childhood, but also the fact that we are still talking about children, and children are innately vulnerable.

What we are doing now at the panel—because of recurring things we see around an inconsistent response to black children and black and

racialised children—is a piece of work looking at race, racism and culture and the implications for child protection. We know that there is bias within our system and I think we just have to be more willing to acknowledge how that influences decision making across the board.

We also know that more recently the report from the Missing People charity and Listen Up—where they looked at the ethnicity of missing people—identified that black care-experienced children disproportionately go missing more than any group and are less likely to have a risk or vulnerability flag against their case in comparison to white children. These groups of children are also those we are talking about in relation to going missing due to exploitation, so it is very difficult not to talk about how discrimination, adultification and bias influences some of that decision making.

Simon Ford: I concur with that. Black or white, a 12 or 13-year-old boy who leaves his front door with a kitchen knife and two bags of class A, where has it gone wrong? At that point? I would suggest not. Is he a victim or is he a perpetrator at that point? That has gone wrong, not at that point when he has left his front door with those items, but years and years before that. I am talking five, six, seven—even younger—in terms of where it started to go off the rails for that kid to leave his front door with those items. That is where we need to concentrate the focus.

Q79 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Simon. The first panel alluded to that, that child exploitation is the presenting problem and not looking at what lies underneath. What needs to happen to tackle child exploitation and county lines? The first panel mentioned the short termism with their funding. What needs to happen to tackle it? Is it about funding or is it where the funding goes? What would be your asks to the Government in tackling this major problem? I will start with Paul first.

Commander Brogden: From a policing perspective, we get a lot of support from the Home Office, £145 million over three years. I think that needs to be put in the context of the 10-year drug strategy, From Harm to Hope, which is £900 million, give or take. It is a case of tracking some of that through. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities has about £533 million, from memory. These are big numbers and big figures. The challenge is how we turn some of that national into the local. I listened with interest to the previous panel. That is where it makes a difference. How do we make sure that we track through? This is all public money that is best spent where it is most effective.

Mark Kerr: I would like to put numbers to things that were talked about earlier on. There was some fantastic work done several years ago by the Audit Commission with York University. They modelled the lifetime cost of care leavers, for example, if we look at the acute end. In today's money they modelled that an extreme negative trajectory for one care leaver across their life course is about £3 million. That is for one. How many go along that continuum? For us there is a huge opportunity to invest to save at the earlier end—the police and some of the speakers earlier on,

who know exactly what they are doing—but we cannot accommodate these children without support from Government and urgent action.

We have three asks, because for us it is very clear what the blockages are in increasing the provision that is desperately needed. First is that the Department supports our recruitment and workforce programmes; secondly, that there is stronger work with DLUHC on planning. One of the biggest barriers to opening up regulated children's homes is planning permissions. There was a recent joint ministerial statement, which was a non-statement, just highlighting what planning laws currently are.

Finally, we are worried that the care review is going to be the Department's Brexit, with unfulfilled promises and unintended consequences. We would urge, because of the crisis that we have, that the Committee can find time for an inquiry just into residential care.

Chair: We will certainly consider that. Nick, you wanted to come in.

Q80 **Nick Fletcher:** Yes, to Commander Paul first. On the previous panel Junior said he was concerned that police forces were not communicating properly with each other, obviously talking about county lines, and that the organised crime gangs are. Bali mentioned relationships that their organisation tries to build up with police forces—and it is something that I have noticed in my constituency—but all the police officers get moved around ever so quickly. I understand promotions are part of life as a police officer, but we need to do as much as we can to get that consistency there. Is there anything we can do about that? Two quick questions.

Commander Brogden: How do we deal with the reality of some police officers moving around? Obviously we like consistency, particularly at neighbourhood policing and sergeant level, but the reality is police officers do move around, as do other partners. Where the consistency needs to come is through systems and processes at a local level that survive people moving on.

In particular, the key one that we engage with is multi-agency safeguarding hubs. It is consistency around the multi-agency safeguarding hubs, membership of the MASHs and in particular how we make sure that education has representation within those local multi-agency safeguarding hubs. They are aware of the safeguarding referrals that come through. My contact is through policing. Give or take, I think we made 5,700 safeguarding referrals through the MASH system. That is where education partners can first get visibility of those who we feel are being exploited and vulnerable. That is where I would like to see the consistency.

It is a challenge about police officers moving on within their careers. I would like to think there is more consistency at neighbourhood level, but we are not always able to deliver that.

Q81 **Nick Fletcher:** The police forces communicating with each other?

Commander Brogden: I spoke about the National County Lines Coordination Centre. That is the main conduit where we try to get the consistency of policing. Obviously I run that centre so I am slightly biased. I would say it is performing well. Could it be improved? Consistency can always be improved. We have all 43 forces engaged. We also run a number of training exercises or Hydra exercises, as we call them. We have about 10,000 police officers and partners attend such exercises over the recent period. We are working together to get that consistent approach and it is also my role on behalf of the National Police Chiefs' Council to try to secure that.

Q82 **Kim Johnson:** I wanted Jahnine and Simon to answer that first question about tackling county lines exploitation. What is needed in terms of funding and what would be your asks from the Government, given that we have had 13 years of austerity and poverty as a major driver?

Jahnine Davis: One of the recommendations from our "It was hard to escape" report a number of years ago, which was very focused on county lines and exploitation, was around the use of data and to have something that is much more joined up and effective, given that we have many children not known to the system going from place to place, but it not necessarily being joined up, and how we can respond and approach their needs. Something we had asked for was better use of how we hold data, obviously acknowledging that there are some risks to doing that, particularly around how it may be used or misused as a way to survey that level of surveillance of children, rather than being used in relation to child protection and safeguarding. However, that was one of the key areas that we wanted to see explored and resourced more.

Simon Ford: There are four things. The first is to make localities fit for purpose, make sure the governance at locality level is right and that there is ownership and accountability of the problem joined up with partnership thinking. Certainly post-Covid I have seen agencies retreat more into silo working—mainly because of budgets and other resourcing constraints, I understand that—and we have lost that focus on joined-up working. I welcome the Government's current review into community safety partnerships, CPS, which is ongoing, because they are absolutely key and remain key in facilitating that joined-up working to deliver a strategic and operational approach at local level. Localities have to be fit for purpose and I do not think they are.

You have to recognise other contributors at play here. Things like exclusions from school are on the increase. The online media activity that we are seeing is increasing. Across the piece—policing, councils, public health—we are all up against the wall with resourcing at the moment, which makes it very hard to tackle this problem. You have to reduce the demand. Basic economics: where there is high demand, you will get supply. Until we start addressing the demand in class A drugs, we are on a losing foot in terms of that.

I would also suggest that the majority—99%—of localities in England and Wales have no grip on what the local drugs market looks like on their patch. Yes, they will have information on drugs arrests and they will have information on those in drug treatment centres, but a whole chunk of the demand is recreational drug-taking and it is very difficult to get any scale of what that looks like. Changing patterns in drug use are equally vital in terms of tackling this. That is something we are struggling with in terms of understanding what the drugs market looks like out our back door. What does it look like? What is the scale of it? I would suggest that most localities in England and Wales have no grip on that at all.

Final point: target the offenders, the key offenders, the ones further up the chain. That needs potentially more investment with the police in terms of upskilling law enforcement agencies and their analytical officers to do things such as communications data and cell site analysis stuff. They are the things that are winning the war against these gangs, not necessarily the traditional methods of undercover police officers working at street level. Yes, that has a place, but we need to get a grip on the vitality of communications data and the products that can really bring down a county line at a trial. That is absolutely vital.

Q83 **Miriam Cates:** This is for Commander Brogden. The Government says that its approach to county lines is a public health-based approach, a preventive one, but if you look at all the interventions and where most of the investment has gone, it is more down the enforcement route. Do you think that current policy and funding has the right balance? As a police officer, would you like to see that balance shift or do you think it is about right?

Commander Brogden: I have already given my rough breakdown of the funding around the 10-year drugs plan. We would need to look at it in that scale, as a whole system. Absolutely, it is a health-based approach.

I am obviously speaking about a police approach. We do try to broaden that under "prevent, protect, prepare" but effectively we are a law enforcement agency so it is often pursue-focused. That is where we need to work more with our partners. We heard from a range of partners earlier in the previous panel. It is about making sure that we understand the police role, particularly around safeguarding referrals, because we are not the experts to look after these young children who are being exploited and we need to refer them to those who can support.

As I have already mentioned, how do we make sure that we are maximising the Government investment around that 10-year strategy? It is not just the £145 million that is towards policing; there is another £150 million towards a wider policing of the drug supply network around organised crime, working with our regional organised crime units. Again, it is tracking back that money. Let us go back to the investment that the Government have made as part of the drugs strategy and make sure that we are maximising that and all aspects of it.

Q84 **Miriam Cates:** Yes. I suppose what I am trying to dig into more is: do you think the money would be better spent earlier on prevention? I absolutely appreciate all you are doing with that money but there was something Simon said about these kids, that it did not go wrong at age 12, it probably went wrong at age three or four or potentially even earlier. As brilliant a job as you are doing with the resources that you have, given that resources in this country are limited and that we are spending more money than we ever have as a state, should we not redirect some of that money into the early years, families and the key protections that children have early on to stop them going down this road, or do you think that is too difficult to do and would take too long?

Commander Brogden: We would always rather these kids were not exploited in the first place. Prevention is always our first point of call. If we could prevent it earlier, then I would absolutely sign up to that. I do not think you would find many police officers who would not. However, the reality is that we are coming in further down the chain and we cannot just take our eye off that. I have given you some statistics in terms of the policing contribution to solving this problem. Effectively, if some of that money was spent to prevent it—we are still dealing with the symptoms but that would be at root cause—no police officer is going to sit there and not sign up to that, but—

Miriam Cates: You have to deal with what you have.

Commander Brogden: That is right, yes.

Miriam Cates: Mark, did you want to come in?

Mark Kerr: I just want to highlight that there is some great multi-agency work going on. It has been talked about earlier, but obviously the police job is generally at the enforcement end. For example, we work closely with the police and the Mayor's MOPAC office on children going missing, particularly on looked-after children. The challenge is at the local authority end. It is the silo thinking. Is it a health problem? Is it a social care problem? I would argue it is all of them. At a local authority level, if we look at some of the biggest spend areas, since 2010 we have seen a 28% increase in children coming into care and the cost of care getting more expensive, against a backdrop of a 16% decrease in funding. It does need to be multi-agency. We do need to bridge these silos. Closer working relationships already exist, but it is funding. Whose problem, whose budget?

Q85 **Miriam Cates:** Yes, and where is the money coming from? As I just said, we are spending more money than we ever have as a state. The answer can't be more money because there isn't any. This is the question we have. At some point, we have to shift our resource spending from prevention to cure because it is a hell of a lot cheaper. As you said, the average care leaver costs the state £3 million over the course of their life. Obviously the system—despite amazing work from all of you guys—is not working.

Jahnine Davis: The reality is that we are always going to have issues with resource but it cannot be the only conversation we are having. There is something about a cultural shift and an attitude shift—and some of that takes even more time—in relation to how we support or even perceive these groups of children.

There needs to be better recognition and understanding of what it is to be a statutory safeguarding partner. Police are statutory safeguarding partners, as well as health and children's social care, and for me it is whether or not that is always understood or captured in how partnerships come together and support one another in their understanding. How do we ensure we are working together, off the same sheet, so that we do not have enforcement happening over here or a different thing happening over here? From what we see at panel, sometimes there is that lack of understanding about what the role is of a statutory safeguarding partner or what one would expect to see.

While we appreciate that of course resource is going to be an ongoing issue, what we tend to see at panel are issues around information sharing. It is a perennial issue, one of the ongoing themes that comes up time and time again when we see cases go wrong, and it is not just the information sharing. When you have the information, it is what you are doing with it and how you are analysing the information you have. While it is important, as I said, to acknowledge some of these issues, I think some of this is around a cultural shift and cultural attitudes in terms of how we confront and manage these various difficulties.

Simon Ford: I would underscore that. I go back to partnerships. They are absolutely central. Jahnine is right around resources, we have to realise that the resources now are finite and we are working with what we have. The only way to tackle this is to come back to partnership working. I think you mentioned earlier the public health approach, which is great, and I welcomed that when the word was first bandied about two or three years ago, but it had public health officials running for the doors because they immediately thought that it was down to public health to fix county lines. That missed a trick completely. I would prefer to use "a partnership approach" rather than "public health".

It needs a strategic framework, something like the 4P approach. First you prepare local areas, making it hard for gangs to operate in localities. Under prevent, you train frontline staff right across the piece in seeing the signs of county line activity and how they would refer. Under protect, it is about early intervention and safeguarding, which are absolutely essential, and about risk management tools. Finally, under pursue, it is about targeting the key offenders.

If you were to apply something like that as a framework within a locality, overseeing governance through the community safety partnership working in that locality, I think you have a chance of joining up and

sharing resources across the partner agencies—which are all struggling—to apply their bit to that 4P approach.

Q86 **Miriam Cates:** Moving on, Jahnine, you answered most of this question in a previous reply to Kim about adultification of children, but I just want to dig into the treatment of girls within gangs. Obviously there are fewer girls in gangs, according to the statistics, but you spoke—or it may have been the previous panel—about how they are being sexually abused and treated absolutely appallingly. How should the police and the different stakeholders tackle the problem of girls being exploited differently from how boys are being exploited?

Jahnine Davis: The reality is that sexual exploitation has been happening for many, many years. I think we still have quite a gendered response and gendered understanding about exploitation. What we see in our cases is that when it comes to sexual exploitation, it is girls, and for criminal exploitation and county lines, it is boys and young men. There has to be a better understanding about how girls are exploited in those contexts, as well as—outside of that—the various power dynamics at play, not just in relation to county lines but societally in terms of violence against women and girls: victim-blaming assumptions about women and girls putting themselves at risk, those concerning and harmful narratives that we still hear, whether in the cases we receive or just in wider society, and how that in itself can silence and influence the ways in which either professionals step back from responding or understanding or that girls themselves feel able to disclose and share what is happening to them.

There has to be better understanding around disclosure in general and what disclosure looks like, particularly in relation to exploitation. I think sometimes from a professional perspective we professionalise children and young people too much. We assume that they are always going to verbally be able to tell us what is happening and that does not necessarily consider or acknowledge neurodiversity or any other kind of disabilities. In terms of girls in particular, there needs to be holistic support around them and those professionals who have an understanding of VAWG so that they have a safe space to access to be able to share some of those experiences.

As I said, we should not just be relying on verbal disclosure, but really listening to what young people are telling us, whether that is through changes in behaviour or anything else. Sometimes that means, as I said, applying that curiosity, because unfortunately if we are just responsive to what we think the issue is, if we are just responding to a girl while she is being disruptive, being angry, acting up or kicking off—whatever problematic language is used to describe some of these children—we are not necessarily considering how those responses could be symptomatic of trauma. It is about how, on an interpersonal level but also a wider system level, we professionally apply our curiosity to explore and understand those various issues.

Q87 **Anna Firth:** It follows on directly from this question. In the 2021 report into the police response to violence against women and girls, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services praised the improvement in its county lines policing. What further improvement can be made and what would be your further asks of the Government to continue to improve in tackling this very serious issue? Perhaps I could start with my fellow Southender, Simon Ford.

Simon Ford: I echo what I said earlier on: partnership is absolutely essential. It has to be partnership. In terms of law enforcement, upskilling officers to undertake analytical products in the prosecution of cases would be a game changer in terms of how we go about our enforcement and how we tackle county lines.

A strategic framework, similar to the public health approach or the 4P approach, is essential to joining up those partners. If there is further investment I think it should be around ensuring that those key strategic partnership boards that work at local level—the community safety partnership, the local health and wellbeing board, the local safeguarding board—are joined up. Since Covid I have certainly seen those strategic boards working more in silos again because of the pressures they are under and we have to turn that back around.

The current Home Office review of community safety partnerships, looking at how they are operating and what needs to happen to make them improve and enhance their ability to tackle crime at disorder at a local level, is absolutely essential and something I welcome. Following the review, I hope that the Home Office puts further investment and further support into community safety partnerships. They are the key partnership hubs operating with the right skilled officers at senior and operational level to get a handle on what is going on.

That is your starting point with regard to tackling county lines. Then you can bring in all the other bits: public health, safeguarding and early intervention. Those can all form under a strategic framework that sits with something like a community safety partnership.

Q88 **Anna Firth:** Thank you very much. Please do not feel that you have to repeat points you have already made. Was there something new that you wanted to add to this, Jahnine?

Jahnine Davis: The role of parents and carers, how they are supported, included in decision making and viewed as experts in their own right, particularly non-abusive parents and carers, who I feel at times are responsibilised, seen as the issue and not necessarily included when thinking about what a multi-agency partnership looks like. How often do we include parents and carers in that? From a panel perspective, that is something we tend to talk about or ask partnerships to consider as well.

Local community-based organisations, specialist organisations, whether they specialise in violence against women and girls or other services, as

Junior and others pointed out in the last panel, do not necessarily have the funding or receive the funding and are not necessarily platformed. We do not necessarily have the opportunity to learn and hear about the work they are doing. When we talk about partnership work, we tend to think about partnership, but in relation to other statutory services or those wider or larger charitable organisations. We need to think about how we bring in, as I said, parents, carers and community-based organisations as well.

Mark Kerr: Just to build on that with safeguarding, for a significant proportion of these children and young people the risk to them is environmental. They are on their doorstep, the perpetrators who are exploiting them. Obviously, we are hearing today a lot about identification and about how the police take their approach. What happens to those who sometimes have to be placed out of area? It is the right thing because unless you have a period of breaking that attachment, and often it is an attachment, to a gang or to an exploitative figure—it is not dissimilar to domestic violence.

People say, "Why do people not leave?" There is an attachment there. We need to try to work on that, break that, build self-esteem, address the trauma and, for a lot of those involved in county lines, have a period where you bring them from fight or flight, because they have had to live day by day. That often means, as I say, moving them out of area for a period. Then obviously the question arises, can they go back to that same area with gangs, particularly in the cities? It does need to be a multi-agency approach, looking at that continuum. We cannot just identify and enforce. We need to help with recovery from trauma.

Commander Brogden: While we welcome those findings, we are not going to rest on our laurels here. There is lots more work to do in terms of policing. From my perspective, I work with Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth as part of the National Police Chiefs' Council violence and public protection committee. I am particularly interested in the work that has been done around Project Soteria. You might have heard that phrase. It is the police response to improving around serious sexual offending, led by Chief Constable Sarah Crew. There is definitely work in there that we can continue to build on.

It comes back to making sure that we professionalise our practice and that we look at the children involved in county lines as what they are, victims. They are children who have been exploited. We need to make sure that we use that professional curiosity to understand and work with other partners to safeguard them and that we do not criminalise them, if needed, and do not go down that route.

Q89 **Kim Johnson:** I have a question for Simon. The Children's Society research shows that councils have halved spending on early intervention from £3.8 billion to £1.9 billion and overall funding to children's services and youth offending fell by 23% between 2010 and 2020. How has this

impacted on youth offending teams and children's services? Do you think that they have the necessary expertise and funding to tackle child exploitation and county lines?

Simon Ford: Those reductions have significantly affected localities and we have seen that since 2010 with not just youth offending teams but the wider protective services, community support services, youth teams, youth councils and community groups. All have reduced since 2010. There has been a steady reduction in those protective services that once upon a time our young people used to go to and be part of to get support and help. What is replacing them in those places, where those groups have reduced, is the county line network. It is catching them. When they fall off the cliff, instead of the local community, the local youth offending team or a youth focus group catching them, they are falling into a county line network. That is what is picking them up and that is becoming what they think is their protective service or their family.

Absolutely, in terms of your question, the reduction in budgets at locality level has had a significant impact on our ability to address victims with skilled social workers and skilled youth offending teams to build that level of relationship trust that has to happen in order for those kids to start to talk to us again and trust us as a protective service.

Q90 **Kim Johnson:** A similar question to you, Paul, in terms of the impact of cuts in funding to early intervention services. Have you seen that replicated in terms of the number of cases?

Commander Brogden: The reality is that we have seen cuts across the public sector. How does that transpire in terms of those safeguarding referrals? What is the quality of follow-up and care? Resources are finite. I have no data or statistics that can support you on that, but my sense of it is that the public sector as a whole is under some pressure. Particularly we have heard from a number of voluntary and third-sector partners. It is tough times.

Mark Kerr: Working with local authorities, I sit on a corporate parenting board for a London borough, and at the moment the local authorities are firefighting and have no time for fire prevention. It is this year's budget. They cannot look beyond that. We have to recognise that out there the socioeconomic circumstances are going to keep driving need to the front door.

I echo the comments on the decline in youth services and the decline in long-term preventive measures. As somebody who has care experience myself, having lived in a deprived area, youth workers were some of the core people who were able to divert people. They do not exist anymore. Local authorities cannot take long-term strategies—we are seeing some going into administration—and a five or 10-year strategy is what we need to look at here. We are very concerned that we are looking at a couple of years of policy inertia because we have the summer recess and then we are into election time.

Commander Brogden: Sorry, can I just come back on one area that may be an opportunity? My understanding is that the next round of joint targeted area inspections will look at child criminal exploitation and also looked-after children. There is a good opportunity there to review some of the multi-agency arrangements. I just wanted to flag that up.

Q91 **Nick Fletcher:** This is a question to Commander Brogden. Schools have a statutory duty to monitor signs that children may become involved in county lines. Do you think they are receiving the information that they need from all the different agencies, including from the police?

Commander Brogden: I have already mentioned that the key conduits for us are multi-agency safeguarding hubs. That is a mixed picture. Some areas and regions are heavily engaged and have good representation from local education partners. Anecdotally, I have heard the opposite in some areas. There is something about getting some consistency around that.

Q92 **Nick Fletcher:** Simon, do local authorities and schools work effectively enough in this area, what more could they do and what do they need to facilitate this to happen?

Simon Ford: Speaking from my own experience in Southend, we have a very good relationship with our educational leads. One of the things we are doing is that when there are any episodes of a child missing from home, we inform the educational leads for them to them develop a plan, with a trauma-informed approach, for when they come back to school. Equally, the majority of the educational leads in our sector are connected to the community safety partnership in Southend and work very closely with police colleagues. Specialist officers within youth offending work very closely with police and educational leads in a central hub in Southend, which works closely with the schools and education sector.

One of the things that we have promoted heavily in Southend, and it has now gone pretty much countywide, is awareness campaigns starting from primary school level. Every year group from year 5 or 6 at primary school level right through senior school has an awareness package that is presented to them every year by experts around county lines, youth offending officers, just to bring that awareness of what a county line is. That is also coupled with work with parents. We have a publicity campaign called See the Signs, which we have been running for four or five years, which is advertised right across the city on buses and bus stops. Any parent, guardian or carer can call a contact number if they feel that the person they are caring for or their child is at risk of county line activity.

The strength that we are operating in Southend is pretty high across the city with educational leads, but I can't comment nationally around the levels of that type of partnership connection.

Jahnine Davis: Some of it is quite inconsistent and fragmented. There seems to be quite a piecemeal approach to how we support and engage with children, particularly from a school context. However, there is evidence, particularly in the work of the contextual safeguarding teams at Durham University, around whole-school approaches. Thinking about these issues and what schools are doing, what works well is that more holistic approach. Rather than focusing on that individual child or young person who may be impacted by county lines, you are having a much more holistic and whole-school approach to this, acknowledging the context and the environment in which these children and young people are experiencing the harm and targeting that as the issue, rather than that individual young person. It also removes that level of blame and victimisation.

Building on the point about what work is happening in schools, it is important to have a whole-school approach where you are looking at policy and upskilling teachers and non-teaching staff so that they feel confident and able to identify these issues. There are always emerging and recurring themes, not just in relation to county lines, and it is very difficult for professionals to always feel that they have the confidence and ability to know what is happening. Again, depending on the environment you work in, you need to feel nurtured enough to be given that permission and that confidence to say you do not know. It is also how we upskill the workforce so that they feel able to identify some of these issues.

Simon Ford: There is also a threshold in place nationally, I think, which comes under truancy. If a child has not been present in school for 10 days, that is the threshold at which that school then makes a report to the local authority or the police. I would suggest that 10 days is possibly too long. You are looking at two weeks missing from school before the school has a duty to report and that might need to be looked at.

Jahnine Davis: There are also those children who are electively home educated, where from a safeguarding focus there may be less known about some of those children and there is less visibility. That is also an area.

Simon Ford: Just on home schooling, the local authority does not do as many checks where there is home schooling involved. There are annual checks on a home-schooled child. Potentially we have hidden cohorts that we do not recognise because of the increase—and there is an increase post-Covid—of home schooling. Equally with home schooling, parents do not have to pay fines if their child is not at school. They can elect to do it that way. There is an issue there in the background that I think is developing and needs to be looked at.

Q93 **Chair:** One of the concerns of this Committee has been there is a gateway to elective home education, but it does not necessarily mean the children are actually being home educated. We all know there are some

very good examples of elective home education, but unfortunately there are also some cases where people might have chosen to go down that route and then not managed. That is one of the concerns, the visibility that the system does not have to work out where those cases are.

Simon Ford: We saw the risks in the increase in online exploitation through Covid, so in seeing more home schooling, again there is just that risk that more online exploitation is occurring.

Jahnine Davis: The panel is looking at elective home education, but not only do we see that lack of visibility of children who are electively home educated, some of the reasons as to why children are going into EHE is that parents and carers don't necessarily always feel school and education is a safe place for their children, just to acknowledge that principal factor as well.

Chair: Absolutely. Mark, do you want to come back on that?

Mark Kerr: Yes. Obviously there is much to be done in terms of identification of kids that are at school in terms of county lines, but the main challenge that we have in terms of the residential sector is often securing a school place. With maintained schools, there is a statutory duty to receive a looked-after child; with academies there is not the same duty. Often we have referrals to hundreds of our members around the country asking them to take a child—a young person that is at risk of county lines. The National Crime Agency notes that looked-after children are at particular risk, but we need to secure an education placement or the provider can't take the child. I think it is about 80% now of secondary schools that are academies, but there is no duty for them to take a looked-after child.

Q94 **Nick Fletcher:** We have been touching on this, but the evidence points to a strong link between exclusion and exploitation. How should this be addressed? Jahnine.

Jahnine Davis: I think it is very difficult, to be honest. It is an ongoing issue, because if we look at exclusion, from the cases we see—and also there is evidence—we know that there are links between exclusion and how that can exacerbate risks of exploitation or those who are already experiencing it. It is not just about exclusion; it is also about those who are then just sent into internal exclusion and what that looks like, but that is a whole other discussion.

It is very difficult to answer the question, if I am honest, and at the panel we struggle to answer this question because it is a recurring issue. We know there have been various different reports and reviews on school exclusions, but we are still seeing the same similar themes and issues come out. Some of it is why and what is the reasoning around school exclusion. We know some of it is in relation to behaviour or behavioural issues or how schools identify and respond to those issues. It is how they

feel supported to manage certain issues where children are presenting with certain behaviours.

We also we know there are other issues in relation to discrimination. We are seeing boys from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities who are more likely to be excluded, whether fixed term or permanently. Again, that brings in another conversation in terms how we manage that, then thinking about how discrimination of course is very much a precondition to exclusion. I am not sure, from a panel perspective, that we have a very clear answer yet.

We do have concerns and we remain concerned about the level of exclusion. The same goes for managed moves in general, where children are just moving from school to school, place to place, becoming more at risk, becoming more vulnerable and having that sense of rejection, where they feel like no one wants them, where they are just not accepted anywhere. It is how that can act as a further factor in them feeling maybe, "Those who are over there who are potentially causing me harm are at least offering me some level of safety and holding me up in some way", because the places that have been set up to support them sometimes produce further harm. That is a very long-winded answer, but I don't think we have a particular answer to exclusion, other than we know it is a continuing issue. I think it is a systemic issue.

In relation to academies and academisation and the issues around exclusion, that is another concern for us. I don't think we have a particular solution, if I am honest. I just think it is something we continue to keep an eye on and ask systems to engage in conversations and reflect on why we are continuing to see issues and concerns around exclusion rates, in particular to racialised and minoritised children.

Q95 **Kim Johnson:** A very quick question about increased securitisation in schools, Jahnine, in terms of more police in schools and Prevent and whether that leads to criminalisation and exclusions.

Jahnine Davis: We know there have been various reports around police in schools, so Kids of Colour, an organisation in Greater Manchester, has done a report looking at the use of policing in schools and how that can exacerbate fear for children and young people, particularly those who are used to experiencing oversurveillance. It is very difficult sometimes, because obviously you will have those individual officers on the ground, who of course are there to provide care and support, but if we understand the impact of how institutional spaces have historically been perceived and experienced by minoritised communities, there is a sense that those spaces are not safe, but naturally of course that can exacerbate those fears. We know, unfortunately, from recent local Child Safeguarding Practice Review findings the use of policing in schools has potentially exacerbated the use of enforcement and a misuse of enforcement. Yes, they are some of the themes we also see.

Q96 **Caroline Ansell:** I have a question about periods of going missing. This

has been identified as a particular risk for children and young people to fall into county lines exploitation. I am going to conclude from everything you have shared this morning that you would concur with that position. Do you think that a missing persons database might have a part to play? Might return home interviews also be a significant intervention in this space? And could you say a little more on how schools fit into this picture? Simon, you already mentioned the 10-day threshold, but are there other aspects that would bring schools into greater play? Does anyone have a particular comment on the significance of periods of going missing when it comes to tackling this issue?

Mark Kerr: From my perspective, obviously return home interviews are standard in residential care if they go missing. Different areas have different protocols as and when a child is reported missing, timescales et cetera, which works very well. There is fantastic joint working that works very well and there is fantastic joint working going on among foster and residential providers and police forces around the country. It would be logical just to expand that to those that are at risk of exploitation. It is there, it is in place and it is a very simple solution. You are just expanding the criteria of the children that would be able to—

Q97 **Caroline Ansell:** It should be made standard across the piece to bring that coherency.

Mark Kerr: Standard, yes.

Jahnine Davis: I think return home interviews can be quite inconsistent. It is dependent on who is doing them. It depends on the relationship that child or young person may have with the person in terms of how much they feel able to share and engage. Again, it comes down to, as I said, the data and how data are used or how potentially data can be misused in terms of how that will be held.

Q98 **Caroline Ansell:** How do you see good practice sitting then? You say it can be ineffective and it can be super-effective. What does it look like?

Jahnine Davis: I think what good practice looks like is how we centre the voice of children and young people, how we hear and engage with them, how we meet them where they are on their journeys, how we provide flex in our systems to ensure that what we are not doing is shoehorning children and young people in services or in approaches that fit our narrative but don't necessarily provide them with the service they may need.

Q99 **Caroline Ansell:** How would it be resourced?

Jahnine Davis: I don't know how it would be resourced. I think some of this is maybe already resourced. Some of this is whether or not we know the services. There are services out there that may already be doing this work. Some of that is around how we partner up, how we provide that level of knowledge transfer. I know that, for example, Missing People has been doing quite a lot of work looking at exploitation in particular county

lines, and the organisation Listen Up is doing a piece of work explicitly speaking to black children, because they are more likely to go missing, around how they feel about responses to them and what would support them, thinking about the return home interview process.

Q100 **Caroline Ansell:** Should schools be doing more around children and young people who are not in schools, which was the second part of that question? There was a different threshold to reporting perhaps and a further role for schools here.

Mark Kerr: Again, for looked-after children we have virtual schools. They know normally within an hour if a child or young person hasn't arrived at the school and then a mechanism will kick in, depending on the individual child. Again, that is something that could be expanded.

Caroline Ansell: To mainstream, rather than just this.

Mark Kerr: To children at risk of exploitation, for example.

Q101 **Caroline Ansell:** Any comments around the missing persons database?

Simon Ford: It is potentially a good idea, but a weighty subject. You may have some disconnect at a local level in terms of populating, managing and maintaining a national index around missing kids. It probably would need to be further reviewed in terms of how it would work. One idea that seems to have some uptake around missing kids is the voluntary use of GPS tags. This is where you can identify where they have gone. It is a voluntary service, they can take the tag or not, not because they have behaved wrongly or because they have entered the criminal justice system. This is a voluntary use of a tag and it gets them out of county line radar because the county line group won't touch them with a GPS tag. We have been seeing more use of those.

Caroline Ansell: I sense there is further comment, but there are further questions and only three remaining minutes.

Chair: Indeed. I am afraid we are at risk of substantially overrunning and I hope the panel will bear with us if we overrun by a few minutes to get the remaining questions in, but Mohammad, I will bring you in.

Q102 **Mohammad Yasin:** Thank you so much. Back in March, a gang of men were jailed for 26 years for what a judge said was the exploitation of vulnerable people in Bedfordshire for violence and intimidation, using the practice of cuckooing, where the home of a vulnerable person is taken over by a criminal gang or criminal in order to use to store or deal drugs. I am very concerned that vulnerable care leavers or young people living in unregulated accommodation, usually flats, are targets for this crime. Have you come across this and what can be done to protect vulnerable young people from having their situation exploited this way? Jahnine, can I come to you first, please?

Jahnine Davis: Yes. Unfortunately we are aware of cuckooing and we are aware that it is those that are most vulnerable who tend to be exploited in terms of they are abused and the homes in which they live in are abused. Again, some of these young people, even vulnerable adults, most times they are known to the system. I think some of this is around information sharing and how we co-ordinate our responses to ensure we do have a better understanding. If we know we have a residential home, do we know what is happening in our locality in terms of potential vulnerable spots? What are the hotspots and how do we ensure we engage with the police and other partners around ensuring that they are aware of those spaces?

In terms of your concern, from a panel perspective, we do see these cases. We know that with these groups of people, in particular in neurodiversity, vulnerability is exacerbated and exploited even further. We see that a lot in our cases. Again, I think it is around how we information share and a more joined-up approach to supporting these groups of people and ensuring that they are informed and know the places and people who they can speak to when potentially at risk of harm.

Q103 **Mohammad Yasin:** What can be done to share better information between forces regarding children in care?

Jahnine Davis: In terms of forces, other panellists may be best placed to share that.

Mark Kerr: We discussed earlier on about the sharing, but just picking up on your point, there is currently new legislation being implemented for semi-independent and supported accommodation. I am pleased to say that that does not require them to do a location assessment. We do come up with a situation where one of the first points of call you should go to would be the local police force, the community policing sergeant, but they are not necessarily at liberty to disclose due to data protection laws and so on. You are quite limited on what data you can gather to decide whether or not that place is suitable. There is also the thorny issue of how much care they receive when they go to that setting, because some of them—as has been said, the neurodivergent—are very vulnerable. Unfortunately the new legislation only really allows to provide support and not care; otherwise it becomes an illegal children's home.

Q104 **Ian Mearns:** Is it a data protection issue if you go and consult somebody and, without giving any names, they just say, "I wouldn't touch that location with a bargepole"?

Mark Kerr: Yes, but it varies in the degree and the strength of the message that is given. Obviously the police are in a difficult situation in what they can disclose.

Q105 **Ian Mearns:** I know there are data protection issues, but common sense has to come into it sometimes.

Jahnine Davis: Some local authorities, linked to country lines as well wider forms of extrafamilial harm, undertake mapping activities. That has been a known piece of work for quite a while with the national contextual safeguarding scale-up work, where it works with various different partner agencies to map what is happening in the local area, so again there is that better information about what might be happening. There are things, yes.

Q106 **Mohammad Yasin:** When it comes to medium and long-term care, how confident are you that the care sector will be capable of supporting exploited children?

Simon Ford: Can I just come in there? In terms of your initial question, the safeguarding thresholds—and I am veering here towards adults—are so high. Where you have aspects where a gang takes over a property, often it is the case that the person in that property has low-level mental health issues, even things like autism and Asperger's. Gangs will target those individuals and we are seeing that becoming more of a common practice, but they are too low on the safeguarding threshold for any support or any visitation from mental health safeguarding colleagues at local authority level, so they go off the radar, they have slipped off. That is where the gang come in.

You have to look at the national thresholds around safeguarding. For young kids it is high, but for adults it is very high. You have to have a significant disability to get any form of safeguarding help and that is where the gangs are coming in.

Mark Kerr: We are looking at the regulations at the moment. I am on an expert group with the Department and we are looking at how far some of the duties can be extended into adults, because—exactly right—the age of 18 is a cliff in terms of what services are available, particularly around safeguarding. But in terms of the medium and long term, I want to be clear here that we have a crisis now that will deteriorate. It has got to the level that this Thursday I have a roundtable meeting with insurers, local authority risk officers and lawyers who are at the point that they are probably going to withdraw cover for local authorities for these kids in DoLS, that are in these illegal settings. They are going to be illegal because of the capacity problem we have. The short term is dire; for the medium term, we see nothing on the horizon that will ease the crisis that we have.

Q107 **Mohammad Yasin:** A final one from me. A number of stakeholders have raised concerns about the out of area placements. How effective have they proven? Paul.

Commander Brogden: On the challenge there, there are pros and cons around out of area. County lines unfortunately have a long reach. The people exploiting these young children have a long reach. Often that conduit is via a mobile telephone, so distance isn't a factor there. Our understanding of it is that if a young child is moved away from their

immediate family, friends and area that they know well, again there are advantages and disadvantages around that. I am not expert in it, but that would be an observation from policing.

Q108 **Mohammad Yasin:** They can fall into the wrong hands in a new area as well, can't they?

Commander Brogden: Yes, that is right.

Mark Kerr: It has to be on an individual, case-by-case basis. At the moment I am involved in setting up some regional acute 24/7 services to receive some of these children and young people. As I say, if the risk to some of them—the exploiter, the gang—is on the doorstep, we have to have a period of removing them. There needs to be a longer-term plan. Some may be able to come back; some might not be able to come back. But as you say, the reach of the gangs is quite strong and we are seeing increasing numbers of the DoLS orders that we know of. The inherent jurisdiction that judges are using may deprive them of their liberty of having a mobile phone. Whether that is a solution, it depends on the individual child.

Simon Ford: What amplifies some of the problem is we are still seeing episodes where an authority places a child or a family into another authority area and there is no intel or information going with that family or young person into the host authority. They bring with them a whole host of problems that suddenly are inherited by the host authority and we still see a lot of that happening.

Jahnine Davis: Yes. As we said, it is around how we engage in terms of that partnership work ultimately and that multi-agency response. As we have said in our "It was hard to escape" report, they are a short-term solution but not necessarily long term. We know that they can exacerbate risk and harm because of the fact that children are being taken away from a net, which even though it may be unsafe, they may not necessarily at that point in their lives see as unsafe or unhealthy.

Q109 **Chair:** Just to your last point, Simon, isn't there a case then for a standardised passport, if you like, or some form of required information that should be passed on in those cases?

Simon Ford: It is law; you should. The exporting authority has a duty under the Children's Act. I think it is section 44—I cannot remember—where it has to inform the importing authority that this child, this family is coming. It does happen and it happens—

Chair: But it also doesn't happen.

Simon Ford: But it also doesn't happen.

Jahnine Davis: Yes, it is regulated. It is in Working Together guidance. We have that information.

Chair: I apologise, we are overrunning. I will bring Kim and Ian in very quickly and then we will have to wrap up, so thank you very much to the panel for your patience.

Q110 **Kim Johnson:** Jahnine, just a very quick question on the experience of women and girls in terms of exploitation. Do you think enough attention is paid to it or does it operate under the radar?

Jahnine Davis: What we have seen in our cases is a decrease in referrals coming through around the sexual exploitation of girls and now most of our cases are around criminal exploitation. I think that is more linked to what we have seen nationally, where now the focus is on criminal exploitation, but sexual exploitation is certainly still happening. Yes, there needs to be more focus and attention so we don't lose sight of that.

Q111 **Kim Johnson:** What are the different risk factors then between male and females in terms of exploitation besides sexual exploitation?

Jahnine Davis: Domestic abuse, coercion and financial abuse are the key ones there and how they may also be used to hold weapons or drugs et cetera. Of course that can happen to all, but I think there is a very different power dynamic that can play out in relation to how that exacerbates their vulnerability.

Q112 **Kim Johnson:** Do you think more needs to be done in schools in terms of looking at the issues around coercive control?

Jahnine Davis: Sure. And where it has now become a theme, even though we know it is not necessarily a new issue and that it has always been an issue, I think it is only now being picked up. For sure there needs to be that focus. That is why, yes, we should be focusing on county lines, but I think any type of awareness raising needs to intersect with acknowledging all various forms of harms in which children and young people can experience, including the experiences of young women and girls.

Q113 **Ian Mearns:** We have been dealing with the county lines issue now for a number of years. Do we think that the right balance is uniformly being struck in treating young people involved in county lines exploitation as victims or as perpetrators that are criminals?

Jahnine Davis: No. I think the language we use around children and the fact that we call them perpetrators is of itself an issue. I think that there needs to be a better way in which we frame children. First and foremost, what we see a lot in our cases about children who are involved in or impacted by county lines and exploitation, is that it tends to be through a lens of criminality. Therefore, as I said, that exacerbates or almost places this concept that somehow they are complicit in the harm they are experiencing, rather than acknowledging the environmental factors, their journeys through life and how those things have placed them at risk of being involved in those types of harms.

Simon Ford: But there is a percentage of children that simply do not want help, that have chosen that lifestyle, and despite enormous amounts of help will continue to behave in the way they do, with all the support and wraparound that has been given to the child. That ultimately leaves you in a situation of: where do you go with that? Is it ultimately enforcement, that policing can only operate at that level once a child has made that decision completely to disengage and not have any help whatsoever, because that is the lifestyle they have chosen?

Jahnine Davis: I think the word "lifestyle" is interesting. I think getting to the why is important. For these children, we engage with them very late in the day and it is too late.

Simon Ford: Yes.

Jahnine Davis: If we maybe had engaged with them when they were six, seven, eight or when they might have first started to disclose, whether that is through behaviour or anything else, maybe at those points they may have wanted to be engaged and felt able and safe to respond and trust.

Simon Ford: That is exactly right.

Q114 **Ian Mearns:** I can't help thinking that youngsters end up in that particular mindset because of years of neglect.

Jahnine Davis: Exactly.

Q115 **Ian Mearns:** Therefore it is not a question about choice, but it is the product of years of neglect. Paul, please.

Commander Brogden: From a policing perspective, our awareness and our focus is now around a child-centred approach, working with the Crown Prosecution Service. We are absolutely cognisant about things like debt bondage, about how kids are drawn in and coerced into this. It is always difficult about when does a victim become a perpetrator, but certainly we work with the Crown Prosecution Service. We present all the facts of the case and in particular we are very interested to understand what the motivational factors are around the child. We absolutely bring the awareness to CPS around any issues around coercive behaviour. We are looking at these young children not being perpetrators in the way that perhaps we were some years ago now. Effectively we look at it from a victim-orientated approach at this stage.

Q116 **Ian Mearns:** Is that not a default position that should be adopted, that any minor in those situations should be regarded as a safeguarding issue in the first instance and then dealing with whatever else afterwards?

Commander Brogden: Yes. It is a safeguarding issue. We look at it through a safeguarding lens. Like I say, I use a child-centred approach. I have no statistics I can give you at this stage to show a tilt or a change around the prosecution of young children, but I can only say what I see. I

have some anecdotal evidence from the London region. Obviously I work for the Metropolitan Police Service. We are seeing a move away from prosecution of children around county lines activity. Clearly we want to get the holders of those lines.

One thing I would like to mention before the Committee closes is opportunities around the communications. The key factor here is communication, movement, violence, exploitation and vulnerability. If we can cut off the communications—with the Online Safety Bill in particular—I am keen to look at how we can progress that and stop these kids being coerced into this behaviour in the first place.

Mark Kerr: I think there needs to be a consistent approach. I am not even sure that I am hearing the same approach from the police here—there are different styles of policing—but my biggest concern is that we have moved from support to surveillance, from strength to deficit models. As somebody who has worked in London boroughs with care-leaving teams trying to develop practice models to encourage them to choose different pathways, I had a rude awakening on the first project I did. It said, "These kids just want to get to the age of 25. Staying alive is their priority". So on agency, I am not sure how much choice they have.

Q117 **Ian Mearns:** How can we make sure though across different police force areas that the same balance has been struck so there is a consistency—because after all, these young kids are being trafficked across county lines—between different police force areas so that Cornwall and Northumbria both have a similar safeguarding style approach?

Commander Brogden: I think it is around the consistency. We mentioned the 4P approach, in this context prevent and protect. We think we are getting that consistency better. Can we work with the Crown Prosecution Service, which itself is regionalised? Clearly I am happy to step into that space myself and get some consistency about decision making and prosecution, which I think is what you are getting to.

Chair: Nick, did you want to come in very quickly?

Q118 **Nick Fletcher:** Very quickly to Commander Brogden. I understand why we are treating these people as victims, and they are victims. I understand that. Is that being abused by the organised crime gangs, saying to these young people, "Don't worry, you will get let off once, you will get let off twice"? Is that something that is happening?

Commander Brogden: I have no evidence of that personally. I think that is a risk, but ultimately the majority of these kids are coerced and drawn into it. I mentioned debt bondage as an example. We have to look at it through a lens of them being, first and foremost, victims. It gets difficult in terms of their level of involvement around the county line. If they start controlling the line and start coercing other young children into it, that is where there are very difficult conversations with the Crown Prosecution Service.

Q119 **Ian Mearns:** A last important but brief question. Would a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation be a useful tool?

Mark Kerr: I think it would be a start to consistency.

Jahnine Davis: I think it would allow for a benchmark in some way.

Commander Brogden: I think before we go into new legislation, there are opportunities to make sure we are maximising the Modern Slavery Act. There may be some opportunities in that space.

Chair: Thank you very much for all the evidence today. I think it has been a striking session and definitely some points for us to take away, so I am very grateful to you for your time and for your patience indeed in overrunning the allotted time.