

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Serious violence](#), HC 1016

Tuesday 29 January 2019

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 29 January 2019.

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Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Sir Christopher Chope; Kate Green; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald; Alex Norris; John Woodcock.

Questions 81–148

Witnesses

I: Deputy Assistant Commissioner Duncan Ball, Lead for Gangs, National Police Chiefs' Council; Nikki Holland, Director of Investigations, National Crime Agency; and Assistant Chief Constable Jacqueline Sebire, Bedfordshire Police and National Police Chiefs' Council Serious Violence Co-ordinator.

II: Councillor Simon Blackburn, Chair – Safer and Stronger Communities, Local Government Association; Lucy Dacey, National Programme Manager, Disrupting Exploitation Programme, The Children's Society; Simon Ford, Director, Violence and Vulnerability Unit; and Evan Jones, Head of Community Services, St Giles Trust.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [National Crime Agency](#)
- [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)
- [Violence and Vulnerability Unit](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball, Nikki Holland and Assistant Chief Constable Sebire.

Q81 **Chair:** I welcome our panel to this evidence session of the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry into serious violence. I ask each member of the panel to introduce themselves.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: Good morning. I am Deputy Assistant Commissioner Duncan Ball. I am the national policing lead for gangs and county lines.

Nikki Holland: Good morning. I am Nikki Holland, the director of investigations for the National Crime Agency. I am the National Crime Agency lead for county lines.

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: Good morning. I am Assistant Chief Constable Jackie Sebire from Bedfordshire police and I am the National Police Chiefs Council lead for serious violence.

Q82 **Chair:** Thank you. Could you start by giving us a sense of how the pattern of serious violence and exploitation has changed over the last two years? What changes have you seen and what are the some of the reasons behind them? Do just come in on the particular questions that you want to answer—do not feel the need to answer every question—but it would be very helpful to hear from you all on the opening question.

Nikki Holland: In terms of county lines first—then I will bring in ACC Sebire to talk about serious violence more generally, if that is okay—the National Crime Agency published its annual assessment of county lines in 2015. At that time, only seven police forces were reporting on being affected by county lines. By November 2017, all forces were reporting county lines activity. At that point, we believe there were about 700 lines in operation.

This week, the National Crime Agency published its latest assessment of county lines, of which you can obviously have a copy. In that assessment, which we call the 2018 assessment, we have 2,000 county lines in operation. The assessment is a useful baseline for us, because county lines is not a crime type in its own right and covers many different crime types. It is a good baseline for us to start our research into how we can respond to the threat.

Multiple lines being in operation allows the business model to be flexible and gives the gangs resilience, so if a line is taken out of operation, they can be flexible in their response, because they will have multiple lines. Obviously, you will see that the number of county lines is increasing, but that does not necessarily indicate a worsening of the problem. It actually

indicates the increasing awareness of law enforcement and our partners of the scale of the problem.

The National Crime Agency, jointly with NPCC, has launched a co-ordination centre, which is based in Birmingham. The national county lines co-ordination centre has given us a whole-system approach to how we tackle the gangs and safeguard the people who are most vulnerable. The co-ordination centre, which receives information from all forces and also partners, ensures that we have the best intelligence available to ensure that we understand the highest threat from the gangs and from the lines themselves.

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: To take that a little wider and to go back to your question about serious violence in general and what feels different, certainly my opinion is that we are experiencing a real peak, and it feels very different in its intensity. We are seeing new crime types such as cuckooing, where very vulnerable people are exploited either for their bank accounts or their house, with the county lines gangs moving in. We are seeing much younger victims, certainly of homicide, but we need to put that in context. Of course every victim is one too many, but we are at lower levels than a decade or two decades ago. Serious violence is down a third on where we were in the 2000s, and we are down two thirds from the '90s. We are definitely experiencing a peak in volume and recording practices, but it is down in that overall trend.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: Just to add, we fully support the comments that have been made. One of the biggest challenges for us with county lines is the exploitation and the vulnerability within that. Over the past two years, we have seen that continue unabated, and we know that the whole business model around county lines is generated by profit. Significant sums of money are involved within that, but the best way that the organisers of the county lines and the leaders of the criminal networks can distance themselves from law enforcement and the best way they can make the most profit is by exploitation, and I mean exploitation in its wider sense. It is not only exploitation of those cuckooing addresses, as Jackie mentioned, but exploitation of young people, drug users and anyone they can potentially exploit. I liken it to water. They look for the line of least resistance in generating a market of vulnerable people they can traffic for the purposes of county lines. That has been reinforced over the past two years—the depths that the criminal networks will go to in exacting violence on those running the county lines for them and the drug users. That continues to be significant.

Q83 **Chair:** In terms of the scale of violent exploitation that is taking place, is that much worse than what you have seen previously as part of drug networks and gangs?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: Through the co-ordination centre, we are building up a better picture on a month-by-month basis. The picture we have at the moment is undoubtedly the fullest picture we have had for violence and vulnerability. From the 2,000 lines, forces report that at least 10% of those have serious violence attached to them. We



anticipate that that is probably under-reported. The challenge we face is that county lines is not a specific crime type, so more often than not, the violence or vulnerability manifests itself in a different form, whether that is a missing person or someone who is excluded from school, for example. What we have to do as police working together with our partners is ensure we go beyond what we are confronted with at face value to be able to identify the county lines that sit behind what is immediately presented to us. That is the challenge in providing a completely accurate picture of the violence and vulnerability that sits along county lines, but we are a long way on from where we were. The work that we will continue to do for the duration of the county lines co-ordination centre and beyond will give us that fuller picture as we move along.

- Q84 **Chair:** I am still trying to understand what has changed and what is driving the changes. I cannot quite be clear whether you are saying, "This is just a different kind of drug gang model—effectively a different kind of business model. We are seeing a different pattern, therefore we have to respond in a different way", or whether there is something more vicious or violent about it and the exploitation, particularly of young people, that is taking place. From the outside, that is what it looks like. It looks like it has become both more violent and more horribly exploitative of young people, but I am interested in your assessment. Are we just uncovering things that we should have been aware of longer ago?

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I think you are right. I think it is both. We are certainly seeing much younger and much more vulnerable people being exploited. We still do not have the complete picture. It is very difficult to quantify in percentage terms how much violence is caused by county lines, because we have indirect and direct violence that is associated with the drug market from the individuals who become very aggressive because they are taking substances. There is the debt management, threats and intimidation that are associated with county lines. I certainly think we are understanding an increasing picture, but in local experience in my own force, we are seeing higher levels of violence because of the territorial disputes. The vast majority of them are enforced either through firearms or knives. Most of our hospital data tells us that. When we look at partnership data—those who are dealing with users, who do not report much of the violence that happens to them—82% of our partners say their clients have experienced violence.

- Q85 **Chair:** What is driving the violence?

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: That would be a mixture of the gangs' operating model through fear and intimidation and through recruiting young people to run the drugs for them.

- Q86 **Chair:** Why has that changed? Why has that become more violent?

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I am sure Duncan can help on that, but I think it is the saturation of the market. User demand has increased and, as a model, we know it works so it is being exported out of London, where it had a foothold. We are finding that a lot of counties are importing and exporting county lines.



Q87 Tim Loughton: Following on from the Chair, the figures you gave about serious violence 20 years ago are interesting. Assistant Chief Constable, you just said that user demand has increased. I assume the range of drugs being trafficked has increased. Has the number of vulnerable people being used to traffic increased? Have you done any work on that? Is it easier to find the people who are doing the running? Twenty years ago it was probably not done by younger children or other vulnerable young adults. What is your analysis?

Nikki Holland: At the moment, we are getting a lot more information; the picture is expanding. What will really help in the next phase of the co-ordination centre is to have a partnership hub alongside it so we get a lot more data from our partners. Going back to 20 years ago, people did deal drugs, but the biggest difference with county lines is that it now operates across regions. As my colleagues have told you, we have started off in a position where the Metropolitan police service, West Midlands and Merseyside areas are the biggest importers, yet 23 other forces now report that they also export criminal use of county lines and the exploitation of children. All that dynamic is changing.

The national referral mechanism around modern day slavery shows that 569 people in the last 12 months were referred. That is less than 10% of the whole national picture of county lines. At the moment, we do not know how many people are involved in it, but by working with our partners we are getting a lot more information.

The other challenge is that people do not necessarily see themselves as trafficked and exploited, because the gangs use different methods to get them to work for them. Some of them will join the gang for a sense of belonging; some will want a more affluent lifestyle. There are lots of different reasons why people would join those gangs, and they will not necessarily see themselves as vulnerable or working for the gang.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: Can I add a point about the broader understanding? Through our work with other forces, we have developed an understanding from a law enforcement perspective. The next stage is very much about getting a broader partnership understanding. To give an example, we now have a strong understanding of where the most harmful lines lie across the country, which we can work on from a law enforcement perspective with forces.

What we then need to do is to consider, for example, the drug user market. If we can understand collectively with Health what a drug's user market looks like, the volume of that and where it is, we can start to look at our understanding of the picture of county lines, because it is at the point where the supply of the drugs through the county lines exceeds the demand that that starts to generate violence. We can work with Health and Education on our alternative provision or people who are excluded from schools—are they are recruiting ground for those county lines? Once we identify those hotspots in county lines from the exporting forces, we can have a better understanding to help to answer those particular questions.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Q88 Tim Loughton:** I think you referred to networks. Can you explain the relationship between London, which has accounted disproportionately for this, and other parts of the country, particularly cities? What is going on beyond that? Does it extend to rural areas and smaller towns as well? Is this a network, or is it just people randomly going out and forming gangs, having links with gangs or whatever? Explain the concept of a network.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: We are not looking at an all-controlling network that organises the county lines, from the intelligence picture as we understand it. You are absolutely right, in that the three biggest exporters of county lines are from London, the West Midlands and Merseyside. In the case of London, that is predominantly because of the disproportionately high number of gangs and networks—both street gangs and organised crime groups—in London due to its size, but it is also to do with transport networks. The whole business of county lines is reliant on moving drugs and people around the country, and good road and transport links assist the business model consistently.

There are 200 street gangs in total in London, for example. The majority are involved in county lines activity or local drug dealing, and they build up their own particular networks. When a particular drugs network or a particular gang from London, for example, moves to the south coast, we sometimes see conflict with other gangs in that area, but we do have some reports from forces of collaboration—of gangs agreeing not to fight over the territory—up until the point when supply overtakes demand. It is lots of individual networks that run throughout the country. I always liken it to a spider's web from London, Merseyside and, indeed, 23 other forces. That is quite significant. We have to see it not just as an urban to rural thing; lots of different forces now report that they are exporting county lines rather than just importing them.

- Q89 Tim Loughton:** So it is not really a franchise network; it is lots of entrepreneurial gang activity that is appearing. About 10 years ago, I did a programme with Channel 4 and spent time with some gangs in the centre of Birmingham. At that time—it still goes on—the postcode gang culture was extraordinary. If you happened to have a different postcode, you were fair game. That included a lot of drugs territory, as well as inflicting violence on other people who just happened to be in a different postcode. At that stage, there were links between people in certain postcode areas in Birmingham and people in, say, Newcastle and other cities. It was tribal, almost, but on a national scale. Are you seeing that as well? Is there a group of dealers in Birmingham working in association with a group of dealers in Newcastle or Liverpool or another part of the country? We are just trying to get a picture of how this network works and, if there were some Mr or Mrs Bigs to be taken out, how much of an impact that would have on disassembling these arrangements that have built up.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: Are we seeing collaboration between different gangs and networks? As with all criminality, we see that on a case-by-case basis. We do not see that on a wholesale basis, so I cannot sit here and say to you that we see it as a key part of the business



HOUSE OF COMMONS

model. What we do see very much is that if a gang from London, for example, moves into an area on the south coast or elsewhere in the country, they dominate that particular territory because they will not necessarily have the same gang picture that they would perhaps have in a larger conurbation or that someone exporting county lines would have. Forces have reported to us evidence of collaboration, but that is very much an exception rather than as a wholesale organisation, in terms of the Mr Big question.

- Q90 Stuart C. McDonald:** We learned that Lynne Owens said in November she had used her tasking powers for the first time. Why was that necessary, and what impact did it have?

Nikki Holland: Our director general used her powers for the first time around county lines for two reasons. The first was the importance of us having a full intelligence picture. In order to get that, we needed every force to be giving us all of the data. Any operations they were undertaking and any intelligence they would receive around county lines was to be submitted to our national co-ordination centre. We have a system called CliCM that is a matrix where we record the information that comes in from forces. Compliance was variable across the country, owing to other priorities, so the director general used her powers to task forces to submit that information on a monthly basis. I am pleased to report that in January we have had 100% compliance from all forces around the country, so our intelligence picture is now the best that it has ever been.

The second part of that tasking was ensuring the prioritisation of county lines packages. As we have spoken about a lot already, we have forces who export and forces who import. The big forces, such as the Metropolitan police and others, will have other priorities. As the exporting force, that might not be at the top of their priorities, for very good reasons. However, this ensures, through the use of the tasking powers, that they will be giving that prioritisation to those packages. So far, since the tasking was put in, we have sent out two packages to two different areas. Those packages cover multiple forces, so they have gone into the regional organised crime units, to co-ordinate together with the NCA and the forces. We have already had a lot of success around that. The use of the powers has helped people to focus. That is the reason that it was done.

- Q91 Stuart C. McDonald:** Are some forces proving to be better at tackling county lines than others? For example, I think Ms Owens mentioned that there were five towns in which gangs had each been able to run 21 county lines without meaningful law enforcement intervention. Is that just a matter of prioritisation, or are there other things that make some forces better at dealing with this than others?

Nikki Holland: I don't think any forces are better than any others. I think everybody is having lots of successes around tackling the problem of county lines. The reason that those five forces were flagged up is because the information had not been received from those forces as to what activity they were actually undertaking. Getting all of the intelligence in,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

as we have done, and the fact that we have now achieved total compliance, means that we now have a full understanding of the problem, we know exactly what activity is undertaken, and we are also able to de-conflict across different operations. So when lines are being used in different parts of the country, we can now link them together under a particular group—if that is the method of operation. Getting all that information in has given us the richest picture we have ever had. Our strategic assessment is the most comprehensive and our operational response is very well informed.

- Q92 **Stuart C. McDonald:** To push a little bit further on that, the Security Minister, during one debate, spoke about how success for the regional organised crime unit in Merseyside had essentially displaced some of that activity to London. Does that reflect that the Met has not had as much success as the regional organised crime unit in Merseyside, or is it simply a question of volume?

Nikki Holland: I will bring in my colleague from London in a moment, because I am sure he is keen to answer that. We have seen no evidence of displacement from the north-west into London.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: To reinforce that, there is no evidence of that at all, from what we see. I would say that there are two levels here. The first level is very much bottom-up from forces, because we have to recognise that the vulnerability and exploitation will present itself on a local level, and it will present itself through partners as well. We cannot lose sight of that within the wider co-ordination that we are bringing through the co-ordination centre. London has, as you will be aware, very well developed work around gangs and county lines. In terms of that activity, we work very closely with other forces across the country. We have been exceptionally innovative around the use of legislation. For example, around the Modern Slavery Act, one particular county lines investigation went into Swansea, leading to two successful convictions. The work that the Met is doing is intrinsically linked across the country with other forces, because there is no point in any force working in isolation as an exporter, recognising that the vulnerability and violence will often hit the importing force as well. There is a desire by all forces to work collaboratively. The extra co-ordination and national oversight the co-ordination centre brings, with the National Crime Agency as well, assists with that to make sure that no forces are working in isolation.

- Q93 **Stuart C. McDonald:** So you cannot think of any reason why the Security Minister said that the gap left by their displacement had been filled with London organised crime groups?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: There are, as I mentioned before, a significant number of organised crime groups and gangs in London that we know move across different parts of the country. Some go up to Scotland or to the north. It is very difficult to give any sort of causality. To refer back to what I said earlier, it finds its way; it is like water. Wherever there is a drugs market, the gangs will look to exploit it, because we know that each line brings in up to £5,000 a day. Over the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

course of a year, for one particular line, you are looking at a significant financial criminal enterprise. Where there is money, the gangs will move.

- Q94 **Stuart C. McDonald:** As you know, this Committee has taken a significant interest in the funding pressures being experienced by forces. What effect have funding pressures had on the ability of forces to respond to county lines, and what is the impact of the most recent funding settlement?

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I can speak from a local perspective in Bedfordshire. We were successful in getting a special grant payment of £4.75 million from the Home Office to help us retrospectively fund the drugs element in Luton. We have experienced significant funding pressures in meeting the demands that serious violence has raised. We are very grateful for that additional money, but that only allows us to stand still. We can continue to recruit, but we cannot continue to prioritise. Obviously, we will always prioritise the greatest threat, risk and harm and those most vulnerable, but then you have other communities that do not get the level of policing response they might have otherwise expected. That is difficult.

It is not only the funding pressures on policing; it is the funding pressures on the whole public sector. From the serious violence strategy, we all know that this multi-agency approach is the way to have a sustained change to what is happening and what we are experiencing. There are funding pressures, and we welcome the discussions that are being had with the Treasury over the policing settlement. There is more money, but whether that is significant to tackle what we are uncovering—it is very complex, and it is probably too early to say.

It is not only that; it is making sure the money we do have is spent effectively. That is why the sharing of good practice—how the co-ordination centre is working—means we are spending the money we have much more effectively.

- Q95 **Stuart C. McDonald:** I want to follow up on a couple of things that you said. To what extent does the co-ordination centre make up for some of these funding pressures? Or do you need proper funding at a local level as well as a co-ordination centre? Also, you mentioned the role of some other agencies: health, education and social work. How important is their role and how well is co-ordination with police forces working?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: I will answer the first question. Under the serious violence strategy, we received £3.5 million for the co-ordination centre to run for an 18-month period to the end of March 2020. That, I would argue, is not to replace local funding pressure or shortfalls elsewhere. The co-ordination centre is about what is in the title: making sure that forces are joined up effectively. It is about making sure the importing and exporting forces are connected and it is also, through the NCA, about effective use of those tasking powers as well. My view is that it is not there to make up for shortfall of funding elsewhere. The general funding pressures on policing materialise in the more general areas—how



we deal with missing people and how we deal with mental health—because they are sometimes the first signs you get of a county line before something materialises in violence or a big drugs network.

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: The second part of your question was about the public health, multi-agency approach. The strategy is unequivocal about how important that is, and evidence shows that that is absolutely the right way to go. The issue on the ground is much more complex, because we have different competing geographical boundaries. We have a number of forces trying to work with health authorities that are running different areas. The role of the local authority as well as the third sector makes for a very confusing picture geographically and politically. There are no joint governance arrangements, and there is different leadership at a local level. While I absolutely think that it is the right way to deal with what we are dealing with, it is much more complex actually embedding that. If you imagine that we have got the strategy absolutely right and there is some wonderful work going on at an operational level, that bit in the middle around the strategy and the governance is much more complex than the strategy suggests.

Q96 **Stuart C. McDonald:** My final question is about the statutory framework and your powers to disrupt. Are drug dealing telecommunications restriction orders any good, for example, and are there other powers that would be helpful to you in trying to disrupt county lines?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: You will be aware that drug dealing telecommunications restriction orders are a relatively new piece of legislation for us. We have done a lot of work nationally to push this out to forces and to encourage the use of them. As it stands, we have numbers that we consider as part of a de-confliction process across different forces. As part of county lines investigations, more than 70 numbers have been considered for that, and more than 20 have been switched off through a DDTRO process.

They have provided benefit to investigations, without doubt. What I would say is that they are one of a number of police tactics that we would use, and in certain circumstances the use of a DDTRO may not be the most appropriate to that particular investigation.

Q97 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Are they fast enough? Some people have said that they are too slow. People change their number—it is as simple as that—so they are not the most effective.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: We are always challenged by the speed with which criminal networks and drugs gangs can operate, in terms of their ability to move from one phone line to another. We know that in some instances that can happen in a matter of an hour or two hours. Once a line is switched off, the risk is always that it automatically triggers up somewhere else. That is why we have to do that with other work as well. Tactically, we may choose to seek the disconnection of a phone line, but we will combine it with other police tactics to try to avoid the situation where one line shuts and another immediately starts.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The other point I would make on that is that we have to work very closely with other agencies, such as health. That is one of the areas that we consider as part of DDTRO applications with the local director of health, recognising that it has a big impact on the vulnerable drug addiction community. It cannot just be seen as a simple law enforcement “one tactic”. We would consider it as a range, but we would also involve other agencies as well, because there are impacts, obviously, of switching off these particular lines.

Q98 Stuart C. McDonald: Are there any other gaps in your powers to disrupt that you would urgently like to see filled?

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: My big ask, if possible, is this: we have found that the model of county lines exploits children in care, because of their vulnerabilities and the fact that many of them are placed in different areas of the country, so they are open to exploitation more easily. Ofsted does not have any powers to regulate the 16-plus provision that a lot of these children are put in. You can be running a home, or you can set one up tomorrow, as long as you pass your checks, but what provision, support and care you are giving these children is very inconsistent, and Ofsted has no power to regulate them. If there was anything that could have an immediate effect for some of the most vulnerable children that we have, my ask would be for working with Ofsted to look at how we could take that forward.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: I touched on the Modern Slavery Act earlier. One of the key areas that we are trying to tackle with county lines is raising awareness that it is absolutely a form of exploitation. Not only are they gang networks dealing drugs, but they are gang masters moving young children around the country as well. One of the challenges that we had—I am aware that Chief Constable Shaun Sawyer gave evidence before the Committee previously—was under section 45, which you will be aware provides the defence around the Modern Slavery Act.

Clearly, it was brought in for a very good reason, and we would not look to change section 45, but I suggest that we need a review to look at how the burden of proof operates as part of that. At the moment, we know that gangs and networks exploit that as a loophole. We need to make sure that it is protected for the vulnerable, in line with the initial thinking behind the legislation, but that it is not liable to exploitation by the people running these networks.

Q99 John Woodcock: On that last point, most of the young people who are running drugs for county lines are vulnerable to an extent, are they not? I very much understand the case for reviewing section 45, but isn't there an inherent tension in this that makes it very difficult? The more protection you give to someone, in terms of modern slavery, the greater incentive there is for that person to be used by one of the drug gangs. Is that not right?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: I think you are right. It is absolutely a tension in the whole issue of county lines. At one end of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

spectrum, you have the criminals or organisers who are running the county lines. Clearly, they are absolutely in the space where we are looking to arrest and prosecute. Right at the other end of the spectrum, you have 11 and 12-year-olds who are clearly vulnerable and being exploited. As you move towards the middle, you move into areas of grey.

It is really important for police and partners together to identify where there is vulnerability, within those young people, and where there is criminality. It is very important that we identify what those areas are and we identify them early on, recognising that there are safeguarding interests across the board. Those decisions have to be made. In relation to section 45 defence, I would say that it is absolutely required and valid, but there is a responsibility on us as police to make sure that we investigate that properly, to be able to make the right decisions with the Crown Prosecution Service when they come to court.

Q100 John Woodcock: Would it be useful to change the judicial system, in order to find more ways to protect and reward young people who are prepared to give evidence about the people who are exploiting them, and break this fear, where many people are clearly afraid to give information?

Nikki Holland: The National Crime Agency has brought in a whole series of modern-day slavery tactical advisers. They go out to forces when they are dealing with county lines or slavery operations. We have had some really good operational successes. In one operation, where criminals had clearly exploited the law to use it as a defence, it was a mechanism to say to the children, "You are safe, because if you are caught we can use the statutory defence for you." The advisers were able to become involved and that was brought out in evidence. The criminals were convicted and given long prison sentences.

Equally, we have other operational examples where the tactical advisers were able to demonstrate that people were not living any kind of luxurious lifestyle or being treated well as a result of their exploitation—in fact, it was quite the reverse. Again, they were able to use that defence successfully and prosecute the main people, not the people who were being exploited.

Q101 John Woodcock: But if that approach were working substantively, you wouldn't have the problems with section 45 that you have. Isn't that right?

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I think you are right in what you said in your earlier point, in that we have seen certain victims suffer the most horrendous injuries and they will still not either report or co-operate with the criminal justice approach. I think that it is a really good idea to look at other ways and inducements to keep those children safe, because they are much more scared of the county lines than they are of us. That comes back to this whole-system approach of how we are dealing with the victims, not just looking at one element. It is about how we work to give them viable alternatives. In some areas, the county lines business model



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is actually their only option for gaining wealth and prestige. It is the only option that they have in the area where they live.

Q102 **John Woodcock:** Thank you. Can I put it to you that we are in danger of getting an overly rosy impression from the evidence you are giving? I am sure it is, in and of itself, right and accurate, and we should celebrate the successes. But is it not the case that you talked about 20 telephone lines being shut down? There are 2,000 on record. You talk about how there is a level of resilience in these gangs, which means that one gets shut down, but another four can operate. Why are we bothering, in that case? For all the successes that you say we are having, there has been no tangible impact on the supply of drugs to areas such as Barrow and Furness, which I represent. I will let you answer in a moment. There was a case last week in which a senior officer reported to me that two 14-year-olds had been picked up from one area of the country and arrested, and then the next day people from an entirely different part of the country had moved in. We are not actually making a difference to people's lives yet, are we?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: With respect, I would disagree with that. Over the last week—to give you an example, or a snapshot—we ran a week of action nationally. As part of that, we arrested more than 600 people who had been involved in county lines. We have had the opportunity to interview more than 1,000 adults and juveniles who we believe are in a safeguarding position. We visited more than 700 addresses that are cuckooed. We have seized more than 150 weapons, including 12 potential firearms. I would argue that all of those have a real impact on individual circumstances and individual cases.

Q103 **John Woodcock:** You are absolutely right. Forgive me for framing my question imperfectly. For all of those individuals, it makes a big difference, but we are not yet having an impact on the overall supply of drugs, because the system is so resilient that if someone wants drugs in Barrow and Furness they can get them, regardless of the amount of effort that you have made to restrict the supply so far. That's right, isn't it?

Nikki Holland: At the National Crime Agency we go upstream of the drugs supply. We are stopping it coming in at source, but we know from the county lines and the fact that crack is in wide usage now that some of the adaptation of drugs is taking place once they are in the UK. We are tackling it from many different directions and we can give you lots and lots of huge operational successes around drugs, but it is a problem that will persist, and has persisted for the last 20-odd years.

Q104 **John Woodcock:** Nothing that you have done so far makes it more difficult. You are trying to take vulnerable people out of harm's way and you are trying to restrict the supply of drugs. You can say you are having success on the first, but it is not more difficult in any of these provincial areas to get drugs as a result of what has been done so far. That is not to say that you are not doing your job properly. I am questioning how effective all of this restriction can be as currently operated.



Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: I think this comes into the broader issue of violence. If you look at the Scottish experience around the public health approach—just drawing an analogy to drugs—it is something that will only be done over years and years. There is absolutely no quick fix to this, because of the sheer scale of it and because of the need for all the different agencies, as well as law enforcement, to be part and parcel. We need to start where we are. We are getting national co-ordination and we need to build from a county lines perspective. With the legislation and working together with local children's safeguarding boards is where we start to have that individual impact. But I do take your point, absolutely, in terms of the drugs market. Drugs are very much available. As long as there is a user population that stimulates the market, you will have county lines until we find a way to tackle the movement of that.

Q105 **John Woodcock:** One final question, if I may. You talk about cuckooing. Do you think there is a greater role for landlords to play? What about potentially greater powers to prevent landlords from effectively turning a blind eye to the way that some of their private accommodation might be abused?

Also, I have been trying to look at the arterial transport network. If you are coming to Barrow, you probably have to end up on the west coast main line and then on Northern Rail—God help some of these people—but is there an increased role that British Transport police or even civilian train staff could play in this?

Nikki Holland: In terms of looking at the criminal enablers around county lines, that is a key part of the work that the co-ordination centre, the NCA and all the forces are doing together in relation to the transport. We know that they will use public transport, and BTP are a partner as part of the co-ordination centre; they have had some really good successes around it and are well linked in.

There are private hire companies where people come in and leave very little detail. They pay big cash amounts to get the vehicles. There is the hiring of taxis. There are hotels and short-term lets where people come in and give money to a landlord with very little detail and then leave again—that is where we need people to come forward and give us that information.

As an agency, for our illicit finance strategy we are looking at the high-value dealers, and working closely with HMRC to look at who is taking big amounts of cash readily and not reporting it under money-laundering regulations. In reality, it is even down to community intelligence—people in the community and businesses are seeing these things and they need to tell us about it.

Q106 **John Woodcock:** The Government have tightened up in recent years with the checks required on letting properties to ensure that the people they are letting to have the right to be here. Could you introduce some greater requirement for checks in those instances?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I don't disagree with that approach. As I mentioned in my opening statement, cuckooing is something of a newer phenomenon that we have seen over the past two years. Some of the manipulation by gangs is so skilled that the vulnerable people who invite them in, because they are getting their supply out of them, do not make any complaints, and then the antisocial behaviour happens. There is definitely a point about the awareness of landlords, and their rights and responsibilities to know that this phenomenon is going on. We are seeing it in parts of the country where it has never happened before.

I wanted to give you some reassurance—you mentioned that we were presenting a rosy picture, and it is absolutely not about that. All forces are absolutely focused on this as a priority, and we are all working really hard to ensure that we are making a difference.

John Woodcock: I understand that.

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I am sure—I just wanted to give you that reassurance.

Q107 **Alex Norris:** Sorry for my lateness—I'm glad I got here just in the nick of time. You may have seen that in October the Committee criticised the Home Office about leadership in policing. How would you assess the quality of Home Office leadership regarding county lines?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: I will answer that from the NPCC perspective. I have found the Home Office incredibly supportive on county lines, and the proposal for a co-ordination centre was jointly developed by NPCC and the National Crime Agency, and widely supported by chief constables across the country.

We presented a proposal to the Home Office, articulating the benefits, and funding was then presented. Since that time, I have seen regular support through inter-ministerial groups and the Home Secretary's serious violence strategy, and county lines is a regular feature on the agenda. I am personally very encouraged by what I hear from other Departments around the table, including on health and education. The next challenge—including for the Committee—is about how we move from that to an operational environment where we can reap the operational benefits of that collaboration on a ground-floor level.

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I would echo what Duncan says. We have been working closely with the Home Office serious violence unit on how we deliver that strategy. It has been open to our consultation on the duty to co-operate and proposals that might be coming out, and the strategic policing requirement.

The Home Secretary has chaired a roundtable of the forces experiencing the most serious violence, and there has certainly been a lot of commitment and co-operation at that level. It is about how that comes through the counties, local authorities and healthcare professionals because there is a real inconsistency and disconnect, and I think that is the next phase we need to work on.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q108 Alex Norris: We will hear evidence from the Home Secretary at the end of next month. A message or an ask from you would be about going from that strategic level down through the different organisations to something genuinely operationalised, effective and active.

Nikki Holland: Supporting us on our whole-system response so that all Departments, as Duncan says, give us operational support regarding how we tackle this on the front line at every level—not just strategically, but on the ground.

Q109 Alex Norris: Could you just clarify support in that context? Assuming that support is not a boatload more money, but also is not just waving flags on the sideline cheering you on, what would effective support look like?

Nikki Holland: Sharing of intelligence. We spoke earlier about the understanding and having a rich intelligence picture, so it is about understanding how health and education overlay, and being able to be more predictive in our analysis by having all the data, not just the law enforcement data.

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: The serious violence strategy is clear that it is not only a law enforcement approach—that is clear throughout every page—but at times, it can feel that law enforcement has taken the lead. The next iteration of the strategy has to be the public health approach and how that is actually going to land on the ground, because it is so complex and confusing.

Q110 Chair: If there was something that you could magically do—maybe it would be indefinite resources, something that you could do at the borders on drugs, or something on prevention—that would make a substantial difference, choke off the problem or make it easier for you, what one thing would make the biggest difference, if it was possible to solve it?

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Ball: For me, it would be saying, “What is the root cause of county lines?” and it is the drugs markets, so it would absolutely be tackling those drugs markets from a user perspective. If we were able to collectively reduce the size and demand from the drugs market, you would find that there was no longer as much money in the criminal networks, and as a consequence, you would expect the amount of county lines activity, and the violence and exploitation, to reduce. For me, it would be focused around that user community and those people who are generating the demand for the county lines.

Nikki Holland: As I have just said, in terms of that whole-system response, it would be ensuring that other partner agencies were putting it at the top of their agendas too and working with us on the frontline.

Assistant Chief Constable Sebire: I have already said that I would get some help for my 16-year-olds who are in provision. It is a small thing, but it would make a massive difference to some young people’s lives.

Chair: Thank you very much for your evidence today. We appreciate your time.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Simon Blackburn, Lucy Dacey, Simon Ford and Evan Jones.

[Tim Loughton in the Chair]

Q111 **Chair:** We have a slight change of characters due to various other things going on today, so I have taken over in the Chair for the session. Thank you for coming along; I think most of you have been sitting in on the previous session. May I ask you all to kick off by introducing yourselves and giving your initial pitch?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: My name is Simon Blackburn. I am here representing the Local Government Association. I chair the LGA's safer and stronger communities board, which looks at all aspects of public protection and safety. My day job is as the leader of Blackpool Council. I sit on the Government's serious violence taskforce, as well as a number of other bodies that research and take action in the field.

The LGA's view, which was very much summed up in the last round of answers from your previous witnesses, is that if we can work together to try to reduce demand for drugs, that would be the single most effective thing that we could do. There is an awful lot to be done in terms of partnership working—a lot is being done at the moment, but much more needs to be done.

Early intervention work is key to stopping young people from entering the youth justice system and to helping them to see the error of their ways when they initially enter it. We also need to make sure that services are fully funded and fully supported; to make sure that the legislation that we have and are using is fit for purpose; and to support our colleagues in the third sector, who you are going to hear from shortly, Chair, and who are doing fantastic work that complements and supports the work of local councils.

Lucy Dacey: Hi, I'm Lucy Dacey. I am the national programme manager for a service called Disrupting Exploitation that the Children's Society is running in London, Greater Manchester and Birmingham.

In terms of the key messages, Simon has touched on this: the big thing for us is early intervention. We know some of the indicators of need that make young people more likely to be a victim of county lines, but unfortunately, at the point when those early indicators are there, there is not always wraparound support available for those young people. They are young people who in particular are at risk of exclusion in the transition from primary to secondary school.

There is the issue of young people when they first start going missing; those early missing episodes are really key. There is a lot of evidence out there about the risk indicators of potential county lines exploitation, but unfortunately the lack of earlier support being available means that when the Children's Society and other agencies are called and get involved, that

exploitation can obviously be quite entrenched, so investment in longer-term, quality, dedicated professionals to work with those young people is also critical.

Another big theme is information sharing. The reason why this business model is relatively effective is that perpetrators know that when young people and criminals cross boundaries, it's very difficult for agencies to catch up with them. We share information a lot more slowly, in the statutory and the voluntary sector, than perpetrators are able to, so there is definitely something about real-time information sharing around risk and vulnerabilities, but also around intelligence to prosecute the real perpetrators of the crime—the higher-up head honchos, as it were.

Simon Ford: Good morning. I'm Simon Ford. I am programme director for the Violence and Vulnerability Unit. We are a national team of gang and county lines experts. We are commissioned by the Home Office and MOPAC, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, to support localities across the UK—England and Wales—that are challenged by this activity of county lines. We have been in operation for about two or three years.

Our role is to support those localities and also to share and disseminate best practice across the regions where we find it and where we see the emergence of new dynamics around this activity, because it changes all the time; the threat is constantly evolving.

Evan Jones: I am Evan Jones, from St Giles Trust. We are a charity working in this area. We have been delivering gang exit work in London since 2006. We became aware of county lines as an issue in about 2012 or 2013. We noticed that our young clients were going missing; they just weren't there to be worked with.

Since 2016, we have managed to secure funding and deliver some pilots. We have done some work in Kent and Cardiff, where we have embryonic county lines support services. We have delivered a Home Office-funded evaluation of the Kent pilot. That is the first evaluation of that type of service, and what it indicates is that casework and support work. That is really important, I think, because a lot of areas have found this issue quite overwhelming. They have found that the young people have been effectively groomed and terrorised by big-city gangs.

The local practitioners don't understand that whole context and they don't get through to them. They know there is a problem, and their advice is sound, but the young people won't listen. We tend to employ people with lived experience—people who have actually been there in the criminal justice system. Some have actually run gangs themselves. They are able to say the right things to the young people and get them to engage.

For me, the big message is that support is possible. It does work. It's multi-agency. It has to be carrot and stick. Class A drug dealing is still very much illegal. We have to work with the police on this. Issues were being raised earlier about the grey areas around vulnerability and criminality—that's where we live. None of our clients is a saint; none is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

100% a sinner. We have to work very pragmatically on a case-by-basis with all of them.

Q112 **Chair:** Thank you all for that. You obviously heard the evidence that we had before. That was very much from a police perspective, in terms of how gangs are operating and the crime impact from that and the contrast with 20 years ago, when there was more serious crime but obviously a different sort of gang violence; we have county lines now.

In terms of the interests that you primarily represent—frontline services, communities and particularly vulnerable children—how different is the impact on communities now from what the police described 20 years ago or so? How have you had to adapt, and how would you want to adapt if you had more resources or whatever? We have heard about dealing with it through early intervention. Councillor, do you want to take that first from an LGA perspective in terms of the impact it has on services for your members?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: Absolutely. The National Crime Agency, which we have already heard from today, and the national county lines co-ordination centre have been very helpful in assisting local authorities to map what is, to a great extent, a hidden issue until the serious violence associated with county lines begins to manifest itself.

By definition, both the vendor and the buyer of drugs seek to keep their operations under the radar of the authorities. On local authorities' traditional safeguarding roles towards young people, you will be well aware that the aim of the Children Act 2004 is to protect vulnerable young people from abuse, mainly in a domestic setting.

As you will no doubt note from my biography, I am a former child protection social worker. Using traditional safeguarding tools and social work practice to identify young people who are in some way in debt or enslaved to a group of people is extremely difficult, even if we assume that our social workers are trained specifically to identify county lines exploitation. People like me, who were trained prior to the emergence of county lines as an issue, were certainly not, and many currently are not. It presents a number of challenges.

By and large, youth offending teams have been very effective at this. There has been somewhere between a 70% and 85% drop in the number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system, but attitudes towards young people who are involved in this vary, frankly, from agency to agency and from one part of the country to another.

The level of understanding that these young people are victims varies from agency to agency. We have been trying to explain that to communities, interested parties and segments of the community that might be able to assist us in this fight, such as the transport companies that Mr Woodcock mentioned earlier. In Blackpool and other places, we work with taxi drivers so that they understand the signs of vulnerability.

Q113 **Chair:** Okay. I'm quite interested in your experience. Blackpool is an



HOUSE OF COMMONS

interesting authority—it obviously has a lot of challenges. A couple of years ago it had the highest proportion of children in the care system of any authority in England.

Councillor Simon Blackburn: That is still the case.

Q114 **Chair:** That is still the case. I make no comment about whether that is right or wrong. You have greater contact with your vulnerable children in the care system than other authorities—for whatever reason, they have less face-to-face time with those kids. Is it working in Blackpool? Do you think you have less of a problem with county lines engaging and subverting vulnerable children than in other parts of the country, where they are perhaps not so engaged with children's services, safeguarding and all sorts of other issues? Is it working better in Blackpool?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: I would not say that it is working better; I would say that we have a better understanding of the scale of the issue. I gave a presentation to the Government's serious violence taskforce immediately prior to Christmas, in which I outlined the joint work that we have done with the National Crime Agency and the fact that we had identified 23 separate county lines running into Blackpool, which came as a shock to us. We were under the impression that there were around a dozen, or maybe 15 at the most, but once we started using the vulnerability mapping tool, speaking with the National Crime Agency and communicating with police forces outwith Lancashire, we soon established that the problem was more serious.

You are absolutely right, Chair, because, regrettably, we have the highest number of looked-after children per head of population in the UK, and we are in direct contact with a significant number of young people. However, what we have discovered is that by no means all of the children who are involved in county lines were known to children's social care, for precisely the reasons that I set out in my earlier answer. They were not presenting with any of the indicators of neglect or abuse that might trigger a social-work investigation or inquiry. For the children who we were in contact with and who were in the care system—whether in our care or in private children's homes, which tend to pop up, again regrettably, in places such as Blackpool, where property values are relatively low—we were able to intervene and engage more immediately, as soon as we were aware that there was an issue. Not all of those children were known to us—I am reasonably confident that they are now. However, from working with families, schools and the young people, those involved believe that they are effectively in business and are not being exploited.

Q115 **Chair:** I am grateful. Perhaps as you have frontline services, Ms Dacy and Mr Jones, you might want to comment on how it has impacted on the nature of the children who you are looking after. I am sure young people in your care have had problems.

Lucy Dacey: In terms of trends, we are definitely seeing an increased risk of violence and threat to the young people we work with, for example, debt bondage, fear of gangs and fear of recrimination, as we have covered. As children get older, we see them disengaging from some



HOUSE OF COMMONS

statutory services, which was touched on by the last panel. A big part of that is how they are viewed; they are viewed as having made a choice, particularly as they get older. The majority of the young people we support are aged 15, 16 and 17 and, as Evan said, we spend a lot of time pragmatically advocating for those young people to be seen as victims and as victims of modern slavery.

In terms of other trends, we have seen a big increase in missing episodes, and not just the frequency but the duration of those episodes. Young people are going missing for longer periods of time. As Simon mentioned, the perpetrators are also very quick to respond to that. They now know that a long missing episode is recognised by the police and by agencies such as ours as an indicator of county lines exploitation, so we are now seeing children going missing for one day, distributing drugs and being forced to come back, so they are technically not reported missing and are not reported missing overnight. The model has changed very quickly.

Q116 Chair: Do you think that there is still a problem with the way we report missing episodes for children in care? That was changed.

Lucy Dacey: Yes, absolutely.

Q117 Chair: I remember that when I was Minister for Children, we changed it because there was a big disconnect between the number of missing episodes reported by local authorities and the number reported by the police, because they were categorising and defining them completely differently. You are saying that these much more serious missing episodes—they are getting involved in drugs—where, if someone has just gone off because he always plays football on a Friday afternoon or whatever, but does not come home at the proper time, are still not being properly logged?

Lucy Dacey: They are not always picked up; sometimes they are deemed as low-risk missing. Certainly early episodes of missing need to be seen as higher risk, particularly if that is out of character. In terms of policy changes, one of the things for which the Children's Society has advocated for a number of years is a nationally held missing persons database. These young people are going missing across boundaries. We are supporting young people who are reported missing by one police force but are picked up, prosecuted and criminalised in another area of the country, so that joined-up intelligence picture is not there.

Finally, it is called contextual safeguarding, but it is how we really need to reinvent the thresholds for children's social care. We spend a lot of time doing multi-agency working with social workers to say, "Yes, this child is safe in the home. It's not traditional abuse or traditional neglect, but the risk of violence for that child and family is so significant that they should meet any threshold that you have for intervention." We need to reframe how we have traditionally assessed abuse and neglect, because it is extra-familial—outside the home—in the case of county lines exploitation.

Evan Jones: I completely concur. We regularly have arguments with social services teams about this issue. They assess risk based on what is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

going on in the home. That is how social services has been built and developed over the last 30-plus years.

Stranger danger is a fantasy that we believed in in the '70s, but county lines is stranger danger. It is someone not connected to your family who poses a massive risk to your child. Whether you put food on the table, their siblings go to school, or you are in a job makes no difference. The young people have been groomed and seduced into this lifestyle, and the nature of the family home is not the best indicator of the risk. That is key.

Because of the high thresholds for social care intervention, lots of parents are scared to report their children missing, so we see lots of unofficial missing reports, including parents reporting via Facebook groups and things like that. They think that, if they go to social services, people will come round to their house, assess them and perhaps take their other children away, so people are very scared to report. A lot of under-reporting goes on.

On the evolution of the model and the earlier question about what has changed, drugs were always available around the country, but county lines have changed their quality and quantity, as well as changing the customer service and the level of violence. However, the drugs were always there. I think that one real irony is that the gap for the county lines model to expand has been created by effective policing. The police are quite good at taking out local drug dealers, which removes the supply, but the demand is still there. That is what creates the opportunity for people from London and the other big cities to move in.

If there is an established local drugs supply market run by some big burly lads from the local town, the London gangs would not see it as such a prospect. However, because those guys are routinely put away, instead of a drug market run by nasty local 30-year-olds, you get one run by nasty 18-year-olds from London. That tends to create more chaos, more violence and more problems. There are a lot of contradictions in this issue, and that is another that I wanted to flag up for you.

Q118 Chair: So, using that logic, the better policing becomes, the bigger the problem will become?

Evan Jones: We love a health analogy. It is a bit like using antibiotics—you end up with superbugs. I think that is what we have here. The gangs have evolved to fill the gap. Drugs used to travel around the country in quite large quantities. There are now many more journeys but with smaller quantities.

We know lots of young people we work with are obliged to carry drugs internally, which limits the amount that they can carry. That is all about reducing risk, which has come about because of effective policing. Dealers do not want to lose half a kilo of cocaine, which is worth an awful lot of money, so they take a risk on a much smaller quantity and have many more children carrying it.

Q119 Chair: You made a point about parents being reluctant to report their kids



HOUSE OF COMMONS

going missing because of county lines, even if they know that there might be a drug connection, because they fear the scrutiny that social services may place on them. Where is the threshold between which is the greater threat? Is it my kid getting more and more involved in drugs or is it social services coming round to investigate a concern that I have instigated, rather than a knock on the door that I did not ask for, which might be worse?

Evan Jones: There are a lot of push and pull factors. Since the concept of county lines has got out there in the last couple of years, we have had decent media coverage and some mainstream stuff. Even the *Daily Mail* has covered it. It has been quite positive. The idea that young people on county lines are vulnerable and exploited has got out there. Even a kid stopped with 100 wraps of crack cocaine is not necessarily seen as a nasty, class A dealer.

Because that narrative is out there, it has encouraged parents and professionals to come forward. The only place to get a sensible response around this issue previously was from a service badged as a gangs service. When their child has not previously been criminalised, parents are reluctant to refer into that. We think social services generally have been reluctant to use that route as well. However, once you put county lines on a service, there is a narrative around vulnerability that encourages people to come forward. We think that this issue is totally unmapped at the moment, for a range of reasons, but people not coming forward is one.

Q120 **Chair:** Did you want to add anything, Mr Ford?

Simon Ford: I agree with Evan. I also think that there is a bit we have missed, which is that some kids go missing and are not actually missed. There is a social element to that. They can go missing for hours and are not reported because they are not actually missed. They have a whole family group that needs to be tackled; there needs to be a multi-agency approach. That is a factor in this.

To go back to your earlier question, in terms of the demand and the impact on localities, I would suggest from the work that we have done across the UK in the last few years that localities are certainly struggling with the demand and the impact it is having on them. In many areas, we still see localities that are not fully aware that it is there and, equally, that are not really understanding it.

Colleagues this morning spoke about it peaking, and we are certainly seeing sustained peaking. We are seeing it growing in nature. It is now into very northern places. We had just seen it in the north-west and the north down to the south coast in England and Wales, but it is very much in Scotland now with London gangs travelling extensive mileage to operate drug markets in Scotland. So at the moment, I would suggest that there is a sustained peak.

There are certainly gaps in the systems, both in policy and in localities, which are aiding and abetting those gangs. The vacuums in the localities

and some gaps in national policy are creating a vacuum by which the gangs can exploit those vacuums and those gaps.

When we go into areas, we are trying to encourage partners—this should absolutely not be left at the door of our criminal justice partners, the cops and the community safety teams; it is much bigger and more complex than that. Critically, our colleagues in health and safeguarding across the partnership spectrum have to have ownership of this—we can call it a whole-system approach; the key word at the moment is a public health approach—but it is absolutely vital to get ownership of it.

Q121 Stuart C. McDonald: We have heard a few times this morning about the importance of partnership working and of sharing intelligence and data between agencies and across boundaries, and about the challenges involved in that as well. How do we start to make that easier? Who, if anybody, is taking the lead on ensuring that that happens?

Simon Ford: It is very disproportionate across England and Wales in terms of data intelligence. In some areas, it is very good and it works very well between law enforcement, safeguarding colleagues and public health colleagues. They are the three key areas that we should be looking at in terms of intel sharing.

I will take you back to 1998 and why it should not be a problem or a hurdle to share that type of intelligence. In 1998, with the introduction of the Crime and Disorder Act, section 115 makes it easy for agencies to share intelligence, information and data to prevent or detect crime and disorder. We have the legislation there, but still, when we go to those localities, people in those positions are very reluctant and nervous to share data. But they can do it and there should not be any hurdles in the way of being able to share that data, whether it is A&E data, crime data, safeguarding data or education data.

When you are dealing with county lines—such a dynamic and complex threat—that data is absolutely vital to nail what the picture looks like in that locality. One of our key roles, when we go in, is to try to encourage and break down some of those hurdles for those agencies to share that data, so they at least have a picture of what is going on in their back yard.

Q122 Stuart C. McDonald: You are talking about the legal power to share information, almost as if it is a question of will and of being aware of the need to do it, but some of the other witnesses have spoken about practical issues, such as different agencies using different systems or even just different boundaries applying—health boards being different from police authority areas and so on. Again, is there any real reason why that should be a problem, and if not, why is it still happening?

Simon Ford: Absolutely right, it should not be a problem. I am saying it should not be a problem because we have the legislation there and it is doable. It is whether those people who have command of that data and the responsibility for it are aware that they can do it. A lot of the problem is in the fact that they think they are unable to share that specific data. Equally, if they share it, what does it mean to them? How will it benefit



HOUSE OF COMMONS

them if they share that data? An example is collating A&E data, which is vital for county lines in terms of people presenting themselves to A&E departments, whether they are victims or perpetrators.

We need to collect those stats around the injuries they sustain in order to understand what that looks like, particularly if they are not going to the cops to report how they have been injured. But you have to inform the A&E colleagues about why you want that data. They often say, "But why do we need to share this? What does it mean for us?" What it means for them is that if they share the data and we are able to get that picture, we can put our resources into the areas where we need to put them, and we will reduce the demand on them, on their A&E services. So the big point of it is trying to sell it back, talking about the impact and what it means to them if they are happy to share that data, not just about the fact that they think they can't share it but about the benefits there would be if they were to release it.

Q123 Stuart C. McDonald: I want to bring in the other witnesses and ask: are there challenges also for frontline agencies when they are working with the police? In particular, are there ever concerns about whether the police get the balance right between pursuing criminals and safeguarding issues? How does that work? How is the relationship with the police?

Evan Jones: The attitudes and approaches are on a complete spectrum. We have seen huge progress with the police's attitude to this issue. A few years ago, I would have been talking to a regional police lead who would have said, "Yeah, we see a few Londoners here selling drugs. Little so-and-sos, we nick 'em and send 'em back". I would have said, "Well that's a county line. It's a problem and we need to address it" and they would have said, "It's not on our radar. We're not interested. We just want it out of the way." What we are seeing now is much, much better recognition of vulnerability and, in terms of decisions, we are not having to take things to court or use the national referral mechanism to establish vulnerability. It is often being identified in the custody suite, and that's fantastic. The police raid a property, they nick six people and they decide that two of them are really vulnerable and need help rather than the criminal justice system.

So there is huge progress but, again, the police have loads of different departments. If you are talking about targeted gangs teams or organised crime specialists within the police, they tend to get this, but there could be a local policing team that wouldn't necessarily. There is a real range of approaches out there.

Lucy Dacey: That's right, but one thing we see is a bit of variance between areas. Where we sit on multi-agency panels, where we work with the police to safeguard a young person, we get a lot of referrals from the police for children who are victims of county lines exploitation, but we get other police forces around the country that see those same young people in a different way. The police as one entity do not really exist. Locally, they might be safeguarding alongside organisations such as the Children's Society and St Giles, but in another area the same police will pick those



HOUSE OF COMMONS

children up and prosecute them. A big part of that is because of the information sharing, which points to your previous question.

There are different elements of that information sharing that need to happen. The first is real-time information sharing around the risk of young people who are moving across the country at this moment. The second is joining up reactive datasets to get a concrete picture of demand and need, and the third is joining up intelligence for prosecutions. On that point, the national county lines co-ordination centre is vital, because it helps police to join up intelligence so that they have enough evidence to bring prosecutions. Quite often, that is not held in only one force, so those different elements are really important.

Councillor Simon Blackburn: To answer both questions, there are numerous opportunities once a child is in the system—once a referral has been made—for information sharing, whether between the police and social workers and the referrer at the multi-agency safeguarding hub when a referral is made, at the MARAC—the multi-agency risk assessment conference—or at the child protection conference. Those are all opportunities where people are invited and encouraged to exchange information. One of the issues we found—I am afraid I have got halfway through the evidence session without mentioning the impact of austerity—is that the number and seniority of people present at those meetings has altered. The willingness to exchange information not so much so, but we are in this bit of a dip post GDPR, where people are somewhat more reluctant to share information. I don't think it will come as any surprise to anybody that it is particularly difficult to get information from health bodies, and that has always been the case. They would accept that is a problem. I am old enough to remember when the Data Protection Act was used as an excuse for everything, and GDPR regulations have proven to be something of a challenge.

In terms of the second part of your question, around the police, their attitude has changed dramatically in fairly recent times. The model of policing that is required to tackle this type of crime is dramatically different from drug disruption activity as it used to be 10 years ago. This is not a new phenomenon, in the sense that drugs that are sold and taken in Blackpool have always come from somewhere else, but disrupting that activity was about sitting on a motorway bridge waiting for three strapping lads from Liverpool in a BMW X5 with two kilos of cocaine in the back. That's what the policing resource was pointed at; that was about communication between Merseyside Police and Lancashire Constabulary.

This is a wholly different situation, and that is why the national centre is so important and why the National Crime Agency has been so important in tackling this. Criminals, and the gangs who exploit these young people, have reacted to a certain model of policing and law enforcement and come up with a system that they know is extremely difficult to police, and it is extremely unlikely that any of the existing agencies or any of our hitherto ways of working were going to pick this up. Everybody is having to adjust the way in which they work to respond to this.



Q124 Stuart C. McDonald: Mr Jones, can I ask you a question about a report prepared by the St. Giles Trust and Missing People? We spoke about this problem of children being caught in no-man's land when they are picked up in a different local authority, and neither that local authority nor the authority of return is making the transfer back happen. Why is that happening, and how do we fix it?

Evan Jones: It is a responsibilities issue. In a scenario where the police in Bournemouth raid a property and find a 15-year-old from Lambeth, if they are acting responsibly, they have to treat that as a safeguarding issue. That is happening more and more now, which is great, but they will contact Lambeth social services and they will not get an immediate response. Most areas outside London struggle to distinguish which London borough someone is from—I mean, there are 32—and if you ring the wrong out-of-hours number, you're not going to get very far.

You often get young people moved back to London by the police, which is a terrible waste of police resources and very ineffective in terms of engaging with that young person. We hear of lots of police handovers at service stations on the M25, where the child will be passed over and then delivered back to Lambeth. As I say, it's very resource heavy and it's not effective. We have now started to offer in London a rescue and response service that starts to address this issue. It has only just started and we have only had a few cases, but when it works, the way it works is that a custody suite out of London will give us a call—"We've got a Londoner"—and it doesn't matter which borough. There is just one number for the whole of London, which makes it a lot easier.

They ring us up, describe who they've got, and then we make arrangements for them to hang on to that young person until we get there. Our worker will actually meet them at the custody suite and escort them back to London, and that is a brilliant opportunity for engagement. There is no better time to try to get someone to change their ways than if they've just found that it's been very unsuccessful and they've just been nicked by the police. We have found that is one of the ways of addressing that issue, but there are still very small amounts of delivery, and for lots of young people it is still a "falling between two stools" situation.

Q125 Stuart C. McDonald: Ms Dacey, can I ask you a question about the national referral mechanism? How effective is the NRM in providing access to support for victims of county lines enslavement?

Lucy Dacey: At the moment, not very effective. It is not very well promoted as a service for domestically trafficked young people. That has changed quite a lot, probably over the past 12 months: there has been a big spike in referrals to the national referral mechanism for domestically trafficked young people.

Essentially, two things happen at the end of that process if you get a positive decision that you are a victim of trafficking. One is that you get access to the statutory defence. As we have talked about, we would always advocate that that is what should be used, but it needs to come



HOUSE OF COMMONS

alongside effective policing to disrupt the exploitation, because there is a heightened vulnerability that comes with that protection. But I think it has been reported in the news in the last couple of weeks that there was a pilot for independent child trafficking advocates, linked to the national referral mechanism. In those pilot areas, for the last year they have been accepting both internally trafficked and domestically trafficked young people, but that has changed, so that service now accepts only internationally trafficked young people.

It is worth saying that the interim evidence suggested that it was very hard to engage young people who have been domestically trafficked. Part of that is because they might know their exploiters; they might think they are making a choice in their exploitation, which we know cannot happen. But there needs to be some sort of support offer at the end of a national referral mechanism process, to make it worth the while of statutory agencies to refer to that, but also to say to that young person, "We believe you, and the system believes that you are a victim," and so there is an offer of professional and dedicated case work and support. At the moment, that is not happening. It is a very limited incentive at the moment for a domestically trafficked young person to go through that process.

Simon Ford: The NRM is great, but the gangs are using the system to their advantage. We are picking up that gangs are telling young kids to get themselves to the NRM because it keeps them out of the criminal justice system, and therefore keeps them a live resource for the gangs. We are picking that up in terms of mechanisms around the referral process.

Evan Jones: There is a definitely a problem with the NRM. For under-18s there is no support offer, so you can have a successful result on the NRM for an under-18 and you still have to take that child back to children's services in their borough. From our point of view, on the ground as a service delivery agency, trying to be pragmatic and get outcomes, we would far rather get a "no further action" decision from the police than have to go through the national referral mechanism, because as Lucy said, it can create risk.

The national referral mechanism is not brilliantly understood by professionals. Lots of people who should know about it genuinely do not, but I'll tell you who does not know about it: these guys' co-defendants. They think it is witness protection, so they think their mate has become a snitch if they are on the NRM. Although we have heard the stories you have heard, we have also heard the other side, where NRM status has been blurted out in court, and that has increased the young person's risk.

Councillor Simon Blackburn: On that point, the Modern Slavery Act and the national referral mechanism were never written with county lines in mind. As colleagues have said, it specifically pointed at adult foreign nationals. The Assistant Chief Constable said in the earlier session that 10% of referrals through the NRM relate to county lines. What that does for me is to highlight the deficiencies in the legislation, such as the Children Act, which we should be using to prosecute these cases and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

protect these young people. That is not a criticism of the Children Act, because county lines was not any issue when it was passed. But it should highlight to us that we are grasping at various bits of legislation to try to resolve this.

Q126 John Woodcock: It is interesting to hear what you are saying about the referral mechanism. That came up in the last two evidence sessions. We as a Committee need to try to come to a view not simply that this is all very difficult, or even that we should have a review. What is the direction in which this should go? Put simply, you are either making the referral mechanism offer a greater level of protection, as some in the third sector would suggest, or you think that is worsening the problem, and you need to move away from that approach. Is that a fair analysis of the crude assessment? Where would you fall?

Evan Jones: I think the lack of support attached to the NRM is one of the biggest flaws, but yes, we are adapting something that was not built for this purpose. The issue about people taking advantage of the NRM would not be such an issue if there was a comprehensive support package attached. Certainly, how our staff work and how the Children's Society staff work is that we do not uncritically accept someone's explanation that they are victim, and we do not uncritically accept someone else's definition of them as a problem. We are professionally curious, and we try to work out what is going on. If we think someone is scamming the system, often we would be the first people to say that.

If there were support workers attached to these young people at the point of NRM acceptance, we would not have those problems. It is about supporting the family as well, because we are talking about under-18s who live at home.

Q127 John Woodcock: If the child or young person is to interact positively with this, part of the support is supporting them after they have provided information that is pertinent to the kind of exploitation or the individuals exploiting them. That is right, isn't it? If that is right, how big and comprehensive would the support package need to be to give that young person confidence against the fear of reprisal? Is that a realistic thing for the state or Government to offer?

Evan Jones: It would be a very substantial package. We are talking about young people engaging for a year or 18 months. The spread of our cases is between three and 18 months, roughly. The NRM should not be seen as a witness protection programme. As far as I know, you don't have to be giving evidence to go on the NRM; you have to be a victim.

Police colleagues will say that for every NRM referral there should also be a crime report. If you are saying that someone has been exploited, who is the exploiter? That can be one of the other unintended consequences of an NRM referral—that it will sometimes trigger police activity. So even if a young person hasn't passed on information, the effect is as though they have.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lucy Dacey: To build on that, you can have lots of NRM referrals that together, when an analyst in the NRM is able to put that together, the need for them to be a witness reduces because you have got a comprehensive evidence base. So, there are unintended consequences that are beneficial for an NRM referral but I totally agree that, unless there is an offer of support at the end of it, there is a limited incentive for an NRM referral for domestic children at the moment.

Q128 **John Woodcock:** Should it necessarily be an unintended consequence? If one of the things that is driving the use of young people is that it offers protection and anonymity to the people at the top of the chain, if you can increase their vulnerability to being convicted by the use of those young people, by increasing how many young people are realistically going to feel able to report on the gangs who are using them, that is a good thing in reducing the problem, isn't it?

Evan Jones: We are in favour of prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act. If greater penalties can be given, there is a perception that it may create greater stigma for people going through the prison system. Rather than going through as a class A dealer, if you go through as a child trafficker that would mean having to sign various registers on release, and things like that. We would still think it is going to be difficult to get those prosecutions. It is a challenge, isn't it?

Simon Ford: I would suggest that NRM is a tool but, equally, there are other options that can be administered. Localities should very much be aware of their most vulnerable young children who live on their patch. For those vulnerable children who are being targeted by the baddies, there should be wraparound support by those localities on each of those individuals.

That is quite an extensive package but it is a starting point, at the very least, to identify the most vulnerable. Whether they are being targeted by county line networks, modern slave labour, baddies or child sexual exploitation, they are in a vulnerable group that all those baddies, so to speak, will target.

It is the vulnerability within the locality that needs to be targeted. NRM is a tool, but there are other options that many partners can engage with to identify and then provide that wraparound support for each of those vulnerable individuals. It is not just about kids. County lines will target vulnerable adults as well.

A lot of this is leaning towards kids, and very rightly so, but just as much now we are seeing vulnerable adults, particularly the group between 18 and 25. If they have been in the care system and had that support from youth offending teams, when they get to the age of 18, many of them just fall off the cliff. They have not been in education, they have not had any training and their work prospects are very low. That 18-to-25 group is very vulnerable and is being caught up in the network.

Q129 **John Woodcock:** Final question, if I may, Chair. You make the point very



HOUSE OF COMMONS

strongly about the need for increased engagement and increased sharing, and Councillor Blackburn rightly raises the question of resources, which I guess you would all agree will need to increase beyond the current level. Is the structure of the way the agencies are cohered nationally and locally sufficient, or do you need to change the structure to be able to deal with the multi-agency sharing approach that you are talking about?

Simon Ford: That is a very good point. I think you are seeing that, without a national direction at the moment on this, many of the localities and the regions are developing their own restructuring in order to be able to address the issue. Historically, this type of activity would have been very much in the police and criminal justice domain, sitting under things such as community safety partnerships, with them having ownership and not speaking to their colleagues in safeguarding or public health because those colleagues would simply say, "That's a policing issue." That is absolutely not the case any longer. You can't sit it in that community safety and crime domain any longer; it has to go across the piece in the localities. We are seeing some areas now starting to restructure how they deal with it. They are developing cross-piece boards, bringing safeguarding, health and wellbeing and community safety partnerships into one joint board that deals with the whole issue—the public health approach, or whatever you want to call it. That is the way forward on this.

Q130 **John Woodcock:** But you want greater national direction to help to empower local areas to shape that.

Simon Ford: Very much so, I would suggest. That is the only way you will get the ownership to deal with such a complex agenda. You cannot sit it at any one of those four doors, or certainly not at the criminal enforcement and criminal agency door. It has to go across the piece. We are seeing that happening and lots of good progress being made on that, but equally, limited progress in other areas. That is where they need some support and guidance on what that structure would look like and what an action plan would look like for how you would operationally introduce that sort of system and approach.

Q131 **Alex Norris:** We finished the previous witness panel with the ACC mentioning support for young people engaged in, essentially, PRUs, but we have not spoken about that yet in this panel. At a basic level, what impact do you think school exclusions and alternative provisions are having on individuals being vulnerable and available for this type of trafficking?

Evan Jones: This is something that came out of the evaluation we did of a Kent project, and it has come out in our Cardiff county lines project as well: we have had 100% correlation between school exclusion and county lines referrals. That does not mean that PRUs teach children to go on county lines, and PRUs are as variable as every other type of educational establishment. There are really well-managed ones that recognise these issues and support their young people, and sadly there are some that do not do it very well. Some are used as recruiting grounds.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The key point here is that school exclusion massively increases young people's vulnerability to this type of exploitation. At the moment, schools have incentives to exclude young people—these are difficult young people, no question about it—but then there is nothing else provided. Sometimes they are even put in a pupil referral unit on what they call “twilight hours”, where they do one or two hours a day. We have had young people deliver drugs to a regional town and come back and still make their time at the PRU, so they are not going missing at all. There is a big problem there, and it is a correlation, not a causation.

Lucy Dacey: I do not really have anything to add. We have seen the same correlation, with lots of young people being at risk of exclusion, but I guess the point about that being a trigger, which we know from casework and from evidence it is, is that the support is not available at that point, even though we know it is a trigger. There is a question about investment in early intervention. Part-time timetables are a particular bugbear, because you have young people with lots of free time on their hands and perpetrators who know that, and there is no support available to them. If their parents work long hours or work multiple jobs, they struggle to provide that support to those young people who are available to perpetrators, and who we are making so as a result of that part-time table.

Evan Jones: I think the reason for the strong correlation has been that we are picking up children very late in the day. When we get a new referral, it is very common that they have been actively working on county lines for two or three years at the age of 16 or 17. With our new London service, referrals at the moment are only 85% school excluded, so I am taking that as a positive sign that we are getting some a little earlier. As services improve and people have a better understanding of the issue, we will get more young people earlier, so there will not be that strong correlation.

Simon Ford: It is a cause and effect of schools seeking higher attainment records. They are under pressure for those attainment records. Kids who are involved in activity that could be described as minor disruption are being expelled in order to keep those kids that want to learn and are seeking the attainment performance that the schools seek, but kids are being expelled for those minor disruptions and ending up in PRUs, and we know that places like that are breeding grounds or recruitment areas for the gangs. We are seeing increasing amounts of activity around those locations, where the gangs know those vulnerable children are clustering.

Evan Jones: This relates to something that has not come up yet: the tendency to recruit locally. When we became aware of county lines as an issue, it was young people on the fringe of a London gang who were being sent to regional towns to distribute drugs. It is now much more likely that the Londoner delivers the drugs and goes back, and that the kids who do the distribution in Margate or wherever are local. Again, the gangs and the people who do this stuff have adapted. If you look round a town and you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

want to find a group of disaffected young people who might want to deliver drugs for you, a PRU is a great place to start.

Q132 Alex Norris: Turning to local government, you mentioned austerity and resources, which merits a bit of probing. First, I am trying to understand everything we have talked about today. Everything around this issue implies a greater need for social care and support. You will know this very well on a day to day basis, but I remember from my time—relatively recently—in local government that we had a graph of doom. The revenue support grant falls off to zero and you have children and adult social care demand increasing. Eventually that pushes you to the brink. That has played out lots elsewhere, so I am not wanting that played out as such, but to what extent is this priced into that demand, or is this another thing on top of rising demand?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: Speaking for a moment as the leader of a council that has just had an inadequate Ofsted judgment around safeguarding, that caused me to look at the amount of money that we spend on children's social care. One of the political leadership challenges in that situation is: is this service well funded enough? I got the figures yesterday. In 2011, before austerity bit in a major way, we were spending £23 million a year on children's social care. We are now spending £33 million a year, so we are spending half as much again now than we were then. We are spending £8 million a year more on adult social care.

The impact of that is that, whereas in 2011 we as a council were spending £73 million on other stuff—gyms, parks, swimming pools, youth clubs, Sure Start centres, children's centres—we are now spending £45 million on other stuff. I am sure every part of the public sector could do the same thing. We increasingly become focused on the serious safeguarding and child protection end of processes and on the serious end-of-life and residential care provision for older people. It is everything else that has been squeezed and, of course, that eventually has an impact because there are not the youth clubs and youth workers that there were. There are not positive diversionary activities for young people laid on over the summer holidays to stop them getting into bother. The police suffer in exactly the same way.

I can recall, just before I stopped being a social worker, that we used to have meetings every Friday. There would be me, somebody from the police and a whole host of other agencies, and we just talked about the half a dozen kids in Fleetwood who we knew were always on some sort of spectrum of risk. We would exchange information about where they had been, who they had been seen knocking about with and what our plan for them was for the next week or two. We ended up stopping those meetings because in the end it was just me and the police officer. All of the other third sector organisations had gradually had their funding cut by local councils or by other bodies. That extra support was not there, and I think this is where all of these guys from the third sector come in. They can help with support and help to plug that gap.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

You are absolutely right, Mr Norris: this is additional demand over and above that which was expected and budgeted for both by the Government and by local authorities.

Q133 Alex Norris: Following that through, we all know from our own communities about the reduction in general needs youth provision, but given the sort of young people we are talking about and what we have heard today—and we know from the research about the vulnerability of a young person on the street who perhaps is not at school and has time on their hands—there is a responsibility for authorities almost to contest that space, to put detached youth workers out there and to provide alternatives, positive role models and ways of trying to deflect and hopefully catch and identify individuals who are at risk early and signpost them to the right places. What is the resources picture for that sort of youth work among your members?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: It is very mixed. It depends whereabouts in the country you choose to look. As a general rule, in bigger urban centres, not least in London, there remains a significant amount of detached youth work and place-based—youth club—youth work. Moving out of those areas into the parts of the country that have been hardest hit by austerity, there is no universal youth offer anymore. There is very limited detached youth work. What there is is normally commissioned out to the third sector, and local authorities have focused what resource they have on youth offending teams and services around the periphery of those teams to try to stop people getting involved in the criminal justice system. There is precious little, frankly, apart from that. Were it not for the work of the voluntary sector in this space, the situation would look much bleaker than it already does.

Q134 Sir Christopher Chope: I apologise for being late; unfortunately, I was at another Committee.

Last Saturday, a family came to my surgery in Christchurch saying that their nine-year-old daughter has been out of school for the last year but the council has only just produced an education, health and care plan. That was produced last week. She has been out of school for a year—this is a nine-year-old we are talking about—and it will be perhaps 20 weeks before a special school place can be found for her. The best part of a year ago, the single mum of this child was advised that she should give up work—she was a nurse—to look after her child at home until something had been found in terms of education. She did that, and she then lost her income. She has now been evicted because of the disruption caused by the child at home.

The council has now told me that it is going to put this family—a single mum with a disruptive nine-year-old—into a bed and breakfast in Bournemouth from the second week of February. You do not need to be a genius to see that this is completely ridiculous. You have somebody very vulnerable being kept out of school because of the inability of the local authority to get its act together, first to produce the care plan and then to make provision for it, and then you have another local authority saying



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that this vulnerable family should be put into a bed and breakfast. What is going to happen to the nine-year-old when they are kicked out after breakfast time, before they can go back in the evening?

Do we need to change the law to force local authorities to take a more proactive approach to the sort of case I have outlined? I have had complaints from one of the secondary schools in Christchurch that they cannot get answers to questions about where these pupils are going to go. They sometimes go to the PRU, for an hour or two per day at most. This is intolerable, but all that seems to have happened is that the Government have said they will put another £200 million into some new project. Why can't we use money now instead of going for these gimmicky new projects?

Chair: That was quite a short question. Does anyone want to have a go?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: I will give an equally short answer, Chairman. I cannot, of course, comment on individual cases and individual local authorities, because I do not have that information. What I would say is that there are 7.9 million pupils registered in this country; 39,000 are in pupil referral units or some form of alternative provision. I get that, with my pencil, to be 0.4%. Although it is very important that we focus on children who are not in formal education, or mainstream education, we await with interest Minister Timpson's report on alternative provision.

I know that the rest of the serious violence taskforce are looking forward to seeing that report as well, because we recognise the vulnerability of children who are outside of mainstream education, without a shadow of a doubt. Of course, out of that number, a lot these children will be being permanently excluded by academies or free schools, over which local authorities—regrettably, in my view—do not exert the same amount of influence that they used to.

Q135 **Chair:** Is there evidence of exclusion rates being higher in academies and free schools?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: Chairman, that is definitely not what I said. I was very careful in my use of language. I said that a lot of those children will be from free schools and academies. I was not in any way seeking to suggest that there was a higher rate of exclusion in those schools.

My point, rather, was that the atomisation of the education system has made it more difficult for local authorities to influence the provision of school places, which is why the Government have encouraged Ofsted to challenge all schools, whether they are academies, free schools, Church schools or state schools, around the rate of exclusions from their roll, examining the rate of dual rolling.

I understand that one of the things that DfE Ministers are keen to see, once we see Minister Timpson's report, is the idea that, if a child is excluded from school and sent into some form of alternative provision, they remain dual-rolled, so that were there a situation—I am not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

suggesting that there is—where a school, of whatever form, was off-rolling pupils or sending pupils elsewhere in order to try to improve their results, that would be self-defeating. I absolutely was not suggesting that academies exclude more children than state schools.

Evan Jones: Just one quick response to that. What a horrible case, but what I am seeing there is loads of money being spent really badly. We have lost a nurse, and we have lost a taxpayer, never mind the effect on the child.

What we have found is that when the cost and the potential for paying out are within the same budget envelope, it is easier to make a case to a local authority for spending to save, but sadly, because so many budgets are separate, one organisation, or a few of the organisations that you have talked about, think that they are saving money, and they cause massive problems to other organisations, as well as to that family. So yes, I think there is a massive problem around the way budgets influence behaviour here.

Q136 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Can anybody offer any solutions?

Simon Ford: Once upon a time, local authorities ran all the schools and we had a robust education welfare system, with education welfare officers who made sure that kids were in school, put plans around the kids and did their best to keep the kids in school.

The budget decline in the last 10 years or so has had a significant impact in terms of that particular resource—education welfare officers. They are still there but they are very much reduced. I know they are buckling under the pressures of the case loads that they have. They were the guys who would do the truancy sweeps. They would be out at dinner times checking the parks, and making sure the kids were in school. With the loss of that particular area, or the decline in that area, we do not have a strong measure.

That is what you see in your example, which is quite awful—nine months to get to the position that you are in, which is not a position to be in in any case, because it is not the answer. If we had had those EWOs in place in the very first instance, we might not have got to the position that that unfortunate lady is in now.

Q137 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Are there any statutory duties on local authorities to produce education, health and care plans within a particular timescale, or anything like that?

Councillor Simon Blackburn: Where children are in the care of the local authority, there is an obligation for personal education plans to be drawn up within a certain number of days—I think it might be 28—of the child's entering the care system. But the child to whom you refer appears not to be in the care system—she is living with her mother—so the statutory duty is to provide full-time education. Again, I am afraid that without a detailed knowledge of the individual case, I cannot comment more directly, other than to agree that it sounds terrible.



Q138 Chair: Mr Jones, you talked earlier about what you saw as the direct correlation between school exclusion and involvement in county lines. I think everybody has cast doubt on the efficacy of pupil referral units. You mentioned that you have used volunteers or employed people who have been part of county lines operations before.

Indeed, when I did the documentary 10 years ago in Birmingham, there was a group called the Young Disciples. It was largely made up of kids who had been in jail and suffered the effects of being involved with gangs, then come out and thought, "Surely there is a better way of running my life," and got involved in something.

From what I saw—you probably see this as well—those kids were probably the ones who had the most potent influence on their peer group by saying "You don't want to do this." If they can literally show their scars and point to their friends and colleagues who have lost their lives, it might just make people think twice.

The PRUs are not working, from what you are saying. How can we come up with something that makes them work, complements them or replaces them, when we are dealing with people who are much more likely to end up in county lines?

Evan Jones: We have done a bit of work in an east London PRU, where we are providing a support service delivered, just as you describe, by individuals who have been there themselves and can talk to the young people with a level of credibility and authority.

We have had successes where we have been able to support young people back into mainstream, which is one of the things that does not happen enough in PRUs. The PRU model was originally "fix 'em and return 'em", but now they don't get fixed and they don't get returned. They go into PRUs and then they go into young offenders institutions—it is a bit of a one-way street.

The other thing to stress about the young people we are working with is that although they have had educational failures, they are not thick. These are very bright, aspirational young people with bags of energy, who want to do well. They have tended to buy the idea that if you do not succeed in music or sport, drug dealing is the next place you go, but they want to do well; they are not couch potatoes.

They have energy and skills that can be channelled, given the right services, support and opportunities. They are not going to do well academically in the conventional sense in the short term, though eventually many of them do. They need support, and they need help for their families as well; their families are supporting them and are often struggling or finding them extremely difficult.

Sadly, the answer to all this is more support, which means more money, but I think it is about targeting services into PRUs. Being school-excluded should be a red flag. It should immediately mean, "Let's push resources to this young person, let's try to support everybody around them and let's get them out of this mess," but sadly that is not what happens.



Q139 Chair: We have not mentioned social media or its impact on county lines, either in terms of its influence on vulnerable kids who may then get involved or as a tool. Ms Dacey, you mentioned that these gangs are one step ahead of the police and the agencies, not least because they share information rather better than the agencies. What counter role is there for social media in trying to get one step ahead of the ringleaders?

Lucy Dacey: There are a few ways in which social media is used by perpetrators—one is to glamorise the lifestyle of exploitation—but it is worth talking to young people, who are the experts on this. We are probably not best placed to comment on where they are going on social media or how they are using it.

There is also a danger of marginalising a particular group. There is a lot of talk online and in the media about drill music and its role in grooming and county lines exploitation, but for a lot of these young people it is also an expression of the lives that they are living. Having that conversation with young people and finding a safe space for that creative outlet to counter what can be a negative thing is really important.

In terms of the use of social media when young people are experiencing or being a victim of county lines, there is this phenomenon known as “remote mothering”, which is where gangs can keep an eye on where young people are when they are really far away from them. So, that is looking at things like Find My Phone and apps like that, whereby you can actually track where young people are. We have had cases where young people move around a room in sessions with workers, so that it doesn’t look like they are sitting with a professional. So it is that pervasive and that extreme.

I think it’s worth our highlighting that to social media providers and phone providers, to say, “We know that these tools are being used for ill. Is there a way of us counteracting that?” I’m afraid we don’t have the answers as yet. But we need to feed that information back and say, “We know that this thing that was not intended for this purpose is being used as a mechanism of coercion and control for these young people, and they feel like they can’t turn them off, because that’s a red flag to the perpetrators that are grooming them.”

Evan Jones: We have been engaging with some of the big social media companies via the Home Office’s social media action group. There is some willingness from them, but there is a sort of cultural issue, in that they all come from the American kind of “freedom of speech” perspective, which is not the way we would approach things in this country.

So when we talk about taking down videos, YouTube is prepared to take down a video where someone waves a knife, but they are not prepared to take down a video where someone in a regional town is threatening people from a gang in south London, which is effectively a suicide note. It’s such a dangerous thing to do; it was a young person who had smoked too much dope, taken some coke, and got himself in front of a corner, produced this video and put it on YouTube. I mean, it was so dangerous, but YouTube



HOUSE OF COMMONS

couldn't "get" that bit of the vulnerability. So there's a lot of work to be done with them.

The other thing that we all know from going on the web is contextual advertising: if I look for sheds, shed adverts will pop up on every media outlet I use for the next year. Now that's got to work in a positive way, and again we have talked to people like Google about this. We've not got very far yet, but we think there should be alternatives and positive messages popping up when you are looking at, say, a Zone 2 drill video.

Zone 2 are a group in south London who produce music and are a gang—a criminal gang. They do both very effectively. And with this stuff, they can map who's watching it; they'll know who's watching their stuff and they can put other stuff up at the same time. But so far we've not got very far with this, so—

Q140 Chair: Are you providing direct examples to the Facebooks and Googles of this world, and they are just saying, "Don't call us, we'll call you"—that sort of approach?

Evan Jones: It is not quite as bad as that. As I say, the providers' interpretations are quite crude. If I can find a video where someone waves a knife, they will take it down. But if I find a video where there is a different type of vulnerability being displayed, or a risk, they don't quite get that, even if I could get that vulnerability supported by the police.

Q141 Chair: It would be quite useful if you supplied some examples, because this Committee has had the social media companies in front of us several times. Each time they appear to get worse at what they are actually doing.

We have concentrated more in terms of extremism, hate crime and adult content, but in terms of the peer influencing aspect of it, it's not something we have taken up so much. So if there are some examples where they have declined, we would be quite interested and we could pursue that as well; it is part of the same malaise, I think.

Evan Jones: Yes, I can raise that with the social media group at the Home Office.

Q142 Sir Christopher Chope: You may have covered this already, but this £200 million for the new national response unit—

Evan Jones: Is that the youth endowment fund that you are talking about?

Q143 Sir Christopher Chope: Well, it is something like that; it is an initiative coming from the Department for Education. So my brief tells me. And it's going to be £200 million. The £200 million youth endowment is additional; it is a separate thing. But this is to set up a national response unit.

Q144 Chair: I think we are talking about two different things. The Home Office has got the £200 million fund, and the Department for Education has got a new national response.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Simon Ford: There is a county lines national co-ordination centre that has just received a few million. Is that what you're referring to?

Q145 **Sir Christopher Chope:** No. It says in the brief here—as always, we are indebted to the team of Clerks who help us—that in August the Department for Education announced, “A new national response unit will be established to help local authorities support vulnerable children at risk of exploitation by criminal gangs.”

Simon Ford: That is out to tender.

Lucy Dacey: That is out to tender. That is a contract, for whoever wins it, to go into local areas—quite crucially not into local councils, which is quite helpful. It is to talk about multi-agency responses to exploitation. But as yet, they haven't announced who has won that. So it is difficult to comment on delivery; it hasn't started yet.

Q146 **Sir Christopher Chope:** And it is £200 million over 10 years, apparently.

Lucy Dacey: I think it is £2 million over three years. I don't know—it depends on the contracts.

Q147 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Is it going to make a big difference? Have you seen the specs or anything like that?

Simon Ford: It will, if the Department for Education speaks to the Home Office and they join up here with what is going on down there.

Lucy Dacey: It is definitely true that there are areas and pockets of good and less good practice. Any response unit that can join those dots together at a local level and nationally with Government Departments has to be a positive step forward.

Councillor Simon Blackburn: Chairman, we would welcome any new pots of funding. I think the new unit being set up by the Department for Education will be a useful tool. The youth endowment fund is a useful tool, as is the trusted relationships fund. They all contribute, but the bidding processes can be hurried or at the wrong time of year, such as over the summer holidays. It tends to favour areas that are very good at bidding for funding and that have units set up in that direction. That can lead to funding being unevenly distributed across the country and not necessarily targeted at those areas where there are the most significant problems. But we welcome all that additional funding.

Q148 **Chair:** It also depends on partners acquiescing to come together and acknowledging there is a problem. I am frequently told that there are schools that are offered voluntary groups and others that have expertise in knife crime—I am thinking of something like Lives Not Knives in Croydon—and are made up of people who have lost close family members through knife crime.

These people offer to go into schools to say, “This happened to kids your sort of age”, yet schools are declining to allow them over the doorstep in some cases because they do not want to admit they have a problem with knife crime. They say, “It is not a problem here”, and it strikes me that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

those sorts of schools most need to have those people coming in to tell their kids what is really going on in the outside world. You have to have everyone acknowledging that there is a problem and wanting to be part of the solution.

Lucy Dacey: We definitely see that. Sometimes you have to catch them all in order to catch the one you want. You say it is a universal service in an area, and if a school in the area does not accept that offer, it will look like it has a problem. Often, if you target the ones most in need, which is what we will do with limited resources, they are the very ones who say, "It is not quite for us", either because they do not want to admit they have a problem, or they do not want parents to be worried that the school is an unsafe environment. It is a challenge. Sometimes you have to scale, and having the resource to do that is quite difficult.

Evan Jones: We once had to get all the heads from one town in one room so they could all take the plunge together. They were all scared of the local newspaper saying that they were the school with the gangs problem. We had the ex-grammar and the toughest comprehensive doing it at the same time.

Chair: This has been a very helpful session. A few more lines of inquiry for us have come out of it. Thank you very much indeed.