



Education Committee

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From Mr Robin Walker MP, Chair

Gillian Keegan
Secretary of State
Department for Education

20 September 2023

Dear Gillian,

I am writing to you following the Committee's oral evidence sessions on Child exploitation and county lines held earlier this year. This is a concern for the Education Committee as the issue has continued to grow since The National Crime Agency called county lines exploitation "the most frequently identified form of coerced criminality, with children representing the vast majority of victims" in their [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#) report in 2020.

For the [first evidence session](#) on 28 February 2023 the Committee heard from representatives from The Children's Society, Catch 22, Missing People and Barnardo's. In this session the Committee focused on efforts to protect young people from gang involvement and explored the 'public health' approach to exploited young people already involved.

For the second and [final oral evidence session](#) on 4 July 2023 the Committee heard from two panels with representatives from the Safer Community Alliance, St Giles Trust, Refocus Project, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Children's Homes Association, Southend-on-Sea City council and the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. This session focused on existing work being done through policy, funding and joint-working to protect young people from gang exploitation through county lines as well as the different approaches taken to tackle county lines exploitation.

Statutory definition of criminal child exploitation

Many witnesses were in support of introducing a statutory definition of criminal child exploitation. The Committee heard from witnesses who agreed a statutory definition would be beneficial as a "start to[wards] consistency" in approach to tackling criminal child exploitation but also as "benchmark" to be used by authorities as they seek to distinguish between the victims and perpetrators of county lines exploitation.

The Committee also heard how a statutory definition would contribute to the success of joint-working and collaboration across organisations. Susannah Drury from Missing People told us:

"It [a statutory definition of criminal child exploitation] is almost stage 1 of information sharing and of working together, having that shared understanding of what we are talking about here. It feels like a valuable thing to have."

Some witness support for a statutory definition came with the caveat that any definition would need to be flexible and not "too narrow". The Committee was told that this was important because of how "fluid" the model of county lines can be, constantly evolving to avoid prosecution.

Please could you tell us if the Government plans for the introduction of a statutory definition of criminal child exploitation?

Modern Slavery Act

Witnesses were supportive of the Modern Slavery Act and acknowledged there have been some positive outcomes in terms of tackling county lines exploitation through the Act. However, the Committee heard from witnesses that there remains room for improving the effectiveness of the Act. For example, Rebecca Griffiths of Barnardo's said that in some aspects the Act "is not going far enough".

Other witnesses expressed concern about the low number of prosecutions under the Act against those grooming children into county lines activity. It was also suggested to the Committee that stricter sentences under the Modern Slavery Act would act as a greater deterrent for those leading county lines operations.

The Committee also heard similar from witnesses regarding the extent to which the Modern Slavery Act is working to disrupt child exploitation and the operation of county lines gangs. There was a shared desire from witnesses across the sessions for earlier intervention and escalation when modern slavery and trafficking risk orders are issued. The Committee was told that many times escalation is delayed meaning exploitation continues and more young people are groomed and exploited before those leading this activity face more serious consequences.

There was also consensus from witnesses that escalation from the issuing of modern slavery and trafficking risk orders to breach or prosecution is inconsistent between local areas and needs to be improved. The Committee understands the importance of this early intervention and subsequent escalation in stopping county lines activity and the grooming and exploitation that accompanies it at the earliest possible stage. We also heard from witnesses about the inconsistent interpretation of the Modern Slavery Act, particularly Section 45. Rebecca Griffiths of Barnardo's said:

"the section 45 defence sometimes can be interpreted from a lens that different agencies might take, maybe a more law enforcement lens, where we would take a more safeguarding lens. Those interpretations happen. We have heard in policing, for example, where section 45 has been squashed a little bit, seeing it as a "get out of jail free" card for children and young people."

Please could you tell us if the Government plans to introduce guidance on interpreting section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act, and the Government's views on its effectiveness in general?

The National Referral Mechanism

On the National Referral Mechanism, witnesses identified limited coordination between local services, authorities and schools as an obstacle undermining its effectiveness. Johnny Bolderson of Catch22 told us:

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

The Committee was told that the consequence of limited coordination between the Home Office, local authorities and support services embedded in the local community is "very patchy" by Iryna Pona of The Children's Society. The Committee was also told of good practice, for example local pilot projects where decisions on referrals were made locally with the approval of the Home Office. On this example Susannah Drury of Missing People said:

“That feels like it is quite a promising approach rather than everything going through to the Home Office. It has limited resources to process these things and it does not have the local context that local professionals working on those decisions will have.”

Witnesses also identified a lack of awareness about the National Referral Mechanism as an issue. The Committee heard about cases where professionals are unaware that a child has been trafficked or what the National Referral Mechanism is.

Please could you provide us with an overview of the Government’s assessment of the current working of the National Referral Mechanism, in particular whether efforts are being made to improve awareness amongst the necessary stakeholders about the National Referral Mechanism, and whether there are plans to learn from examples of good practice such as those described above?

Online platforms

Across both evidence sessions the Committee heard about the role of online platforms in child exploitation and county lines. Johnny Bolderson of Catch22 told us “social media and online gaming are the foundation of county lines recruitment”. Witnesses also told the Committee about how beyond recruitment, social media is being used to promote gang-related content as well as coerce and threaten young people. Iryna Pona of the Children’s Society told us:

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

Additionally, the Committee was told by multiple witnesses this issue of grooming through online platforms has been on the rise since Covid. Simon Ford, Head of Community Safety at Southend-on-Sea City Council told the Committee: “In recent years, particularly since Covid, we have been concerned about online grooming in criminal exploitation so in seeing more home schooling, again there is just that risk that more online exploitation is occurring.”

Concern about online platforms is not limited to issues around county lines and grooming into criminal exploitation. Acknowledging this, the Committee launched an inquiry on screen time on 11th September 2023, to explore its impact on children and young people’s education and wellbeing.

What steps are the Government taking to protect children and young people from online grooming by gangs?

Schools and education

In both our evidence session witnesses agreed that schools and teachers need better education on county lines and child exploitation in order to be able to identify the early signs of grooming and exploitation. Bali Rodgers of Refocus Project and Safer Communities Alliance told us:

“Schools need a lot more education about what younger grooming and exploitation is because they cannot see the signs.”

The Committee were told that those equipped with the insight into the issue, such as lived experience workers, should be going into schools to provide understanding and awareness amongst teachers. In addition to educating school staff, witnesses also told the Committee an important part

of prevention was the education of children and young people about the dangers of county lines and gang exploitation.

The Committee was told that one of the “main indicator[s]” of a child or young person being exploited was extended periods of being missing either from home or education. The Committee heard that exclusion from school exacerbates the risk of exploitation with excluded children and young people often unaccounted for. Johnny Bolderson of Catch22 said that exclusion from education is “extremely worrying because the young person has lost every relationship, positive or negative, in their lives and they are isolated.”

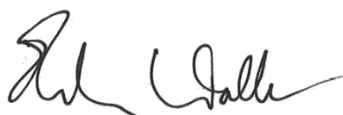
Witnesses also highlighted the potential role of return home interviews for missing children to the Committee. It was recognised that when done effectively, these interviews are opportunities for intervention and organisational awareness. Susannah Drury of Missing People told us:

“It is a window of opportunity to find out what is going on for the child, why they went missing, what happened while they were away and maybe what support they need to stop them from going missing again.”

Please could you provide us with an overview of what training and education school staff currently receive about county lines exploitation, including how to identify and prevent it, and what education children receive about these issues, including any efforts being made to revise and improve this? We would also like to know if there are any plans to improve the consistency of return home interviews for missing children as well as the support available to excluded children and young people.

The Committee looks forward to a response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Walker', written in a cursive style.

Mr Robin Walker MP
Chair of the Education Committee