



SOMERSET CHILD EXPLOITATION STRATEGY



Somerset Safeguarding
Children Partnership

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Foreword

I am pleased to introduce the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership's Child Exploitation Strategy which sets out key objectives for tackling child exploitation in Somerset.

We have been fortunate in securing the support of Research in Practice in 2020 to help with the development of a local needs assessment which has informed this strategy and assisted us in developing further our Child Exploitation Strategic Subgroup as a function of the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership.

As a partnership, we recognise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly the challenges it has created in responding to and acting on child exploitation as a children's safeguarding partnership. Equally, we celebrate the work of the partners under extremely challenging conditions and re-state our commitment to working across agency boundaries.



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1: Introduction

In 2021, a Strategic Needs Assessment was commissioned jointly by the [Safer Somerset Partnership](#) and the [Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership](#) to outline the current picture of child exploitation in Somerset, identify the number of children potentially at risk of exploitation, and highlight best practice and what works well in tackling this issue. Data included in this strategy has been derived from the Needs Assessment, and the strategic aims outlined in this Strategy are based on the evidence from this Assessment, the [Somerset Serious Violence Reduction Strategy](#)¹, the [Avon and Somerset Police Local Crime Plan](#)², and the [Somerset Youth Offending Service Strategic Plan](#)³.

2: A Summary of Child Exploitation in Somerset - Evidence from the CE Needs Assessment

There is no one single definition of Child Exploitation. There are two main forms of child exploitation: Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE); and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) which are used for the purposes of this Strategy:

Child Sexual Exploitation is defined by the UK Government as:

“Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity

- (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or
- (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.

The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”⁴

¹ [Somerset Serious Violence Reduction Strategy 2021-22](#)

² [Avon and Somerset Police Local Crime Plan 2017-21](#)

³ [Somerset Youth Offending Service Strategic Plan 2021-23](#)

⁴ [Department for Education \(UK\). Child sexual exploitation - definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation \[Internet\]. 2017.](#)

Child Criminal Exploitation is defined by the UK Government as:

“Child Criminal Exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity

- (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or
- (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or
- (c) through violence or the threat of violence.

The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.⁵

Child Criminal Exploitation is commonly associated with County Lines, but it can go beyond this to include, for example, children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft.⁶

County Lines is defined by the UK Government as:

“County Lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.”

In addition to these definitions, for the purposes of this document, a child is anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday.

⁵ [Home Office UK. Serious violence strategy. 2018;\(April\):111.](#)

⁶ [Home Office \(UK\). Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance. 2018;\(September\)](#)

3: Policy Context

The UK Government provides statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (2018). In summary, the statutory partners of the SSCP have a legal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in their area and to recognise that sexual and criminal exploitation can occur from both within the home and from external pressures. Therefore, the guidance stresses the importance of staff in all child-facing sectors being well trained to identify individuals at risk.⁷

To aid with this, the UK government also offers two key pieces of guidance for practitioners who work with children:

- 1. Child sexual exploitation** - definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation – February 2017 – which can be accessed here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-sexual-exploitation-definition-and-guide-for-practitioners>
- 2. Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults** - County Lines guidance – September 2018 – which can be accessed here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>



⁷ HM Government. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 [Internet]. 2018.

4: Prevalence of Child Exploitation in Somerset

The following section discusses the evidence base gathered in Somerset around child exploitation. This data has been taken from the [Child Exploitation Needs Assessment undertaken by Public Health in 2020-2021](#).

Given the complexities of this issue, the prevalence has been split into those who are known to be victims of or at risk of exploitation and those who are potentially at risk of exploitation.

Known to be at risk of exploitation

In 2020, there was a total of 323 children who were flagged as having an exploitation risk and 326 children flagged as a child victim of sex offences in Violence Reduction Unit data analysis.⁸ The work of the Safer Somerset Partnership has seen a reduction of these recorded child exploitation offences between 2019 and 2020. In addition to the above, between September 2020 and February 2021, there were a total of 254 children flagged as being high risk from sexual and criminal exploitation⁹.

The [Child Exploitation Needs Assessment](#) stated that in 2019/20 there were a total of 606 screening tool forms completed for 474 different young people. Of these 21 were categorised using the Child Exploitation Screening Tool Risk Banners¹⁰ as Risk Aware, 11 as Active, 4 as Pursue, and 8 were part of the TOPAZ cohort. In 2020/21 the total number of young people assessed increased to 493 (with 593 forms) but the number being given a banner was considerably lower with only 4 being classified as Risk Aware, 7 as Active, 0 as Pursue and 3 as part of the TOPAZ cohort.

The screening tool is used on young people of all ages from 5 to 20 however the most common age is 12 to 16 years old at 343 young people in 2020/21, followed by 17 to 20 years at 135 young people. The 5 to 11 age range had the significantly lower total individuals than the other ages at only 15 young people in 2020/21.

Those potentially at risk of exploitation

Proxy measures were considered in the [Child exploitation Needs Assessment](#) to estimate those most at risk of exploitation, including **age**, where in 2019, 50,492 were

⁸ [Safer Somerset Partnership Violence Reduction Unit \(VRU\), Child Exploitation Indicators – Source: Child Exploitation Needs Assessment. 2021; \(August\): 11](#)

⁹ [Somerset Serious Violence Reduction Unit Needs Assessment. 2020](#)

¹⁰ [Child Exploitation Screening Tool Risk Banners. Source: Child Exploitation Needs Assessment. 2021; \(August\):14](#)

in the age range most likely to be exploited (10 to 17). The Index of Multiple Deprivation considers several aspects of area such as **health**, **poverty**, and **crime** to give the area an overall score of deprivation. This is often used as proxy measure of need. In 2019, there 3,852 children in Somerset (0 to 17) living in the 10% most deprived areas in the country. 1,578 of these were aged between 10 to 17. This is roughly 3% of all children in Somerset.

Another risk factor to exploitation is **disability**. In the October 2020 school census, there were 10,508 children (14.7% of the total on roll) identified as having Special Education Needs and Disabilities. This includes learning difficulties, behaviour difficulties and physical disabilities.

The Department for **Education** reports, in 2020, there were 530 children looked after in Somerset, which can be an indicator of added vulnerability. This is a rate of 48 per 10,000 of 0 to 17 year olds.

Somerset County Council records the number of fixed term exclusions in the county. The Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) monitors this data.

Between September 2020 and February 2021, there was a total of 3,477 days where children were not in school due to fixed term exclusions. Being out of an education setting may increase exposure to risk. This is similar to the risk when missing from home. Between September 2020 and February 2021, the VRU recorded a total of 386 children who experienced a total of 1,175 episodes of missing from home.

Transitions

The Department for Education reports the number of 16 to 17 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) or whose activity is not known. These individuals are potentially at risk of exploitation. In 2019 there were 870 16 to 17's in Somerset who fell into this



group, which makes up 7.8% of our 16 to 17 population.¹¹

County Lines

Local Police data (2018) suggests that the number of 10 to 17 year olds arrested for intent to supply drugs, which is a significant indicator of County Lines trafficking, has gone up by 49% outside London. The Children's Society highlight how young people are being pressured into violence to prove loyalty to County Lines gangs and potentially being used to distract the police focus from other disruption activity (e.g. drug, weapons movement).

There may be concerns that gangs operating County Lines are exploiting vulnerable young people who may be leaving the care system to criminally or sexually exploit into dealing or storing drugs for them. These young people may be sent out of the area into cities like Cardiff to deal drugs for a Somerset based group which raises particular concerns about their safety and wellbeing.

Qualitative evidence from focus groups conducted with young people in Somerset's Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) suggests young people perceive an increased risk of violent crime when County Lines is present:

"Do you think you are at risk of being a victim of violent crime?... Yes, everyone is, especially if there is County Lines in the town"

- Somerset VRU 2019

Adults with Vulnerabilities and Exploitation

County Lines can involve adults with vulnerabilities as both victims and perpetrators. Cuckooing¹² is likely to involve adults who may be targeted due to their vulnerabilities, such as class A drug addictions, old age, mental and/or physical health impairments. Specific groups can also be vulnerable such as female sex workers and single mothers. County Lines groups pursue vulnerable individuals attending recovery groups, dependency units, and areas associated with those experiencing problems.

¹¹ [Public Health England. 16–17-year-olds not in education, employment, or training \(NEET\) or whose activity is not known \[Internet\]. \[cited 2021 Apr 20\]](#)

¹² Cuckooing is a practice where people take over a person's home and use the property to facilitate exploitation.

5: Best Practice and What Works Well in Tackling Child Exploitation

The Child Exploitation Needs Assessment highlighted key areas of good practice that should be considered. This includes:

A 'Whole-System' approach and Raising Awareness and multi-agency working

Taking a 'Whole-System' approach to child exploitation involves engaging all departments of the council, local businesses, and the wider community, including education and the voluntary sector, as well as other partnerships to "build confidence in recognising and reporting safeguarding concerns"¹³. This way of working involves raising awareness with the whole community, including parents and children, so they are able to recognise the signs of grooming and exploitation.¹⁴ Awareness raising is most effective when local knowledge and understanding is utilised to inform

prevention work and provide insight into how perpetrators are operating in the local area.

Due to their complex needs, the children most at risk of exploitation are likely to come into contact with a wide range of services. These services need to be coordinated and easily accessible for children seeking help and staff well trained to recognise and understand the action required in each case.



Child focussed approach

Any response needs to be tailored to the individual child. Children and their families may not recognise they are being exploited so professionals need to be patient and persistent when building effective, trusting relationships with them. Professionals need to have the appropriate training around adolescent development, child exploitation and the

¹³ [OFSTED, et al. Time to listen: a joined-up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children. 2016; \(September\): 31](#)

¹⁴ [OFSTED. Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking, and modern slavery: an addendum. 2018;\(November\):20](#)

complexities of abuse to ensure their response is appropriate to the needs of the child.^{15 16 17}

Legislative tools

In addition to the above ways of working, there are several pieces of legislation that can be used to disrupt child exploitation. The Home Office has put together a Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit which outlines the different legislation and when it can be used. The toolkit splits the disruption activities into six sections: Abducting and Trafficking; Sexual Offences; Victim Care; Behaviour; Location; Other Options.¹⁸

The toolkit can be accessed here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-exploitation-disruption-toolkit>

Teachable Moments

There are three main 'teachable moments' available when a child or young person is either at significant risk of or actively being exploited. These 'moments in time' can be catalysts for change and improved, meaningful engagement and can be the beginnings of a move to a safer position for the child.

The three moments are:

1. Risk of exclusion (fixed term or permanent) for education or training
2. Their own victimisation / received harm so presentations in A and E or other acute health services
3. Entry into the formal criminal justice system.

Research suggests that relevant agencies should work together to take advantage of 'reachable and teachable moments' and identify which interventions are most effective and how they can be implemented.¹⁹

¹⁵ [OFSTED, et al. Time to listen: a joined-up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children. 2016; \(September\): 31](#)

¹⁶ [Public Health England. 16–17-year-olds not in education, employment or training \(NEET\) or whose activity is not known \[Internet\]. \[cited 2021 Apr 20\]](#)

¹⁷ [OFSTED. Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum. 2018;\(November\):20](#)

¹⁸ [Home Office. Child exploitation disruption toolkit. 2019;78pp](#)

¹⁹ [LGA. Impact of government policy on knife crime House of Lords. 2019; \(June\)](#)

Focus on Inequalities

It is clear that socio-economic inequalities increase the risk of exploitation. Stakeholders in Somerset advocate for focussing activity in the most deprived localities or targeting young people for preventative activity who present risk factors. This will include tackling homelessness and the causes of homelessness and working with social landlords across Somerset to ensure that they 'see the child' in the work they do with families to prevent homelessness and in tackling breaches of tenancy agreements due to drug related activity.



6: Recommendations from the Needs Assessment

1. Participate in cross partnership activity to improve data collation and sharing to improve quality, and align with relevant statutory requirements and other local strategic plans (i.e. Serious Violence Duty, Avon and Somerset Police Local Crime Plan).
2. It is recommended that the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup considers training requirements across relevant stakeholders, including schools, and elected members and voluntary and community sector to ensure there is an appropriate level of professional competency as well as awareness and commitment to the Child Exploitation agenda. This will include increased awareness and understanding of SEND vulnerability and transitions.
3. The Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup should consider how it can capture the voice of the child to learn from the lived experience of exploited children and young people in Somerset.
4. It is recommended that the system for supporting exploited children and young people should be based upon a whole family approach by engaging with parents/carers and understanding the impact on the family.
5. Ensure that Covid-19 recovery and building resilience forms part of the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup's strategy.
6. Socio-economic inequalities increase the risk of exploitation. It is recommended that the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup prioritises work in the most deprived localities or targets young people for preventative activity who present risk factors.
7. Children who go missing are at higher risk of being exploited, can be victims or perpetrators of crime and may have other needs that require additional support. It is recommended that the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup include this cohort in its strategic planning activity.
8. Housing should be considered as a priority in the Child Exploitation strategy, linking with the Homelessness Reduction Board in any strategic or policy developments.
9. It is recognised that young people who are transitioning into adult services will have increased risk and vulnerabilities if protective factors are removed or they are unable to access services. It is recommended that this is prioritised for the subgroup.

- 10.** As part of whole system approach, relevant communications should be shared appropriately. This includes sharing minutes of the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup with the Safer Somerset Partnership and VRU to ensure that governance is aligned.
- 11.** It is recommended that the group considers the use of an appropriate multi-agency Screening Tool.
- 12.** Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup should be assured that the services designed to support exploited children in Somerset, specifically ROUTES, BASE and TOPAZ are performing well and meeting the needs of young people, this should include the voice of the child and lived experience to assist with continuous improvement.
- 13.** Effective partnership working is key to preventing and tackling County Lines due to the transient and fast paced nature of the model. It is therefore recommended that the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup includes County Lines as a strategic priority which can give effect to tangible multi-agency action.
- 14.** Activity planning should take account of 'teachable moments' available when a child or young person is either at significant risk of or actively being exploited. These 'moments in time' can be catalysts for change and improved, meaningful engagement and can be the beginnings of a move to a safer position for the child.



7: Priorities for the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic Subgroup

1. The CE strategic subgroup will take a leadership role in tackling County Lines, working in partnership with the Violence Reduction Unit to identify and support young people at risk.
2. Take a whole family, trauma informed approach, considering parents and siblings in the package of support for young people at risk of, or victims of exploitation working with and supporting parents as partners in safeguarding.
3. Supporting awareness and improved understanding of exploitation within the safeguarding system.
4. Use data effectively for assurance and to inform response and direct resourcing where possible at targeted interventions to reduce the risk of exploitation with a focus on:
 - The most deprived localities
 - The most at-risk young people for preventative activity
 - Missing cohort
 - Young people who are transitioning between children's and adults' services.

8: Conclusion and Next Steps

Child Exploitation is complex and can affect children and young people in a number of ways. It can be difficult to identify in the first instance, and even more difficult to stop. Because of this, it is important that the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup considers best practice in preventing exploitation and creating resilience in our children and young people to limit the risk of exploitation before escalation occurs. The evidence base provides the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership with facts about where and how Child Exploitation manifests in Somerset as well as highlighting good practice for responding.

The Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership Child Exploitation Strategic subgroup will design a detailed plan containing specific activities to deliver the priority outcomes highlighted in this strategy.

9: References

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