

National Children and Adult Services Conference 2019

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Tackling County Lines

I'm afraid I'm not here to offer a list of interventions that will 'work' in addressing CL & SYV. We have relatively little empirical evidence on specific interventions – compared to, say, improving literacy, or treating asthma. Fortunately though the [Youth Endowment Fund](#), [Early Intervention Foundation](#) and [What Works for Children's Social Care](#) are working hard to build the evidence base in that regard – and I urge you all to keep abreast of their work.

Whilst we don't know with certainty exactly which programmes or methods work for which young people, we do know enough to be sure we need to redesign our approach.

We know much from the attention paid – and progress made – in relation to child sexual exploitation. This learning was hard-won, painful frankly. And it's ongoing, of course. So it seems problematic that we are not systematically applying this learning to our work to tackle County Lines, criminal exploitation and youth violence.

Let's start by questioning whether the term County Lines is actually helpful. Certainly no young person has ever called it that... Is it useful to distinguish between County Lines and broader drug trafficking? Or between County Lines and criminal exploitation? [Dr Helen Beckett](#) and others have rightly questioned the helpfulness of setting CSE apart from the existing definition of CSA. Practitioners agonising over whether a child's experience fits into a specific definition can distract from the primary issue of safeguarding them. With narrow service criteria in place, partly to manage resource allocation, practitioners can quickly learn to label children with whatever the buzzword of the moment is – simply to be able to get some help in place for that child. Furthermore, as [research by Beckett and her team](#) shows, young people rarely if ever identify their harm as being the only thing that defines them – whilst we can see them as a CSE victim first and foremost, for many YP this is just one part of their multi-faceted lives. The same is likely to be true for YP ensnared in violence and drug trafficking. Children rarely fit neatly into boxes.

As colleagues in Greater Manchester have articulated so clearly within their ambitious [Complex Safeguarding model](#): these issues are not neat nor linear, so our response cannot be either. We cannot seek to simplify the problems nor the solutions in relation to child exploitation and violence. We cannot arrest or inspect our way out of this, we have to lean in to the complexity.

Just as with CSE, this complexity is evident at every level: YP hold dual identities, both victims and perpetrators, both 'at risk' and 'a risk' – this presents significant challenge to services, not least our colleagues in law enforcement.

Adding further complexity, highlighted powerfully in recent years with regards to CSE, our child protection system was designed largely to address the needs of younger children facing harm in the family. We now understand that many adolescents face extra-familial harm – that is harm outside the family, in their peer groups, their schools and neighbourhoods and online. The world of child protection is undergoing a process of significant transformation with the excellent work of [Carlene Firmin](#) and others around [Contextual Safeguarding](#) becoming ever more influential. The term Contextual Safeguarding refers to a very specific set of approaches and tools, being tested through research – it is not a 'catch-all' for all adolescent safeguarding activity. See [ADCS briefing](#).

One of the key learning challenges CSE presented was the need to treat parents as partners, wherever safe and appropriate to do so. Traditional approaches to safeguarding have had to be adapted as a result. The work of organisations like [PACE](#) and [SPACE](#) powerfully highlights that we have much further to go here. Imagine being a parent, worried sick about your child and the criminals they are spending time with, not knowing where they are for days – or if they are even alive, spending money you don't have to clear your child's debts, constantly worrying about the safety of your other children... and when you finally ask for help, the process is set up to assume that you are the one who needs to demonstrate 'capacity to change'. We must unlearn some of our closely held assumptions about professional power and expertise, we must learn from those with personal lived experience. This is not to say that young people affected by County Lines / Criminal Exploitation don't also have experience of adversity within their family – many do. We need a nuanced, balanced approach.

Our criminal justice system was designed largely around the idea that there are victims and villains, goodies and baddies. This no longer bears out when dealing with YP ensnared, coerced and manipulated into criminal behaviour. Indeed, evidence submitted to the [Justice Select Cttee Inquiry into 'The treatment of young adults in the criminal justice system'](#) shows the disproportionate rates of learning difficulties, autism, communication impairment and head injury amongst 18-25 year olds in custody. They have very often experienced violence, adversity and maltreatment in childhood – they are (or were) precisely the children we are talking about today. These young men, for the most part – are the very definition of vulnerable. If we see them only through the lens of the offences they have committed, we are failing in our duty to protect them.

Faced with such complex, emotionally demanding work, it is little wonder that practitioners seek something – anything – that might provide some sense of order amongst the chaos. The proliferation of scored checklists and simplistic 'indicators' within the CSE field is a prime example. Professor Sarah Brown of Coventry Uni has highlighted the very [questionable evidence underpinning most of these tools, as well as the concerning inconsistency in their application](#). Yet they are hugely popular... Practitioners can feel they are doing something, and this false sense of reassurance spreads upwards: managers can check how many checklists have been completed, senior managers or officers can check how many managers are auditing the checklists, inspectors can check how many LAs or police forces are using checklists... put bluntly, everyone feels safer apart from the kid. I fear we are about to make the same mistake in relation to County Lines and Criminal Exploitation. Tools can be helpful of course, where they scaffold and encourage – but do not impede - professional curiosity. There is not a checklist, or flowchart, or ICS plug-in in the world that can replace evidence-informed, relationship-based, critically thought through and well-supervised professional judgment.

The interconnected nature of extra-familial harm requires a highly integrated response. It is about creating holistic, integrated, whole-place systems. It is not sufficient to have a County Lines team or a gangs service, operating separately. This kind of specialist support must be closely knitted in with early help, whole family support, mental health and educational provision. Crucially, we need to think expansively about how to include and respect the expertise of communities within these systems. Long after we have packed up and gone home, these young people will still be part of their communities. Meeting the needs of young people ensnared in violence and criminal exploitation is an issue of place-based leadership, not single issue procurement. It is more useful to think of it as coalition building rather than traditional commissioning

Something that we have learnt the hard way from CSE is that harm, and its effects, do not stop at 18. We have designed a system that assumes a binary notion of childhood

and adulthood, presumes that young people magically wake up at 18 able to exercise capacity, that the trauma of childhood melts away overnight.

But the people who seek to hurt our kids don't walk away when they turn 18 of course – we do. The people who want to hurt our kids don't have complicated referral pathways, or eligibility criteria, or waiting lists. Unlike us, they stick around.

The research from colleagues like [Sawyer et al](#) makes a very compelling case for redefining adolescence, not as 11½ to 17½ - but more like 10 – 24/25. And yet, under the current arrangements, our support to these highly vulnerable young adults is seriously lacking. [ONS data on knife-related homicides](#) shows clearly that 18-24 year old males are particularly vulnerable, (with 16-24 year old males showing the sharpest increase in knife-related deaths between 2017-18). These young men are nobody's business. Too old for children's safeguarding, and we are – ironically - failing to offer care and support, because these young adults are not deemed to have Care and Support needs. This is a restrictive interpretation of the Care Act. The Care Act sets out who we must support, but does not limit who we can support – it is the resources that restrict us, not the legislation.

I have nothing but sympathy for colleagues battling to stretch every penny that bit further – and nothing I have said here is intended to elude the wholly indefensible underfunding of services that you face. In such times, it is easy for gate-keeping to become the norm... we must not let a preoccupation with thresholds at the expense of prevention. The young people who we cease to support at 18 can appear in our homeless population, criminal justice system, mental health population, substance misuse population... and yet we might not offer any support until they become parents... we are feeding a very expensive machine. I have had the privilege of visiting more than 20 local areas seeking to develop a [Transitional Safeguarding](#) approach – and have been inspired and impressed by the sector's ambition to redesign the system.

The excellent work done across the sector to improve our response to CSE has been that much harder due to issues surrounding data. The same is very much true in relation to Criminal Exploitation. Too often we are reliant on poor quality data, and have inconsistent approaches to sharing. We have no definitive answer to the question 'how many YP are affected by CL or CE?' - making the work of commissioners very difficult. But we should be cautious of any suggestion that the solution is to introduce a duty to record and report. Until we have shared definitions and parameters of exactly which YP we are talking about, any figures collated will be fairly useless. As my colleague [Rebecca Godar](#) recently noted "*Whether or not the box is ticked depends on the practitioner's own understanding of extra-familial harm and exploitation. Changes in this number might imply increased staff awareness, or a local policy focus, or preparation for inspection, rather than any change in the underlying prevalence*".

I would be concerned that such spurious data could lead to unsophisticated KPIs against which LAs and police forces are judged, with no national agreement yet as to whether these numbers ought to be going up or down – either could be seen as a good news story. And then there are the issues of ethical governance... surely we must treat these children's data with the same care and caution that we'd want for our own children? The quality and utilisation of data *must* be improved, but this must be done thoughtfully and collaboratively, with national and local actors working together and holding citizen's rights front and centre.

This leads me to highlight issues of equalities, diversity and inclusion. Improvements in relation to CSE have demanded a greater focus on such issues – we are still learning how our practice culture and some of the tools being used served to exacerbate blind-

spots, with [boys being under identified as victims of sexual harm](#). Similarly, young people and young adults with learning difficulties are particularly vulnerable to sexual and criminal exploitation – and can become ensnared as perpetrators as well as victims. In thinking about Criminal Exploitation and violence, there are particular issues we should be alert to. Charlie Taylor's review of the youth justice system highlighted the striking racial disproportionality within that system. Work by [University of Cambridge found worrying racial disproportionality in relation to conviction](#) (that is where a person can be convicted by association). There is much enthusiasm for a 'public health approach' and for the use of Artificial Intelligence to tackle some of the most complex challenges facing society. Both of these solutions rely on data. We should think long and hard about the potential unintended consequences of building on [data that reflects racial bias](#).

Many local areas have worked hard to adopt a trauma-informed approach to CSE – and the visionary ones are seeking to do the same in relation to Criminal Exploitation. Three points of learning are relevant here: Central to a trauma-informed approach, and a [public health approach](#), is the notion of participative practice. Children experiencing highly coercive contexts need to be given as much 'voice and choice' as possible – whether in direct practice, or in service design and policy influencing. The power of such approaches within CSE is well argued in the work of [Camille Warrington](#), [Kristine Hickle](#), [Michelle Lefevre](#) and others... It is not a choice between protection and participation, it is – as Lefevre et al recently [published](#) – 'both/and, not either/or'. Indeed, these points are interdependent – we can't protect young people without upholding their participation rights. It can be hard to work in this way, and possibly even harder with YP ensnared County Lines and gang-related activity, but we must strive to work in this way if we are to disrupt their experience of control and effectively protect them. Secondly, being trauma-informed does not begin or end with the use of scored ACEs checklists, to explore some of the critique of the way ACES research is being applied, see [here](#). The other important thing to say about a trauma-informed approach is that it does not happen in practice without a systemic, [organisation-wide approach](#). We cannot expect practitioners to deliver trauma-attuned support without trauma-attuned supervision; similarly, relational strengths-based practice does not happen in a vacuum – it must be led from the top, with feeling.

Improving our response to CSE has taught us a lot about the emotional impact of this work on practitioners. There will be, in many of your organisations, colleagues who came into their role primarily because they want to protect vulnerable children. It is hard to overstate the learning curve they now face, as they try to protect vulnerable children who present as neither vulnerable nor child-like. Working with CYP affected by criminal exploitation and violence asks something profoundly challenging of our professionals – they must see past the presenting criminal or violent behaviour, see past the fact that young person might be 6ft 7 with a neck tattoo, see past their flat denial that they are a victim, and see the young person obscured by all of this. Ofsted's 2018 report on adolescent neglect, [Growing Up Neglected](#) highlighted how much more there is to do to ensure practitioners are able to see the young person behind the behaviour, their vulnerability and needs (and strengths). This work is hard.

To build trust with a young person who has experienced the highly coercive and controlling context of a gang is no mean feat. To help a young person to heal when they have witnessed the violent harm, even murder, of their friends, is an extraordinary ask. And yet professionals across all agencies do this extraordinary work every day. Too many of them – especially those working outside of social work or therapeutic services – do it without reflective supervision, without support to process the emotional impact and without organisational attention being paid to the risk of vicarious trauma. There are

some excellent initiatives in this space however – such as this [collaborative pilot between Camden Council, Camden & Islington NHS Trust and the Met Police](#), providing direct support and reflective group supervision to police colleagues encountering traumatic experiences. Working with people in pain is painful. Our colleagues in education, law enforcement, community settings may well need the kind of emotional support and reflective supervision that health and social care services are often very skilled at providing. Any multi-agency forum worth its salt should surely be thinking about how to collectively support *all* practitioners working in this complex field, irrespective of where they work.

And we learnt something about innovation too. Innovation happens locally, led by those who know their patch, know their people and are hungry for change. National initiatives can help, and certainly the support of central government is key. But true innovation doesn't come in a shiny wrapper, rubber-stamped by Whitehall, to be rolled out like turf. Where we think we have an evidence-based intervention, it is right to consider fidelity – but contextual adaptation matters too. Scale and spread does not necessarily mean 'copy & paste'. Innovation is about collective learning, shared passion, and collaborative problem-solving. It's about hearing – really hearing – from those practitioners who do the work, and those we serve. It's about making discoveries and making mistakes. It's about reconsidering existing paradigms and being bold enough to know when the time has come for radical system redesign. It is less about models and more about creating a social movement.

Being brave, being radical is something that local leaders often do very well. But I caution against using the language of 'savings' to justify your innovation. Sometimes it is simply the right thing to do. And even where investing in prevention, addressing the divide between children's and adults safeguarding (or between safeguarding and community safety) may well enable cost-avoidance, this does not guarantee savings. Furthermore, this cost avoidance will probably not be in your budget line and maybe not in your lifetime. This is a test of your nerve, colleagues... I have every faith in you.