



## Report of the Police and Crime Panel

**Report title:** Fighting serious organised crime – County Lines and the protection of the vulnerable

**Date:** 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2023

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**Purpose of the report:** As requested by the Panel

**Recommendations:** Information only

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### Executive Summary

This report sets out activity by the OPCC and Thames Valley Police in delivering the strategic priority of fighting serious organised crime, as set out in the Police & Criminal Justice Plan 2021-2025.

### 1. Background

1.1 The Police & Criminal Justice Plan highlights the fact the serious organised crime can come in many forms, but provides a particular focus on protecting vulnerable people. There are a number of specific areas for action set out in the plan:

- 1.1.1 Continuing to develop the Violence Reduction Unit, identifying potential victims and perpetrators and enabling multi-agency interventions
- 1.1.2 Reducing deaths from knife crime
- 1.1.3 Increasing the number of disruptions and successful prosecutions for serious organised crime (SOC)
- 1.1.4 Ensuring focus on SOC groups involved with acquisitive crime and exploitation
- 1.1.5 Ensuring regional resources are available to support local investigations
- 1.1.6 Supporting early intervention work to prevent young people becoming either perpetrators or victims of crime

1.2 These areas sit alongside a number of wider considerations and activities conducted by Thames Valley Police and the OPCC.

### 2. Forms of serious organised crime

2.1 The National Crime Agency has identified three key areas of threats from serious organised crime: Exploitation of the vulnerable; Impact on communities; Economic harm. Several areas of criminal activity are recognised within these areas.

2.2 Exploitation of the Vulnerable:

- Child Sexual Abuse
- Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking
- Organised Immigration Crime



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### 2.3 Impact of SOC on Communities:

- Drugs
- Firearms
- Organised Acquisitive Crime

### 2.4 Harm to the UK's Economy and Institutions:

- Cyber Crime
- Fraud
- Money Laundering

2.5 This report is not exhaustive in covering each of these areas of crime, but attempts to highlight some of the key strands specifically relating to exploitation of the most vulnerable.

2.6 It must nevertheless be noted that significant work has also been undertaken in with regards to the wider issues, including fraud and serious acquisitive crime. In terms of the latter the Rural Crime Team have made great efforts to tackle the trade in stolen vehicles and machinery, supporting the introduction of new legislation. Similarly work to tackle issues such as retail crime and catalytic converter theft need to be viewed through the lens of serious organised crime.

## **Violence Reduction Unit (VRU)**

3.1 Established in 2019 and funded by the Home Office, the aim of the VRU our aim is to reduce the number of people affected by Serious Violence across the Thames Valley, working with our communities.

3.2 The VRU is a partnership body (not a legal entity in its own right) supported by a central programme team. It brings together representation from policing, local authority community safety, children's services and social care, prisons and probation, education, youth offending and the voluntary and community sector.

3.3 From its inception the PCC has been the Senior Responsible Officer to the Home Office for funding purposes, but the team has been staffed mainly by Thames Valley Police Officers, along with individuals seconded from other partner organisations.

3.4 As Home Office funding comes to an end the VRU partnership is embarking on a new period of embedding the work as business as usual. To this purpose the PCC has appointed a new Head of Violence Reduction who now leads the VRU, with staff forming part of the OPCC structure.

3.5 The activities of the VRU are many and varied can perhaps be broken down into three broad areas:



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- 3.5.1 Diversion – The VRU co-ordinates funding and referrals for numerous organisations across Thames Valley that seek to divert young people from becoming involved in criminal activity or seeking to provide an escape from the cycle of offending.
- 3.5.2 Enforcement – Additional Home Office funding for overtime enforcement operations has been managed through the VRU which has enabled additional funding for operational policing. The VRU has also developed the Hot Spot app used by officers across the Force for focused patrols to tackle violent crime.
- 3.5.3 Data – The Thames Valley Together data project seeks to bring together information not just from policing, but also from local authorities and health partners to highlight risks of offending and victimisation in order to prevent serious violence. This project is still managed with TVP in order to mitigate data sharing issues.

### Exploitation

4.1 Exploitation is a form of abuse where someone is forced or coerced into doing things for the benefit of others. It can often be a gradual process as people are groomed and introduced to new ideas, behaviours and activities, making these appear normal and acceptable. These behaviours and activities may seem exciting or give someone something they are looking for – including money, gifts or a sense of belonging. People may not recognise that they are being exploited until their situation becomes very serious. Exploitation can take many forms, can take place in a range of situations, and can involve many groups of people.

Common forms of exploitation:

4.2 **Criminal exploitation** – being forced to take part in criminal activities such as transporting or selling illegal items (e.g. drugs); participating in violent or acquisitive crime; or grooming and exploiting other people.

4.3 **Debt bondage** – present in many forms of exploitation. People may accumulate ‘debts’ during exploitation, such as payments for transport and accommodation, or ‘free’ drugs and money. People may be forced to carry out work, favours or criminal activities to pay off their debts and may be threatened with violence if they do not.

4.4 **Drug trafficking** – being forced to transport drugs to areas where they can be sold and distributed. This can involve county lines activities such as cuckooing (where drug gangs transport drugs to towns and cities along ‘deal lines’). Drug trafficking can be a form of modern slavery and drug trafficking if people are forced to travel to take part in the transportation and sale of drugs.

4.5 **Financial exploitation** – being deceived or coerced into handing over monetary funds or assets to others. This can happen through scams, fraud, blackmail, or through accruing debts.



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**4.6 Labour exploitation** – being forced to work for little or no pay, often in poor conditions. People experiencing labour exploitation may have limited freedom and may be forced to live with other workers. Labour exploitation is a form of modern slavery.

**4.7 Modern slavery** – having control or ownership over another person and using this power to exploit them. Modern slavery can include human trafficking, enslavement, domestic servitude and forced labour.

**4.8 Radicalisation** – the process through which people come to support increasingly extreme political, religious or other ideals. This can lead them to support violent extremism or terrorism.

**4.9 Sexual exploitation** – a form of sexual abuse where people are encouraged, manipulated or forced to participate in sexual acts. They may be threatened with violence and may be groomed by offers of affection, money or gifts.

### **Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**

**5.1** This is a form of child abuse where children are abused for money, power or status.

The abuser takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person into criminal activity, often related to drug supply:

**5.1.1** in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or

**5.1.2** for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator.

**5.2** It can still be exploitation, even if the child appears to consent to the activity. It is often accompanied by violence, threats of violence (perhaps towards relatives or siblings) or the use of inducements. The children involved may not feel they have an alternative, but are often labelled as “having made a lifestyle choice”. They may have thought that the gang or group offers safety, status and protection from others.

Child Criminal Exploitation can take many forms:

**5.3 Peer-on-peer exploitation:** Young people are forced or coerced into criminal activity by peers or associates. It may be associated with gang activity, but not always.

**5.4 Gang related exploitation:** As part of the gang culture a young person will be criminally exploited, perhaps as a punishment or for a perpetrator to gain status within the gang.

**5.5 Organised exploitation:** Young people are passed through networks and between towns and cities where they may be forced/coerced into criminal. Often this is part of an Organised Crime group’s “County Lines”



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There are often many stages of exploitation, which are important for police officers and partners to understand. Officers should consider and understand the following techniques used to groom a victim and the four stages this grooming typically follows:

- 5.5.1 Targeting stage – the groomer targets a particular young person, glamorising the gang lifestyle and inviting them to participate and give them status
  - 5.5.2 Experience stage – the groomer trains them up and gets them used to the lifestyle by offering gifts, praise and including them in activities and testing their loyalties, such as giving them a weapon to look after.
  - 5.5.3 Hooked stage – the groomer makes them feel they are part of the gang, even if they are still being groomed. They may be given a bigger role or responsibility, become engaged in thrill seeking, risky or criminal acts
  - 5.5.4 Trapped stage – the exploiters true motives become clear. Threats, assaults, blackmail, humiliation, addiction and exploitation become frequent.
- 5.6 Identifying the victim/offender status of the child during the early stages of an investigation can be difficult to establish. However regardless as to whether a child is an offender or a victim, the very fact that he/she is involved in serious organised crime with all the associated risks of drug misuse, weapons, violence etc. places that child at significant risk of harm. Under the terms of s47 of the Children’s Act 1989, the local authority is obliged to act when a child at risk of significant harm is identified. Using the phrase “child at significant risk of harm” will help other agencies to understand the concerns being raised and the need for them to respond under s47 of the Act.

### **Child abuse**

- 6.1 Child abuse is the generic term encompassing all situations of the ill treatment of children, including serious physical and sexual assaults, as well as cases where the standard of care does not reach reasonable expectations (neglect) and where psychological harm is caused. It includes Child Sexual Exploitation.
- 6.2 In many instances of child abuse the perpetrator is likely to be a family member or someone known to the child. In some cases children may not understand that they are being abused. The complex dynamics of abuse mean that some individuals develop an attachment to the person harming them. This can sometimes make identifying abuse difficult and result in the victim playing down and/or denying the abuse.
- 6.3 The Police are under a statutory obligation to safeguard and promote the welfare of children under section 11 of the Children’s Act 2004 by working with other agencies. The nine Local Safeguarding Children's Boards oversee local arrangements to protect children in the Thames Valley. The Statutory Guidance on ‘Working Together to





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Safeguard Children 2018' provides advice and guidance about how all agencies should keep children safe.

6.4 Child abuse takes many different forms and officers should follow the relevant Operational Guidance to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to keep children safe. Officers should maintain professional curiosity and consider all the circumstances when making enquiries into the welfare of a child. Any subsequent assessment will be carried out by Children's Social Care, often in conjunction with officers from CAIU.

### **Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)**

7.1 Learning that has come from dealing with victims of Child Sexual Exploitation (CESE) suggests that involvement in offending is an indicator of CSE. A number of victims of CSE had spent time in custody prior to and during the time they were abused. Please use the links below to navigate to the appropriate section of the page

Signs and behaviour generally seen in children who are already being exploited:

- 7.1.1 A child who carries two mobile phones can be an indicator of living two lives as opposed to an adult who may carry both work and personal phones.
- 7.1.2 Missing from home or care.
- 7.1.3 Physical injuries.
- 7.1.4 Drug or alcohol misuse.
- 7.1.5 Involvement in offending.
- 7.1.6 Repeat sexually-transmitted infections, pregnancy and terminations.
- 7.1.7 Absent from school.
- 7.1.8 Change in physical appearance.
- 7.1.9 Evidence of sexual bullying and/or vulnerability through the internet and/or social networking sites.
- 7.1.10 Estranged from their family.
- 7.1.11 Receipt of gifts from unknown sources.
- 7.1.12 Recruiting others into exploitative situations.
- 7.1.13 Poor mental health.
- 7.1.14 Self-harm.
- 7.1.15 Thoughts of or attempts at suicide.

The following are typical vulnerabilities in children prior to abuse:

- 7.2.1 Living in a chaotic or dysfunctional household (including parental substance use, domestic violence, parental mental health issues, parental criminality).
- 7.2.2 History of abuse (including familial child sexual abuse, risk of forced marriage, risk of 'honour'- based violence, physical and emotional abuse and neglect).
- 7.2.3 Recent bereavement or loss.



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- 7.2.4 Gang association either through relatives, peers or intimate relationships (in cases of gang associated CSE only).
  - 7.2.5 Attending school with young people who are sexually exploited.
  - 7.2.6 Learning disabilities.
  - 7.2.7 Unsure about their sexual orientation or unable to disclose sexual orientation to their families.
  - 7.2.8 Friends with young people who are sexually exploited.
  - 7.2.9 Homeless.
  - 7.2.10 Lacking friends from the same age group.
  - 7.2.11 Living in a gang neighbourhood.
  - 7.2.12 Living in residential care.
  - 7.2.13 Living in hostel, bed and breakfast accommodation or a foyer.
  - 7.2.14 Low self-esteem or self-confidence.
  - 7.2.15 Young carer.
- 7.3 Actions for custody where CSE is suspected: A number of these factors may become apparent during the risk assessment of a child detainee. Where there is anything disclosed by a detainee, or there are indicators that give rise to suspecting a detainee may be the victim of or subject to CSE, the Custody Officer should bring this to the attention of the OIC.

## **Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery**

- 8.1 With both modern slavery and human trafficking, men, women and children are forced into a situation through the use of violence (or threat of violence), deception or coercion. Modern Slavery encompasses Human Trafficking, Slavery, Servitude, Forced and Compulsory Labour and is often committed by organised crime groups.
- 8.2 Victims are often subject to multiple forms of exploitation although four main types of exploitation are associated with modern slavery:
- 8.2.1 Forced Labour;
  - 8.2.2 Criminal Exploitation;
  - 8.2.3 Sexual Exploitation;
  - 8.2.4 Domestic Servitude.
- 8.3 For an adult to be a victim of Modern Slavery there must be an action (recruitment, transfer), a means (violence, coercion) and purpose (self-gain, criminality) for exploitation. For child victims it is not necessary to prove the means, as a child is unable to provide consent.
- 8.4 How might a victim be identified? There are a series of behaviours or indications that somebody may be a victim of Modern Slavery. It is not always easy to recognise a victim of modern slavery and a victim may not consider themselves to be a victim



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- 8.4.1 Living and working in the same place.
  - 8.4.2 Housed with multiple people in a cramped living space.
  - 8.4.3 Working long hours with little or no pay.
  - 8.4.4 No identification or travel documents – these may be withheld by an employer.
  - 8.4.5 Signs of physical and or psychological abuse, including post-traumatic stress disorder.
  - 8.4.6 The third party insists on being present or interpreting for the individual.
  - 8.4.7 Non-verbal communication and body language between potential victims and suspects.
  - 8.4.8 Victim may initially present as a potential suspect due to forced criminality.
- 8.5 It takes courage for a victim to disclose their abuse as they may fear the consequences. In any investigation of modern slavery, the welfare of the victim(s) and witness(es) and preservation of any evidence is crucial. This should be foremost in the investigating officer's mind.
- 8.6 Where someone is suspected of being a victim of modern slavery then they should be considered a child or adult at risk and the relevant child or adult at risk operational guidance followed. The Force will seek support from relevant partner agencies and address any immediate safeguarding requirements. A referral may then be made into the National Referral Mechanism in line with the operational guidance.
- 8.7 The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a process used to identify and record victims of human trafficking and modern slavery. When referred into the NRM a decision is made by the national team as to whether the person is a victim of MS or trafficking and will therefore be accepted into the mechanism to have support and accommodation to free them from their situation.

### **Communications: True Costs campaign**

- 9.1 The true costs of drug misuse are significant and far reaching, from child exploitation and other criminality, to health and environmental. However, not everyone who uses illegal drugs knows the reality of how they are produced and supplied. As most people do not see the awful consequences observed by the police there is an opportunity to shine a light on this. The true costs campaign seeks to provide facts to highlight the consequences of such illegal activity.
- 9.2 You can find the True Costs webpage at <https://www.thamesvalley.police.uk/police-forces/thames-valley-police/areas/c/true-costs/>
- 9.3 Prior to the pandemic, Thames Valley Police developed and executed a behaviour change campaign strategy and arrived at an approach that informs and educates people on the true costs of illegal drug use. The Force had the goal of challenging the social acceptability of drug misuse in the short term with the goal of reducing levels of illegal drug use in the long term.





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9.4 Following the pandemic, TVP are delivering True Costs messaging around general drug misuse in the night time economy rather than focusing on a specific drug type. This followed the official relaunch of the True Costs campaign in 2022 in which we intend to focus on the reality of child exploitation.

9.5 The campaign speaks plainly, avoiding judgmental language and gets straight to the point. We want to provide people with the facts and let them make informed choices; let them come to their own conclusions. We hope that by informing the public conversation about the true costs of choosing to buy and consume drugs illegally, some people may choose not to do so.

### **Governance**

10.1 Force performance is monitored through the Performance and Accountability Meetings (PAM) and the Liaison Meetings with the Chief Constable.

10.2 The VRU continues to develop and become business as usual within the OPCC. The Partnership has been strengthened with Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service taking on chairmanship of the Strategic Board.

10.3 Work continues through Operation Deter and other activities to focus on reducing knife crime. Despite a number of tragic incidents analysis by HMICFRS shows that in the latest figures to be published in October 2023, Thames Valley is a positive outlier nationally for homicide.

10.4 Measuring disruptions can be a subjective matter, but work has taken place across the Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU) network nationally to standardise these assessments. The PCC has also proposed work across the South East in order to standardise assessments across Forces. Disruptions defined as “Major” increased from 33 to 59 in the year to July 2023 compared with the previous year.

10.5 Through Operation Deter and the wider work of the Violence Reduction Unit a wide range of diversionary activities are funded to prevent young people from becoming perpetrators of crime. This is in addition to the services provided by Victims First for the victims of exploitation.