

# Warwickshire Safeguarding Children's Board – Briefing for schools

## Threat to Warwickshire pupils from organised crime groups

There is a growing threat to young people in Warwickshire, with school pupils being targeted and exploited by organised crime groups operating in the area.

**Warwickshire Safeguarding Children's Board are urging professionals working with children and young people to be vigilant for signs of vulnerability or involvement in organised crime and to raise awareness of the dangers with children, parents and carers.**

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County lines drug dealers, gangs involved in organised crime, recruit children and other vulnerable people through criminal and sexual exploitation using high levels of threat, intimidation and force. Children are exploited to carry out criminal acts to reduce the risk of gang members getting caught and are often moved around locally or regionally for this purpose – this is a form of modern slavery and trafficking.

Risks to children are significant with serious violent crime and use of weapons a strong feature of county lines activity.

We are aware of county lines groups operating across north and south Warwickshire where local children, as young as 13 years, have been exploited by groups based in Birmingham and Coventry, and in some local towns. There are some known cases of pupils being picked up at the school gates and taken away to participate in criminal activities being returned in time to avoid raising suspicion or children being reported as missing.

Features of the local profile include:

- Children targeted via social media and coerced into giving gang members access to their bank accounts, or opening new accounts for them to deposit and/or launder proceeds of criminal activity. This week in a school in north Warwickshire, a young person has been used to transfer a substantial amount of cash into their bank account and hand over their bank card and pin in the promise of receiving a cut of the money.
- Children groomed through initially being given what they think are 'free' drugs
- Debt bondage as a consequence of the above
- Transporting and selling drugs to local communities in and out of school time

- Threats and perpetration of serious violence to maintain their silence and 'labour' with firearms and other weapons having been used
- Children used to recruit other children into the gang/group

As with child sexual exploitation, Children Looked After (CLA) and those with low self-esteem and resilience, attachment issues and experiencing social isolation are particularly vulnerable, as are young offenders.

Pupils who are persistently absent from school may be at an increased risk of involvement in this kind of activity; long-term friendships and associations cultivated at school have also been repeatedly referenced as a pathway into serious and organised crime.

**Signs to watch out for:**

- Withdrawing from family life
- Sudden loss of interest in school or change in behaviour
- Decline in attendance or academic achievement (although it should be noted that some young people will maintain a good attendance record to avoid coming to notice)
- Being emotionally 'switched off', but also containing frustration/rage
- Starting to use new or unknown slang words
- Having unexplained money or possessions
- Reports of decline in parental control
- Sudden change in appearance – dressing in a particular style or 'uniform' similar to that of other young people they hang around with, including a particular colour
- Dropping out of positive activities
- New nickname
- Unexplained physical injuries, and/or refusal to seek/receive medical treatment for injuries
- Graffiti style tags on possessions, school books, walls
- Constantly talking about another person who seems to have a lot of influence over them
- Breaking off with old friends and hanging around with one group of people

- Associating with known or suspected gang members, closeness to siblings or adults in the family who are gang members
- Starting to adopt certain codes of group behaviour e.g. ways of talking and hand signs
- Going missing and being found many miles from home with no explanation
- Expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past
- Being scared when entering certain areas
- Concerned by the presence of unknown youths in their neighbourhood
- Repeat sexually-transmitted infections, pregnancy and terminations
- Disclosures made then withdrawn
- Self-harm or thoughts of/ attempts at suicide

### **What to do if you have concerns about a child**

If you are worried that a child is at immediate risk of harm, please call 999.

Where you have a safeguarding concern about a child as a consequence of county lines, or indeed any other matter, contact the MASH on 01926 414144.

If a child or young person is approached by anyone suspicious they are urged to report this to the school, an appropriate adult and the police.

### **Links to further guidance and advice**

[Toolkit for working with children and young people \(Children's Society\)](#)

[Guidance for frontline professionals on dealing with county lines \(Gov.uk\)](#)

[Educational resource: county lines \(Fearless\)](#)

### **Warwickshire Safeguarding Children's Board (WSCB)**

Warwickshire Safeguarding Children's Board have recently widened the county's priority to include all forms of child exploitation, not just sexual exploitation and restructured to create a 'Child Exploitation and Missing' subgroup.

A task and finish group will be working on the design and implementation of a local response to wider criminal exploitation and developing further resources which will be shared in due course.

Further information and guidance is available on the [WSCB website](#).

**Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Awareness Day – 18 March 2019**

Warwickshire multi-agency CSE, Missing & Trafficking team and its partners are supporting the [NWG Child Sexual Exploitation Awareness Day](#) on Monday 18 March.

[Read more here.](#)