

# North East Multi-Agency Operating Protocol

Responding to, caring for and repatriating  
Children and Young People (Under 18 years old) at  
risk of 'County Lines' Exploitation by Serious and  
Organised Crime Groups

## 1 Introduction & Background

Tackling the criminal and sexual exploitation of children and young people is a key priority for North East Child Protection agencies. The North East of Scotland currently has the highest rate of County Lines running in the country. 'County Lines' is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by Serious and Organised Crime Groups. The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs.

This operating protocol specifically addresses the multi-agency response to children and young people who are suspected to be involved in Serious and Organised Crime activity from various Local Authority areas. These victims may be from the same Local Authority as located, neighbouring Local Authorities or UK wide.

The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 states that trafficking can occur when children and young people 'are recruited, transported or exchanged in order to be exploited. Travel may include short distances (e.g. taxi rides) or medium distances (e.g. across a rural/island region or into an urban centre), as well as international travel. It also states that the 'immediate priority is to secure the safety and respond to the needs of the child.' This can include child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation.

Whilst a child can be defined differently in different legal contexts, for the purposes of this activity and associated Human Trafficking considerations, the rights of children and young people must be considered up to the age of 18 years, and the welfare of the child or young person should remain paramount at all times.

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 defines:

'ADULT' means an individual aged 18 or over.

'CHILD' means a person under 18 years of age.

Corporate parenting considerations and responsibility remains until a Care Experienced Young person reaches 26 years old. Part 9 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 requires all corporate parents to have responsibility of care leavers who were looked after on their 16th birthday (or subsequently) up to and including the age of 25. In this situation, for a young person aged 18 years or over, Adult Support and Protection Services should be considered.

If a child or young person is care experienced, then they must, with discretion, be provided the option of continuing care until they attain 26 years of age. The decision-making capacity of the young people involved in Serious and Organised Crime may not always be straightforward and it is the duty of agencies to ensure they understand procedures, risks and support available to them. Agencies must also ensure that all children and young people understand all their rights throughout agency interaction.

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Where there is concern in relation to child trafficking, a referral should also be made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK's framework for identifying victims of human trafficking and/or exploitation and ensuring they receive the appropriate support and protection. Only designated First Responders can make a referral into the NRM. In every instance of suspected/confirmed Human Trafficking or Exploitation, an NRM form should be submitted to the Home Office. An assessment is then made as to whether or not the victim detailed is a PVoT (Potential Victim of Trafficking).

The vulnerability and risk posed to, and potentially from, young people involved in Serious and Organised Crime means a response is required which ensures the safety and wellbeing of all involved. This includes the young person themselves, members of the public and staff across partner agencies. For this reason, it is vital to pull the expertise from across partnerships (this will ultimately require Police, NHS, SW and likely 3rd sector knowledge, support and intervention.).

### **Purpose**

Where children or young people are suspected as being exploited for the purposes of activities associated with County Lines, this Multi-Agency Operating Protocol aims to provide guidance for partner agencies to work collaboratively to ensure the child or young person is cared for and repatriated promptly.

### **1) Preparation and Planning**

Where information becomes known, or intelligence is received by Police Scotland that a young person is in the North East area, and is suspected as being exploited for the purposes of activities associated with County Lines, Police Scotland must seek to discuss these individuals with Social Work at the earliest opportunity. This includes planned operations where it is suspected that young people may be located within an address Police intend to search or visit to detect or disrupt criminal activity. Similarly, where such information or intelligence is received by Social Work, they must seek to discuss these individuals with Police Scotland at the earliest opportunity.

Effective and timely preparation will ensure that any welfare issues can be considered in advance and used to inform plans to repatriate the young person as quickly as is feasible and appropriate for the young person.

### **2) Procedures**

Once a young person has been located by an agency (Police, SW, NHS etc), an Inter-agency Referral Discussion (IRD) must take place. This should be convened by the Police Home Force and/or Home Area Social Work. If issues arise, Local Social Work will communicate with Home Area Social Work directly to assist with the arranging of the IRD. If Home Force Area Social Work are unwilling to participate, this must be raised to local SW manager. This will be the same for Police and their counterparts. It is important to establish any formal orders / compulsory measures of supervision, or if

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they are reported as a 'Missing Person' as these may impact on decision making. Orders may differ in different parts of the United Kingdom and specific arrangements should be discussed during the IRD.

It is important to note that regardless of whether or not the young person has been charged with any offence, the key priorities are:

- Ensure the immediate needs of the young person are met
- Risks to their mental and physical wellbeing considered
- They are cared for in a trauma informed environment
- They are given support and advice whilst with agencies
- Safe onward travel arranged timeously, as appropriately decided within the IRD

### 3) Welfare of the Young Person

Any immediate welfare issues should be discussed with local Health and Social Care services to ensure any emergency treatment, advice and support is provided as required.

As previously mentioned, the IRD must be carried out between relevant partners on every occasion County Lines CCE has been identified. Each local agency must have a representative. The IRD will allow multi-agency discussions relating to risk, welfare, orders, future safeguarding and repatriation plans to take place timeously.

Local Social Work will facilitate the supervision of young people following completion of the IRD, and this will include the provision of food, drink and any other supplies the young person may need. Any further welfare issues will also be supported by Social Work.

We cannot hold children or young people without a legal reason to do so. In the process of planning repatriation we are asking children and young people to stay in a safe place while arrangements are being made. Should the child or young person choose to leave where there are no powers to stop them we would use a trauma informed approach to ensure the child or young person is aware of their rights, the support available to them and take all possible steps to ensure the child's safety.

### 4) Transportation

#### a) Travel Arrangements

If the young person is subject to any formal orders / compulsory measures of supervision, arrangements for them to be collected, or returned accompanied, to their Local Authority should be made by local Social Work as soon as possible. When required for the purposes of expediency out of hours, Police Scotland will transport

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the young person. Police will also transport if there is a flight risk or higher risk grading identified during the IRD.

Robust risk assessments will take place throughout the process, ensuring all agencies are aware of all risks/change in risk.

Catch 22 and St Giles are currently repatriation charities who operate in England. If the child is from areas of England that these charities cover, they are to be considered and option for repatriation with an organised meet at the border. The use and organisation of a repatriation charity will be decided in the IRD. These charities carry out a care function, ensuring there is a care plan moving forward with that young person on their return to their home area.

If the young person is not subject to any formal orders / compulsory measures of supervision, arrangements for onward travel by public transport or alternative methods determined between Local Authorities should be made by local Social Work as soon as possible. This is only suitable if no risks are identified with this course of action during the IRD and the young person does not wish further agency assistance. If a flight is agreed, Police Scotland Airport Officers can support local Social Work with movement round the airport if required. When required for the purposes of expediency out of hours, Police Scotland will assist in making these public transport arrangements.

To ensure the safety of staff, no member of staff from any agency should transport a young person to another area alone.

### b) Delays in Transportation

Whilst awaiting repatriation, the young person should not remain within a Police building and should be cared for elsewhere. Young people should not be removed from the police station until a suitable alternative is identified and risk assessed by local Social Work. In the absence of a dedicated accommodation site, all efforts will be made to identify the most appropriate place for any child or young person to be cared for, in a manner which recognises the context and likely trauma their circumstances have occurred in. Local Social Work will identify a suitable place for the young person to be cared for until transportation is arranged. Again, to ensure staff safety, no member of staff should care for the young person alone.

### c) Associated Transport Costs

Transportation costs will be met by the Home Area Local Authority. To ensure immediacy of return travel, local Social Work Service may arrange transport and recharge the receiving Local Authority as appropriate.

**5) Where a Young Person Wishes to Remain in the North East**

Where a young person is not on an order, has not been charged with any offence and wishes to remain in North East, they must be allowed and supported to do so (where required). This may involve advice and support from a range of partners to ensure young people are aware of their rights and entitlements should they choose to remain here. Likewise, if a young person chooses to leave the Police station or other location, they are free to do so. Again, the child and young person must be made aware of their rights throughout and agencies should check they understand these rights.

**All agencies MUST always act in the best interest of the child or young person.**

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