CCE & County Lines – Staff Guide (Autumn 2026)

Safeguarding pupils from criminal exploitation and grooming

🔍 Recognising the Signs

- Unexplained money, gifts, or new possessions
- Multiple phones or SIM cards
- Frequent absences or going missing
- Sudden changes in friendship groups or behaviour
- Anxiety, aggression, or secrecy about online activity
- Association with older peers or gang-linked individuals
- Travel to unfamiliar areas or being found far from home

🛡️ Staff Actions

- **Report concerns immediately** to the DSL — *do not investigate or confront pupils*
- **Record accurately** on CPOMS (include dates, times, and verbatim disclosures)
- **Assess risk** with DSL: consider harm, coercion, and contextual factors
- **If immediate danger: CALL 999**
- **Refer** to MASH, Police, or Youth Justice Service as directed by DSL
- **Seek advice** from LADO if staff conduct or safeguarding thresholds are unclear

🤝 Multi-Agency Support

- MASH / Children's Social Care
- Police / County Lines Unit
- Youth Justice Service / VRU
- Early Help / Mentoring / Family Support

📘 Recording & Review

- Log all actions on CPOMS and update chronology
- Review attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing regularly
- Transfer safeguarding records promptly if pupil moves school

💬 Key Messages

- Exploited children are **victims**, not offenders
- Apparent consent **does not equal free consent**
- Always act in the **best interests of the child**
- Maintain **professional curiosity** — small signs matter

Policy document for: **Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) including county lines**

Updated: Autumn 2026

This policy forms part of the Trust Safeguarding and Child Protection policy and reflects the latest KCSIE guidance. Keeping children safe in education 2026 (comes into force from 1 September 2026) See page 17 & 161- for full details

All schools in BA-MAT recognise that CCE is a form of child abuse that occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power (such as age, gender, intellect, physical strength or other resources) to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child into criminal activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or through violence or the threat of violence. What marks out exploitation is an imbalance of power in the relationship. The perpetrator always holds some kind of power over the victim which increases as the exploitative relationship develops.

Victims may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Whilst such exploitation can involve physical contact e.g being forced to shoplift, pickpocket or take part in county lines activity, it can also occur through the use of technology.

The exploitation may be:

- in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, **and/or**
- in exchange for the financial advantage **and/or**
- in exchange for increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator **and/or**
- through violence or the threat of violence

BA MAT schools recognise that children can become trapped in CCE as perpetrators can threaten victims and their families with violence or entrap and coerce them into debt. Children involved in criminal exploitation often commit crimes themselves, which can mean their vulnerability as victims is not always recognised (particularly older children) and they are not treated as victims, despite the harm they have experienced. The experience of girls who are criminally exploited can also be very different to that of boys. We also recognise that boys and girls being criminally exploited may be at higher risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE).

Victims may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Whilst such exploitation may involve physical contact e.g. being forced to shoplift, pickpocket or take part in 'county lines' activity, it can also occur through the use of technology.

Children can be exploited by adult males or females, as individuals or in groups. They may also be exploited by other children, who themselves may be experiencing exploitation – where this is the case, it is important that the child perpetrator is also recognised as a victim

Recent evidence shows an increase in children being targeted to act as money mules by fraudsters who wish to hide money from the authorities. Targeted through adverts on social media, video sharing sites and in some cases outside schools, children are offered money in exchange for 'squaring' - moving the fraudster's money through their bank accounts. This is a criminal offence.

Grooming

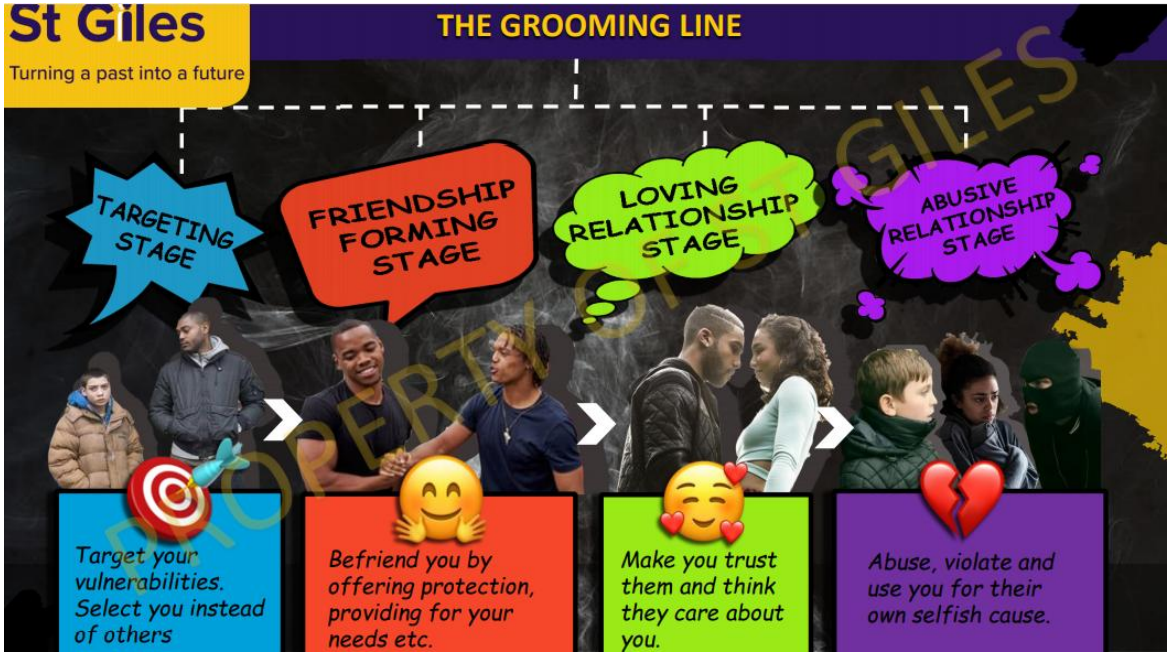
In CCE, the term grooming describes the process abusers use to manipulate a child. This includes physical and mental manipulation in order for the perpetrator to take advantage of the child sexually. Such perpetrators are often patient and develop the grooming process over a long period of time to achieve their aim.

Typical grooming tactics are:

- Making the child feel special;
- Pretending to feel like or have similar experiences as the child;
- Careful construction of the relationship to get to know all about the child;
- Pretending the relationship is friendship or support, non-sexual;
- Giving the child things they need or want;
- A gradual increase in physical contact or pressuring for exploitative activity;
- Construction of the need for secrecy;
- Using other children or young people to help groom.

Models of grooming also include systems where groups of young people are targeted, typically by other young people already targeted by and under the control of the perpetrators. Perpetrators collectively work to groom large groups of young people. This involves repeated invitations to parties at various venues with the intention of exploitation. In this model, young people are regularly encouraged and have access to free drugs and alcohol. Once the young people are regularly participating, the perpetrators then demand repayment for the drugs and alcohol consumed. Unable to fund, young people are then sexually exploited to repay the debt.

Perpetrators can threaten victims and their families with violence or entrap and coerce them into debt. Children involved in criminal exploitation often commit crimes themselves which can mean their vulnerability as victims is not always recognised (particularly older children) and they are not treated as victims, despite the harm they have experienced. The experience of girls who are criminally exploited can also be very different to that of boys.



Online CCE

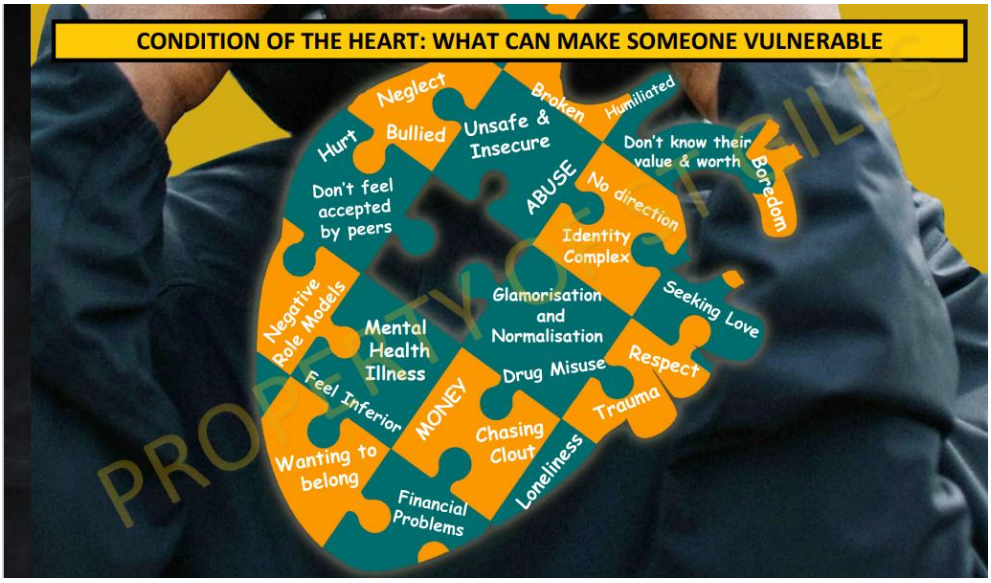
The prevalence and availability of technology provides a further medium where abusers can exploit children. Due to the prevalence of children using online services, the risks to children are higher. This

access to technology, social networking sites and mobile devices offers the abuser further mediums to groom, coerce, blackmail and exert control .

Dark web sites using anonymity software to encrypt web traffic and deep web databases and web services, which cannot be indexed by conventional search engines, elevates internet risk as it enables people to keep their activities hidden. Whilst there are legitimate uses for the dark web e.g. providing internet anonymity for people living in countries where they can be arrested or tortured for online activity, it also enables on-line criminal activity.

Factors which make children more vulnerable to CCE

- Chaotic dysfunctional home life;
- Poor or problematic parenting, including parental mental health issues;
- A history of abuse or neglect;
- Domestic abuse in the home;
- Bereavement;
- Low self-esteem or self-worth;
- SEND - especially vulnerable are those with low cognitive ability and communication difficulties
- Uncertainty of sexual orientation;
- Association with children who are or have been sexually exploited;
- Homelessness or living in residential care;
- Where the child is a young carer;
- Gang association.



In BA MAT, we recognise that our SEND children are particularly vulnerable, especially those at Aspire school who frequently have communication barriers due to the context of the school.

Indicators that a child may be already exposed to CCE

These may include:

- Absence from education;
- Reduced contact with friends and or family;
- Frequently going missing from home or care or regularly come home late
- Association with gangs;
- Self-harming;
- Poor mental health;
- Physical injury;

- Sexually transmitted infections;
- Pregnancy and terminations;
- Substance misuse;
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts;
- Having unexplained items or possessions;
- Sexual activity with someone of an older age;
- Inappropriate relationships on social media;
- Encouraging others into exploitative relationships / situations.
- Children who associate with others who are known to be involved in exploitation
- Children who suffer from changes in emotional wellbeing

Money mules

Recent research shows that there is an increase in children being targeted as 'money mules' by fraudsters who wish to hide money from the authorities. Adverts are placed on social media, gaming platforms and even outside schools. Children are offered money for 'squaring' – moving fraudsters money through their bank accounts. Most children who use their bank account in this way are unaware that this is unlawful.

County lines

The phenomenon known as 'county lines' is a term used to describe the expansion of city drug dealing into importing areas within the UK. The term is used when drug gangs from large urban cities expand their operations into other cities, smaller towns, coastal or rural areas, often using violence to drive out local dealers, by exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs. Vulnerable people, often with mental health or addiction issues, are also targeted and their homes taken over and used as a base for the exploited children to operate from. This is practice is known as 'cuckooing' which is illegal and a criminal offence.

The 'county lines' process relies on a gang culture where children are groomed to become involved. It is a coercive manipulative process which often includes intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and the use of weapons to ensure the compliance of victims. The children don't see themselves as victims or realise they are being groomed to get involved in criminality. Similar to the process used in child sexual exploitation (CSE), the dealers are proficient in spotting factors that make a child vulnerable and exploit them

This term is used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs (primarily crack cocaine and heroin) into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". Exploitation is an integral part of the county lines offending model with children and vulnerable adults exploited to move [and store] drugs and money. This can happen locally as well as across the UK – no specified distance of travel is required.

Children are also increasingly being targeted and recruited online using social media.

Risk factors

This often involves children without a secure home life environment for example:

- Where family relationships are poor or dysfunctional;
- Families affected by domestic abuse or substance misuse;
- Households where there is little or no income and children feel the need to provide financially for the family;
- Where other members of the family are involved in criminal activity

Children are often recruited to move drugs and money between locations and are known to be exposed to techniques such as 'plugging', where drugs are concealed internally to avoid detection. Children may be trafficked to areas a long way from home as part of the networks drug dealing business. Whilst they are holding drugs and cashthe children are held responsible for them. If lost, they are then in debt to the dealer, which further strengthens their hold over the child.

Children can easily become trapped by this type of exploitation as county lines gangs create drug debts and can threaten serious violence and kidnap towards victims (and their families) if they attempt to leave the county lines network. To mitigate risk children often carry knives or other weapons. This is an abusive system where children rationalise criminal behaviour and violence as part of their everyday life. County Lines is referred to colloquially as country, cunch, OT, out there, out of town, upsuh and going O, plus many other terms.

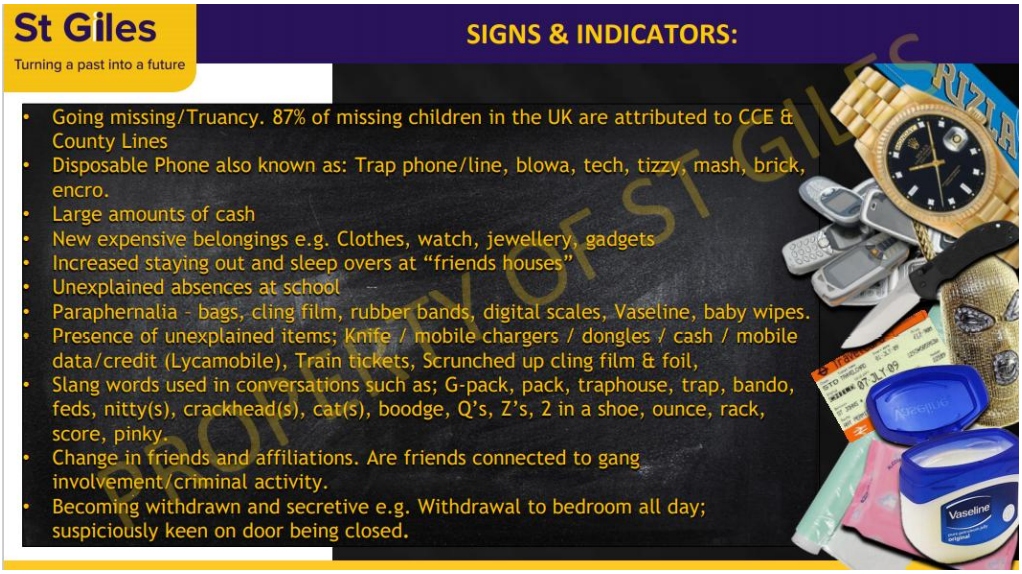
Possible indicators

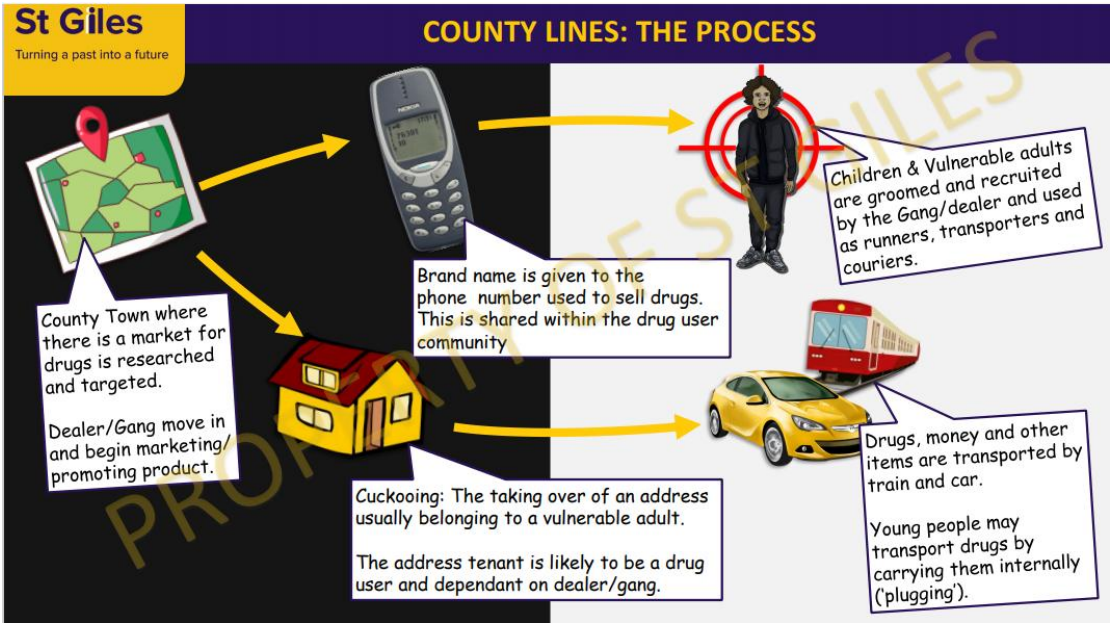
Possible indicators of a child's 'county lines' involvement include:

- Truancy, exclusion, disengagement from education;
- Possession of unexplained and/or unaffordable new items e.g. clothing, phones, jewellery, cars;
- Disengagement from relationships with peers and developing new relationships, especially with older adults;
- Substance misuse;
- Involvement in or increased anti-social behaviour;
- Unexplained injuries;
- The child becoming secretive, withdrawn, aggressive or emotionally unstable;
- Children being seen in unknown cars or taxis;
- Going missing or regularly being away for periods of time;
- Sexual knowledge/activity inappropriate for age.

Additional specific indicators of a child being criminally exploited in county lines are children who:

- go missing and are subsequently found in areas away from their home
- have been the victim or perpetrator of serious violence (e.g. knife crime)
- are involved in receiving requests for drugs via a phone line, moving drugs, handing over and collecting money for drugs
- are found in accommodation that they have no connection with, often called a 'trap house or cuckooing' or hotel room where there is drug activity
- owe a 'debt bond' to their exploiters
- have their bank accounts used to facilitate drug dealing





The Trust recognises the impact of gangs, county lines, serious violence, crime and exploitation. Any concerns regarding gangs and county lines will be reported and responded to in line with other child protection concerns. The initial response to child victims is important and staff will take any allegations seriously and work in ways that support children and keep them safe.

[Preventative Schools Work - St Giles (stgilestrust.org.uk)]

Actions staff should take

If a child discloses concerns around CCE or county lines involvement

- Inform a DSL immediately by speaking to them face to face
- Log all concerns, including the words of the child on CPOMS

One of the ways of identifying potential involvement in county lines are missing episodes (both from home and school), when the victim may have been trafficked for the purpose of transporting drugs and a referral to the National Referral Mechanism will be considered.

If a child is suspected to be at risk of or involved in county lines, a safeguarding referral will be made alongside consideration of availability of local services/third sector providers who offer support to victims of county lines exploitation

Additional resources can be found on:

- Criminal exploitation of children, young people and vulnerable adults - county lines (publishing.service.gov.uk)
- County Lines Toolkit For Professionals | The Children's Society (childrenssociety.org.uk)

DSL flowchart

