

Subject:	County Lines		
Date of Meeting:	Monday the 22nd of January 2018		
Report of:	Executive Director, Neighbourhoods, Communities and Housing		
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Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an explanation of the threat of county lines and an overview of how it might be impacting in Brighton and Hove.
- 1.2 The report will also consider the next steps the council will take alongside police and other agencies to reduce the impact of county lines.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the committee notes the adoption of Tackling County Lines as a priority for the Community Safety Partnership and requests that the Community Safety Partnership reports back to Committee on action taken in six months.
- 2.2 That the committee requests that officers of the council share this report with the Local Children's Safeguarding Board and the Safeguarding Adults Board and bring the Boards' respective responses back to this committee.

3. CONTEXT/ BACKGROUND INFORMATION

National Context

- 3.1 County lines is the police term used to describe urban gangs supplying drugs to market and coastal towns across the country using dedicated mobile phone lines. Gangs often use children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money between different locations. Gangs establish a base, typically by taking over the homes of local vulnerable adults (who are often drugs users) by force or coercion in a practice referred to as cuckooing.
- 3.2 County lines is a major cross cutting issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal child exploitation, modern slavery and missing persons.

- 3.3 Drugs supplied through county lines are primarily heroin and crack cocaine, cannabis is also supplied by runners as a secondary drug as an independent side-line to generate extra income.
- 3.4 County lines gangs have a proven ability to adapt their operations quickly to evade detection and enforcement. High levels of violence are reported, including the prevalent use of weapons to intimidate and control members and associated victims.
- 3.5 The national response involves the police, the National Crime Agency, a wide range of Government departments, local government and the voluntary and community sector.
- 3.6 County lines activity and the associated violence, drug dealing and exploitation has a major impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities.
- 3.7 One of the key factors found in most cases of county lines exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (for example carrying drugs in exchange for something). The victim, who is vulnerable, is offered, promised or given something they need or want in return for moving drugs or money. The exchange can include both tangible rewards (such as money or drugs or clothes) or intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection).
- 3.8 There is an unequal power dynamic within which the exchange occurs, the receipt of drugs by a young person or vulnerable adult does not mean they are not a victim. Prevention of something negative, such as a threat to family or friends can also be part of the exchange.
- 3.9 Islington Council is leading a cross party call for the Government to help protect vulnerable young people at risk of exploitation. The cross party call is from lead members from children's services from 19 London boroughs. They have identified that older gang members groom vulnerable young people to work as drugs mules carrying drugs across the country and selling in cities, towns and rural areas where there is unmet demand, they are then expected to return with the proceeds.

Local Context

- 3.10 Locally we have seen an increasing number of properties that have been cuckooed (this is where the property of a vulnerable person is taken over by drug dealers). In the majority of these cases there was evidence of cuckooing. In several cases offenders and victims were traced to another address nearby or elsewhere in the city.
- 3.11 There is no doubt that County lines are operating in the city. The police and the council have closed down over 20 premises in the past two years using Closure Orders under the 2014 Anti-social behaviour Policing and Crime Act.
- 3.12 There have been incidents of violence associated with these addresses with knives and other weapons reportedly being used.

- 3.13 The true scale of county lines activity is difficult to determine nationally or locally with accuracy as its nature is fluid and the intelligence surrounding the threat is not always clear.

Local Action

- 3.14 Sussex Police regularly disrupt drug dealing in the city in a comprehensive operation using specially trained officers from out of force to identify dealers. This was formerly known as Operation Reduction. These operations take time to set up and deploy. The last such operation in the city led to 76 arrests for drug supply offences with 10 offenders still outstanding. 14 county lines were disrupted as part of this operation. Police estimate that one county line uncovered in Sussex was supplying cocaine worth £2 million per annum.
- 3.15 These police operations need to continue as they are having an impact on drugs supply. However demand in the city means that new drug dealers quickly take the place of those that have been arrested.
- 3.16 In the city there are robust working practices for dealing with premises that have been cuckooed. This includes gathering intelligence, executing drugs warrants, closing premises quickly using ASB Act powers when necessary to bring relief to neighbours, supporting vulnerable and displaced residents and taking direct action against perpetrators of crime. This work is guided by established Cuckooing and Premises Closure Guidance for officers.
- 3.17 Officers met with colleagues from Thanet in Kent on the 13th of November to understand how they identified and took action to address county lines. Learning from this will inform activity locally.
- 3.18 The Leadership Group at the council, comprised of leaders from all parties and executive officers from the council, called for a learning review to be produced in response to a number of addresses being cuckooed in one street in Brighton in 2017. This has been disseminated to officers to help them identify early signs of cuckooing and county lines, what action can be taken and how to support communities. This was presented to the Leadership Board on the 15th of January.
- 3.19 Following on from the Learning review relevant officers from Housing, Community Safety and the Communities Equality and Third Sector Team will work together to help communities understand the pernicious nature of county and how it can impact on vulnerable people resulting in cuckooing and anti-social behaviour and crime in neighbourhoods.
- 3.20 At the 12th of December meeting of the Community Safety Partnership officers from across statutory services agreed to adopt tackling county lines as a priority. Officers are developing an action plan with clear measurable activity that will impact on county lines. The progress on this work will be reported to this committee in six months.
- 3.21 There is significant drugs demand in the city. At an initial meeting on the 20th of December key stakeholders including Public Health colleagues and police met to scope how drugs demand in the city could be assessed. Drugs demand will be

mapped establishing where the hotspots are but more significantly who the users of drugs are and what drugs they are using. There is a good understanding of the demographic of chaotic users but many users can afford drugs and drugs misuse has little immediate impact on their lives.

- 3.22 Officers have met with the Metropolitan Police and the Home Office who are keen to help establish the profile and extent of drugs use in the city. County lines operate in the city because there is substantial demand for drugs. This work will be linked to the county lines action plan being established by the Community Safety Partnership.

4. ANALYSIS & CONSIDERATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1 County lines evolve and adapt quickly to meet demand. Officers will continue to make links elsewhere in the country with colleagues who are undertaking new work to tackle county lines and will bring that learning to bear locally where appropriate
- 4.2 It is likely that an initial action plan will need to be able to flex to meet the changing needs to address county lines.

5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CONSULTATION

- 5.1 Where county lines activity results in cuckooing there will be significant impact on immediate neighbours and the wider neighbourhood can be impacted too. In some cases where this has happened there have been community meetings to reassure communities and to take the opportunity to encourage the reporting of incidents.
- 5.2 Officers will work with communities to alert them to the threat of county lines and help them to build confidence in reporting issues that may be linked to county lines. This will initially be through a briefing to the Local Action Team Forum and by way of direct briefing to community and neighbourhood groups.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 This is a complex issue that is prevalent in metropolitan areas and is becoming increasingly commonplace in towns and cities across the country where there is sufficient drugs demand.
- 6.2 There is work going on nationally to understand and tackle the issue and local work will be informed by that.
- 6.3 It is very likely that a flexible responsive approach will be needed and activity locally will need to be able change and adapt quickly to tackle the issue.
- 6.4 This report shows that locally a proactive approach is underway.

7. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 7.1 There are no immediate financial implications in relation to this report, current suggested activity will be managed within existing resources.

Finance Officer Consulted: Mike Bentley

Date: 5/1/18

Legal Implications:

- 7.2 Each local authority is obliged by statute to keep under review matters relating to crime and disorder within its local area. The community safety team in conjunction with legal services have undertaken enforcement work to disrupt the County Lines activity.
- 7.3 From the body of the report it is clear that those being targeted for cuckooing will often be vulnerable. Consideration will need to be given to whether any of those involved in this process will have qualifying criteria under the Equalities Act. Also being considered routinely is mental health and the impact on any young people in a household. This is and has to be balanced against the impact that the behaviour is having on neighbours and local communities.

Lawyer Consulted: Simon Court

Date: 29/12/17

Equalities Implications:

- 7.4 A number of the gangs involved in county lines locally, but not all, are made up of people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds and young people. Targeted activity against individuals will need to take account of potential impact on trust and confidence of Black and ethnic minorities and young people locally.

Sustainability Implications:

- 7.5 There are no immediate sustainability implications.