

Overview

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance has been produced by the KBSP and is primarily aimed at frontline staff who work with vulnerable adults. It can also be used as a source of information and advice to support individuals, families, carers and members of the public. This guidance is to raise awareness of the issue of cuckooing and provide a framework for agencies to work to when dealing with cuckooing cases. It seeks to promote a consistent approach and to ensure there is an effective multi-agency response which supports victims, alongside action to prevent, disrupt and reduce cuckooing in our areas.

What is cuckooing?

The term Cuckooing takes its name from cuckoos who take over the nests of other birds to lay their eggs. In the unlawful sense of the word, it is a practice where people take over a person's home and use the property for some form of exploitation.

Cuckooing might sound quite a tame term, but it masks horrific stories of often extremely vulnerable and terrified people becoming prisoners in their own homes and it probably should be referred to as a home invasion, which far better describes the practice. Cuckooing can take on many forms. For example an older person who may live alone and have no family or friends or support network. They feel lonely and look for friendships in any form, becoming targets to those that have picked up on their vulnerability. They believe they have gained a friend allowing the person to stay with them at their home without realising they are being taken advantage of. There are also cases where females are used to target and befriend a vulnerable male with the idea that they are their girlfriend, though the female or 'girlfriend' is likely to be a victim of exploitation herself and used by the gang's as 'bait'.

Cuckooing is part of drug dealers' business model and has become far more prevalent now because of COVID. Prior to the pandemic, although many gangs used cuckooing, others would often use Airbnb, guest houses or hotels to set up and run their "businesses", but because of lockdowns they have been forced to find alternative premises, so they too use vulnerable individuals' properties.

What are the types of cuckooing?

Cuckooing is a term used to refer to a forced home invasion. Cuckooing is a crime where an individual criminal, or criminal gangs, exploit vulnerable people. The most common form of cuckooing is where drug dealers take control of the victim's home and use the premises to store, prepare or distribute drugs often as part of county lines networks. Criminals can use a range of settings such as rental and private homes and properties, student accommodation, prisons, and commercial properties in the supply and distribution of drugs and for other criminal activities. The criminals may at first provide the individual with money or the offer of friendship to establish a relationship with them but will then use coercion, intimidation, and violence (including sexual violence) and weapons to gain control of the property.

It is common for some criminal gangs to have access to several cuckooed addresses. They can move quickly between people's homes for just a few hours, a couple of days or sometimes longer. This helps the gangs evade detection. By cuckooing, the criminals can operate from a discreet property, which is not associated with them and probably under the radar of the police, making it an attractive business model for criminal gangs.

Other types of cuckooing can include:

- Taking over or using the property to take drugs.
- Using the property to manage the "workforce" of drug runners and to carry out acts of violence.
- Taking over or using the property for sex work / human trafficking.
- Taking over or using the property to store weapons.
- Taking over the property as a place to live.
- Taking over the property to financially abuse the homeowner/tenant.

Who might be at risk of cuckooing?

In some cases, the criminal gangs are known to utilise consenting adults to assist their criminal activity by getting them to open up their homes and allow their address to be used for running and holding drugs or firearms. Sometimes they are given money and drugs as a payment for the use of the property but once the gang moves in, they deploy different tactics such as bullying, intimidation and violence to gain control, often leaving the initially consenting adult, scared and too worried to contact the police or other agencies for help for fear of reprisals from the gangs.

The gangs usually target people who are often unable to protect themselves from being exploited. The criminal gangs then use a range of clever tactics to manipulate and exploit their victims, some of these tactics may be so subtle that the victim doesn't always realise that they are being cuckooed, so their predicament may go unnoticed for some time. This is especially true when the adult with the property believes they are in a relationship with the criminals. I.e. Male home owner believes he is in a relationship with a female, but the female is part of a criminal gang. Cuckooing usually involves the criminals identifying vulnerable people who may, for example:

- Use drugs and/or alcohol or previously were addicted to substances.
- Have connections with other people involved in gangs.
- Lack a safe/stable home environment.
- Have a history of being in care.
- Have prior experiences of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse.
- Be vulnerable due to mental or physical health impairments.
- Be elderly and may be socially isolated.
- Have cognitive impairments.
- Have learning disabilities.
- Be experiencing economic deprivation.
- Be a single parent.
- Be sex workers.
- Are socially isolated, lonely or experience social difficulties.
- Are economically vulnerable (such as having debt, experiencing poverty, or are poor at financial management)

- Live in an area of social deprivation which is also exposed to violent crime and gang-related activity.
- Are known to the police/ have a criminal record.
- Are unaccompanied minors (aged 16 to 18)

In considering the above list it is also worth noting that there are also recorded cases of exploitation of individuals with no known risk factors and who were not previously known to services (sometimes referred to as “clean skins” by exploiters), as they were deemed less likely to attract any attention from authorities.

The cuckooing may begin by the criminal’s giving gifts or paying bills, offering friendship or sex or offering others reward such as free drugs and or alcohol in exchange for the use of their home. The gangs may then use a tactic known as “debt bondage” which is where a real or perceived debt is used as a method to exert control over individuals. The gang then expects “repayment” for the debt and, will threaten the vulnerable person into allowing them to take control of their home, so they can use it for their criminal activities as repayment for the debt. Once they gain control over the person, whether through drug dependency, debt or as part of their relationship, larger groups will sometimes move in. In a number of cases, the victims of cuckooing may ultimately find themselves homeless.

What are the signs of cuckooing?

Cuckooing usually takes place in multi-occupancy or social housing properties. Sometimes, the person being exploited has no idea that they are being used or is simply too afraid to speak up, which can make it very difficult to spot what is going on.

Signs of a cuckooed property include:

- Presence of unfamiliar individuals coming and going from the property at all hours or an increase in key fob activity.
- The property regularly changing residents.
- An increase in foot traffic or loitering in the area around the property or takeaway deliveries at unusual hours.
- An increase in noise and disturbance levels, including late-night parties or arguments or other signs of anti-social behaviour such as littering around the property.
- Damage to the property, such as broken windows or doors; and threats or intimidation towards other residents or neighbours.
- Suspicious items in the property, such as weighing scales, multiple phones, sim cards or drug paraphernalia.
- Unexplained presence of cash, clothes and other items of value.
- Conversely, the property may appear almost sparse of valuable possessions inside and begin to go into a state of disrepair both inside and out.
- Doors and windows which have been blocked off.
- Possible increase in anti-social behaviour in and around the property and increased litter such as drinks cans and takeaway packaging outside the property.
- Cars arriving at the property for short periods of time.
- Signs of drug use and open drug dealing.

- Concerns that the inhabitant of the property has not been seen for a while; they may feel too afraid to leave the house or may have been prevented from doing so by the drug gang.
- Disengagement by the inhabitant of the property with support services / healthcare services.
- They have paid off debts such as housing debts in full and in cash.
- They are associating with new unidentified people who are often present at the home.
- They have changed their appearance, ie. are wearing expensive clothing or appearing unkempt.

How to deal with cuckooing

Any child, young person or vulnerable adult who you think may be at risk of exploitation requires an immediate safeguarding multi-agency response. When working with an individual suspected of being exploited by county lines, their activity may appear consensual, they may not recognise that they are being exploited and the distinction between victim and perpetrator may appear unclear. This may be the case especially for those transitioning into adulthood. However, individuals who have been groomed and exploited into criminal activity have not freely chosen to be involved, cannot consent to being exploited and so should be seen as victims first and foremost.

It is important to recognise that they are likely to have had traumatic experiences which they may have normalised, and taking a trauma informed approach that puts the child or vulnerable adult first will be crucial. It is important they feel safe and supported by agencies and are protected from reprisals, so professionals are encouraged to deploy a multi-agency response to cuckooing and county lines involvement, including the victim in the safeguarding process and discussing next steps with them to build their trust.

Understanding the risks

Often the person being cuckooed will be reluctant to raise concerns as this would impact on their availability of drugs which is an attractive offer for those struggling with addiction. Victims may be fearful of going to the police for being suspected of involvement in drug dealing or being identified as a member of the gang, which could lead to being arrested themselves and lead to potentially losing their tenancy. When working with a suspected victim it is important to have professional curiosity, keep a log of activity and save any evidence related to the exploitation. Using reachable moments to connect with the vulnerable person and actively seek inputs from different professional perspectives to build a picture of the whole story and multi-agency response is vital.

Police and disruption of county lines and cuckooing.

Targeting and disrupting the perpetrators of county lines exploitation is an integral part of protecting victims. Likewise, reporting safeguarding concerns can support disruption activity and investigations.

There is a range of drugs, modern slavery, weapons, violence and sexual offences that can be charged against county lines perpetrators on a case-by-case basis. There are also a range of civil orders which can be applied for to disrupt perpetrators, including but not limited to: Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders and Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders; Anti-

Social Behaviour Civil Injunctions; and Drug Dealing Telecommunication Restriction Orders. Non-statutory tools are also available such as Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNS).

In cases of cuckooing, the police, local authorities and housing associations can take action to evict the offenders and support the victim to regain control of their property through the application of civil orders such as Closure Orders and Community Protection Notices which can be used to close down premises that are being used for criminal activities. If you suspect or know of someone that is being cuckooed, it is extremely important that you keep the police informed of any exploitation or criminality so that they can begin a multi-agency approach in tackling the issue.

The effective intervention by local multi-agency collaborations is essential to safeguarding any children and vulnerable adults and their properties from cuckooing and other associated county lines criminal activities. You should always consider how the use of any order or multi-agency response will impact on the victim's safety and the potential risk of reprisals on the victim from the criminal or gang.

The aim of any multi-intervention will be to protect the tenancy and the usual occupants in the cuckooed property. When carrying out their investigations, the police will try to establish, so far as possible, who may be a witness, defendant or victim. However, if drugs are found at the property it is likely that the vulnerable adult, being a resident at the address, will be interviewed and/or arrested by the police. If an occupier allows gang members to use their property for drug supply, they may face a prison sentence and/or a fine. However, if there is evidence to suggest that the adult is vulnerable and has been exploited by the gang, this will be considered when making charging decisions and safeguarding measures will be put in place.

Usually an agreement on who can attend the address will be put in place between the police, housing provider and the resident. These are a positive measure and can be used to help the resident gain control over their home again. Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, landlords or property managers can receive up to 14 years' imprisonment or a substantial fine for having drugs residing at their property. The property may be seized or forfeited as well as prosecuted for money laundering. The premises may be 'closed down' and boarded up under the terms of a Premises Closure Order: (Section 76 Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014).

When the police are investigating cuckooing cases, it is important they involve other safeguarding partners to provide a multi-agency response ensuring the victim is protected and appropriate support services for them are put in place.

Housing

Frontline housing workers can often be the first professionals to notice changes with a property or encounter issues associated with cuckooing. They can often see signs that may indicate the resident has lost control over their home. Contractors should also be equipped to look out for warning signs, the rationale being that residents are less likely to be concerned about what a tradesperson might see or hear than for example a visiting housing officer or support worker. With an 'all-eyes' approach, visits can expose cuckooing cases a lot earlier. As intelligence on cuckooing cases can come from a variety of sources such as neighbours, partner agencies and the wider public, it is important that frontline staff apply Professional Curiosity to explore and understand what is happening, rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value.

It is essential that appropriate referrals are made if there are suspicions, as this will help to build up the full picture of what's actually happening, with housing workers having a crucial role to play in the multi-agency response to safeguard the victim and the wider community.

If you believe a person is at immediate risk of harm:

Contact the police on 999. If a person is not at immediate risk of harm, follow your local safeguarding guidance and ensure this information is shared with local authority social services and the police. Police involvement should not be limited to instances of immediate risk of harm.

The first step is usually to contact your designated safeguarding lead within your organisation who should help you complete a safeguarding referral to Bristol City Councils Children social care (for a child) or Adult social care (for a vulnerable adult.) You have a responsibility to make a referral if you believe a child or adult is at risk or involved in county lines or is being cuckooed for criminal activity.

You should not assume a colleague, or another professional will take action that might be critical in keeping a vulnerable person safe. You have a responsibility to safeguard children and adults from harm and as such you must make your referral to children and or adult social care immediately and you should follow this up within 24 hours if you have not heard back, to ensure action is taken. You can make a referral into children's social care [here](#) and make a safeguarding referral for a vulnerable adult [here](#).

Bristol city Council social services will then consider with safeguarding partner agencies (as required under Working Together Guidance 2023) whether any further actions are necessary to protect the vulnerable person. If you are not satisfied with the local authority's response, you should follow up on your concerns by discussing these with your safeguarding lead or escalating them via the local KBSP [children's escalation policy](#) and/or [adult escalation safeguarding policy](#)

Multi-agency safeguarding coupled with law enforcement intelligence and operations will generate effective disruption outcomes. When reporting known or suspected incidences of cuckooing activities to the police, try to provide as much information as possible including:

- The address of the property.
- A description of the concerning behaviour, including dates and times.
- Names and dates of birth for the usual occupants of the property (if known).
- Any known vulnerabilities of the usual occupants.
- A description of any visitors to the property including names and other details (if known).
- The registration numbers and/or a description of any suspicious vehicles.

Further resources:

Report suspicions or concerns to the police: [Give us information about a suspected vulnerable or exploited person | Avon and Somerset Police](#)

Additional toolkit: [Cuckooing Risk Assessment and Response Toolkit \(Digital Download\) - Safer Together \(safer-together.co.uk\)](#)