



Cuckooing

Practice Guidance

A guide to working with adults at risk of exploitation - cuckooing

Policy Issue	1
Review date	April 2024
Consultation with	HSAB Policy and Procedure Subgroup Cuckooing Task and Finish Group
Based on	Cuckooing Operational Toolkit Hertfordshire Constabulary
Approved by	Liz Hanlon
Prepared by	Ewa Merlo

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
What is cuckooing.....	2
County Lines.....	2
Who is at Risk of Cuckooing.....	3
Signs of Cuckooing.....	3
How to Tackle Cuckooing.....	4
Mapping a Multiagency Response.....	5
Mental Capacity.....	5
Multiagency meeting.....	6
Involvement from police.....	7
When cuckooing victim is also a victim of modern slavery.....	7
Victim Support.....	7
Cuckoo Visit - Aide Memoire.....	8
Victim – Full name, DOB & Ethnicity.....	8
Location – Full address & description.....	8
Suspect – Offence / Methods.....	8
Methodology.....	8
Drug Market.....	8
Resources.....	9
Appendix 1 - Cuckooing Professional External Pathway.....	10

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to help with the identification of and support for victims of cuckooing. The guidance aims to provide front line professionals with a multi-agency framework to facilitate effective working with adults who are at risk of cuckooing.

The guidance should be used in a way that achieves best outcomes for adults respecting their autonomy and choice to live the life they want. Interventions should be proportionate and person centred therefore should be decided on a case by case basis.

What is cuckooing

Cuckooing is a practice where people take over a person's home and use the property to facilitate exploitation. It takes the name from cuckoos who take over the nests of other birds.

There are different types of cuckooing:

- Using the property to deal, store or take drugs.
- Using the property for sexual exploitation.
- Taking over the property as a place to live.
- Taking over the property to financially abuse the tenant.

The most common form of cuckooing is where drug dealers take over a person's home and use it to store or distribute drugs. Criminal gangs target people to use their homes to deal drugs from. Money and weapons may also be stored at the property.

The person is often coerced into allowing their property to be used for this purpose with the offer of "free" drugs. The cuckooed person may then be forced to deal drugs to pay off the "free" drugs. This is known as debt bondage.

Gang members or dealers may also offer the adult something other than drugs that is of interest to them, this could be a relationship, friendship, money or clothing.

Gradually the 'benefits' will reduce and may eventually come to an end, and more and more people will come and go from the address. The gang members / drug dealers may threaten the adult verbally or physically if they try to put a stop to their criminal activity. They will also discourage family / friends and support workers from visiting the address.

If there are any concerns about exploitation of children these should be referred immediately to [Children's Services](#) and the [police](#).

Cuckooing often forms part of a wider County Lines activity and is a form of criminal exploitation. The person being cuckooed will likely be reluctant to raise concerns for fear of repercussions or violence.

County Lines

County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons." ([Home Office](#))

County lines activity and the associated violence, drug dealing and exploitation has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities.

Who is at Risk of Cuckooing

Exploitation is widespread, adults can be targeted individually, or the exploitation can be connected to gangs involved in county lines who target children and adults in an organised crime.

Offenders of cuckooing prey on vulnerabilities. Adults who misuse drugs or alcohol, have ill mental health or learning difficulties, are particularly susceptible but anyone can be targeted. For example, the elderly, living alone and socially isolated looking for company or people living in poverty. Children and adults are exploited and used as drug runners.

Some of the factors which increase the risk of cuckooing are:

- Prior experience of neglect, physical and / or sexual abuse.
- Lack of a safe/stable home, now or in the past (for example due to domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health or criminality).
- Social isolation or social difficulties.
- Lack of economic stability.
- Homelessness or in insecure accommodation.
- Connections with people involved in gangs.
- Physical or learning disability.
- Mental health needs or substance misuse.
- Receiving care (particularly those with interrupted care histories).
- Exclusion from mainstream education, in particular attending a Pupil Referral Unit.

Signs of Cuckooing

Cuckooing prevails in rented or social housing but can happen elsewhere too.

Signs that a property may have been cuckooed include:

- An increase in the number of visitors to the property through the day and night, often visiting for only short periods of time.
- An increased number of vehicles outside the property including taxis or hire cars.
- The usual occupier of the property having new associates staying and bags of clothing and / or extra bedding in the property.
- The occupier moving out or staying away from the property whilst an unknown person remains.
- Evidence of drug use such as discarded syringes, foil and cling film in and around the property and evidence of drug dealing such as scales and deal bags.
- An increase in local crime and anti-social behaviour, including the accumulation and storage of stolen pedal cycles.
- Victims of cuckooing may disengage from support services and be unwilling to discuss what is happening at their property when the subject is raised with them.
- Individuals with large amounts of cash or multiple mobile phones.
- Excessive receipt of texts/phone calls.
- Leaving care without any explanation.
- Suspicion of physical assault/unexplained injuries.
- Carry weapons.
- Changes to emotional wellbeing.

How to Tackle Cuckooing

Cuckooing may be part of wider and more organised crime with links to criminal exploitation, but it may also be a less organised and more localised issue. Response to cuckooing needs to be person centred and when safeguarding criteria are met in line with making safeguarding personal.

Cuckooing should **always** be reported to [Hertfordshire Constabulary](#). In emergency dial 999.

Identifying patterns and themes in an area, may indicate the concerns are more widespread and more people are at risk from the same perpetrators so police must be informed to gather intelligence and link the pieces together.

A multi-agency response is key to working to address concerns around cuckooing and exploitation and this is likely to include police, social care (children and adult), the local authority, housing, health workers, substance misuse support agencies, the voluntary sector and care providers. It is vital that practitioners identify ways to disrupt exploitation.

In cases where there is immediate risk to someone it may be necessary to take urgent steps to support them to move to alternative accommodation to keep them safe.

There are also other tools and powers which can be used to remove the people who are exploiting and keep the tenant safe. In the more extreme cases, the local authority and police will work together to obtain closure orders or injunctions on the cuckooed properties.

The Anti-Social Behaviour: Crime and Policing Act (Section 8) allows for closure orders to prohibit access (up to three months) to a property. Injunctions can also restrict who can enter a property. Breaking a closure order is a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment, meaning police can immediately arrest unwanted people found in a home with a closure order on it.

Further legislation can also be used, such as, CAWN's (Child Abduction Warning Notices) can be used for adults in certain situations, Serious Crime Act (specifically Section 34 (gang injunctions)) as well as Modern Slavery Act 2015 (specifically Part 2, Slavery and Trafficking Prevention / Risk Orders).

Perpetrators of cuckooing and exploitation may have support needs of their own such as mental health or substance misuse. Agencies should consider whether offering support or assessment to them may also help to mitigate risks.

Safeguarding

Where the adult meets the criteria for safeguarding under the Care Act 2014 relating to any category of abuse linked to cuckooing, and there is indication that the adult may be unable to protect themselves due to their care and support needs a [safeguarding referral](#) should always be made to Adult Care Services (ACS). To make a safeguarding referral for an adult with care and support needs go to the [Safeguarding Portal](#)

For guidance on how to make a safeguarding referral and to see the correct pathway go to:

[Safeguarding Referral Pathway - November 2020 \(PDF 272KB\)](#)

[How to make a good safeguarding referral factsheet \(PDF 141KB\)](#)

Referrals for children should be made to [Children's Services](#)

There could also be children who may be perceived as alleged perpetrators of abuse but are themselves being victimised so it is key that a [referral](#) is made to Children's Services where there may be a child/children identified.

Mapping a Multiagency Response

Where an adult appears to be a victim of cuckooing, the lead agency (i.e. the agency initiating the cuckooing multiagency response) should scope which agencies need to be involved in multiagency planning meetings. This should be based on which agencies should be involved in meeting the person's care and support needs or may hold information connected to the cuckooing concerns particularly where there are multiple adults. Agencies should not decline to be part of the planning meeting on the basis that they are not currently actively working with the person. Any agency can lead the multiagency meetings, it doesn't need to be ACS or Hertfordshire Constabulary.

The lead agency will usually be determined by which agency has the most knowledge about the person and their situation, the most current or previous engagement, the needs of the person and the associated risks. It is expected that agencies will prioritise attendance at multiagency planning meetings wherever possible. When agencies are not able to attend the meetings, it is expected they will provide relevant information.

When planning a professionals meeting, consideration should be given as to which person might be best to work with the adult/s. This is particularly important where there are multiple adults involved.

The adult/s should be advised of the meeting and their views should be sought in advance and be recorded as part of the multiagency meeting. Consideration should be given about what information can be shared especially where there are multiple adults involved based on risks. The decision and reasons for this should be clearly documented. If there is uncertainty, then the lead agency should consider seeking legal advice within their agency about whether information should be shared.

Mental Capacity

Mental capacity under Mental Capacity Act 2005 is a factor in safety planning with, or on behalf of, adults who are at risk of cuckooing (see [Hertfordshire Policy on Mental Capacity \(PDF 709kb\)](#)). The adult's mental capacity in respect of the specific concerns associated with the case should be discussed. If there are doubts about the person's capacity, then a mental capacity assessment should be undertaken in relation to this decision.

Multiagency meeting

The main purpose of the initial support planning meeting is to agree a plan to reduce the level of risk to the person(s) in their situation. Whilst the risk is shared on a multi-agency basis it may be agreed that only one agency will be taking the lead. This should be the agency that the group agrees will have the best chance of reducing risk to the person(s).

The purpose of the subsequent multi-agency meetings is to review whether the plan is working to reduce the level of risk and whether the plan needs to change to try another approach. If it is known that several people have been affected by cuckooing in the area, the meeting should also map any common themes and patterns in relation to the perpetrators.

The meetings should be chaired by someone who has an appropriate level of authority to agree actions on behalf of their agency and appropriately challenge other agencies if they are not participating.

It is important to agree timescales for each part of the process to prevent the case drifting. This will be different for each case dependent on individual circumstances.

Within the support plan, it should be clear what the agreed actions are, who is responsible for carrying out the actions and the timescales involved and the date of the next meeting.

Professional disagreements happen and professionals involved should always try to work out their differences and put the adult's needs at the centre of the process. Where disagreements take place, resolution should be sought as outlined in the [Escalation Policy](#).

The lead agency is responsible for ensuring that the notes and actions from the meeting are sent in a timely manner to all those present at the meeting, and those staff or agencies not present but where actions have been identified for them. Arrangements must be agreed as to how the adult(s) at risk will be updated about the outcome of the meeting.

There is a meeting template for the Multi Agency Planning meeting in our [HSAB Multi-disciplinary guidance for complex cases 2020 \(trixonline.co.uk\)](#) which provides a framework for the management of complex cases.

Involvement from police

The steps taken by police will be specific to the case and may include:

- Regular planned high visibility visits to the address according to risk rating, submitting Intel where necessary.
- Contact with neighbouring addresses.
- Identifying who owns the address.
- Looking for opportunities to work with the owner / landlord / agents / housing / wardens.
- Crime Prevention Survey – lighting, CCTV, unlocked access, insecurities, alarms etc. Influence the landlords / letting agents to get repairs done ASAP.
- Identifying vulnerabilities – drugs / alcohol addiction / mental health / CSE / debt bondage (are they in financial difficulty / rent arrears, etc...).
- Appropriate signposting / referrals regarding any identified needs to statutory services, charities, probation etc.
- Monitoring and review risk rating based on occurrences / intelligence / visits.

When cuckooing victim is also a victim of modern slavery

If it is suspected that a cuckooing victim is also a victim of modern slavery, then a referral must be made to the [National Referral Mechanism](#) (NRM) in line with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. NRM First Responders have a statutory responsibility to offer the NRM to potential victims of modern slavery in line with a mandatory requirement to notify the Home Office if they identify a potential adult or child victim of modern slavery and/or human trafficking. Locally, NRM First Responders include Hertfordshire Constabulary and all 11 local authorities (county council and 10 district/borough councils). If an adult does not consent to enter the NRM, it is still mandatory for the form to be submitted online by a NRM First Responder. The online form adjusts dependent on whether an adult has consented or not. If the adult has not consented to enter the NRM, then personal details should not be included.

HSAB Referral Pathway and Practice Guidance on Modern Slavery

Where modern slavery is suspected or identified with cuckooing, practitioners should also refer to [Practice Guidance on Modern Slavery for Practitioners](#), which includes the [Referral Pathway for Adult Modern Slavery victims](#).

Victim Support

[Beacon](#) is Hertfordshire's Victim Care Centre which is staffed by professionals from both Hertfordshire Constabulary and Catch 22, an independent organisation commissioned to support victims of crime in Hertfordshire. Beacon aims to help victims cope and recover from their ordeal. They can also provide advocacy. [Beacon](#) supports all victims of crime through a dedicated case worker.

Contact: **0300 0 115 555** (option 3) or email [Beacon](#).

Cuckoo Visit - Aide Memoire

Victim – Full name, DOB & Ethnicity

- Mean of Communication (phone / e-mail / social media).
- Other occupants at address.
- Vulnerabilities – mental / physical health, addictions (drugs / alcohol). Identify support in place.
- Drugs used, frequency, last used, quantities.
- Vehicle owner (Consider use of D751XA form if a registered user of drugs).
- Source of drugs.
- Payment for drugs (cash / goods /runner / sexual etc.).
- Current drug debt.
- Social Worker / Probation Officer.

Location – Full address & description

- Intelligence checks prior to visit (Force / Partners).
- Housing Status – private owned, Housing Association, private rental.
- Layout, security, condition (evidence of drug use).

Suspect – Offence / Methods

- Full name, DOB, Ethnicity, address. Images of suspect.
- Area originates from.
- Nicknames, full description to include distinctive markings, habitual clothing.
- Drug line identified / Gang affiliation.
- Transport used (hire car/ rail network / private car).
- Communications – drug number and personal number. Other means of contact.
- Weapons.
- Drug transportation method (bag / on person / plugged).

Methodology

- How victim was approached (3rd party, suspect, own volition).
- Agreement to use premises – duration (overnight, times frequented).
- Coercion / incentives used. Attempts to stop use of premises or forced out.
- Communication with victim whilst using premises – how and wording used.
- Use of address – storage / preparation of drugs / supplied from / use of runners.

Drug Market

- Commodity supplied; Pricing; Packaging.
- Open or closed market; Area of coverage.

Resources

Guidance for frontline professionals on dealing with county lines, part of the government's approach to ending gang violence and exploitation.

[Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults \(Home Office\)](#)

[County Lines \(National Crime Agency\)](#)

Modern Slavery Resources

[Report modern slavery as a First Responder](#)

[Indicator Checklist](#)

[NRM Support Booklet](#)

[Survivor Handbook](#)

National County Lines Coordination Centre Animation

[NCLCC - County Lines Awareness Video - YouTube](#)

Cuckooing - Professional External Pathway

