

# Child Criminal Exploitation & Gangs Policy

Soundly Fostering will provide regular training to carers and staff regarding the criminal exploitation of children and young people, particularly in respect of county lines, when it is deemed relevant for the children or young people they care for. For children being exploited into criminal activity, there is a significant power imbalance between perpetrators and victims. Children cannot consent to their own exploitation.

We view criminal exploitation, gang activity, county lines and trafficking extremely seriously.

Carers and staff are to ensure that they are prompt in reporting concerns and know they have a legal duty to report and understand how to support young people, working alongside other agencies.

This policy will be used alongside Safeguarding, CSE, risk of Suicide and Missing policies.

## Regulations and Standards

### **The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011**

**Regulation 11**- Independent Fostering Agencies -duty to secure welfare

**Regulation 12** - Arrangements for the protection of children

### **Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards**

**Standard 4** - Safeguarding children

## Key Legislation

Crime and Policing Bill 2025

## Relevant Guidance

[Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023](#)

## Information Sharing

Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers April 2024 (Dfe)

Report to the Agency and Local Authority. If you're concerned about a child's safety, contact the police immediately.

## Grooming

Grooming is when someone builds a relationship, gaining trust and emotional connection with a child or young person, so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them.

Children and young people can be groomed into exploitation and abuse, both online and offline. They may be sexually abused, forced into labour, made to launder money for criminals through their own bank accounts, or coerced into committing crimes like transporting drugs or stealing from shops. Any child is at risk of being groomed. It is important to remember that both boys and girls can be groomed.

Children who are groomed online could be abused by someone they know or a stranger. This could include abuse by someone who commits a one-off act or a stranger who builds a relationship with them. Some children are more at risk of grooming, particularly those who are vulnerable. Children in care, those with disabilities or children who are neglected can be targeted by groomers.

Groomers will exploit any vulnerability to increase the likelihood that a child or young person will become dependent on them and less likely to speak out. Anybody can groom, no matter their age, gender or race. Grooming can take place over a short or long period of time, from weeks to years. Those who groom children may also build a relationship with the young person's family or friends to make them seem trustworthy or authoritative.

Organised criminal gangs groom children and young people because they're less suspicious and are given lighter sentences than adults.

## Child Criminal Exploitation

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is child abuse.

Children and young people under the age of 18 are manipulated, deceived and coerced by an individual or group into committing crimes. This commonly occurs in county lines. Children who are targeted are often groomed, physically and emotionally abused, sexually exploited or trafficked. They are likely to have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.

Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

Children are more at risk of being exploited if:

- They have been excluded from school
- They have special education needs
- There are problems at home, such as neglect, domestic abuse or sexual abuse
- They have problems with their mental health
- They are having problems with the peer group
- they live in areas known to have active gangs.

Carers and staff must remain vigilant to possible signs of a child or young person being criminally exploited. You should speak up as soon as you have concerns, even if the signs appear insignificant. Foster Carers' records are important and may show a developing pattern of concern.

Soundly Fostering's Safeguarding lead, Joy O'Brien Miller or the Registered Manager, should be informed, as should the child's placing Local Authority, who may involve the police.

If you have any concerns for a child's safety, the police should be called.

## Gang

The word 'gang' means different things in different contexts. The government, in their paper 'Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity' distinguishes between peer groups, street gangs and organised criminal gangs.

- **Peergroup:** A relatively small and transient social grouping which may or may not describe themselves as a gang depending on the context.
- **Street Gang:** Groups of young people who see themselves, and are seen by others, as a discernible group for whom crime and violence are integral to the group's identity.
- **Organised Criminal Gangs:** A group of individuals for whom involvement in crime is for personal gain, financial or otherwise. For most, crime is their occupation.

It's not illegal for a young person to be in a gang because there are different types of 'gangs' and not every 'gang' is criminal or dangerous.

However, gang membership can be linked to illegal activity, particularly organised criminal gangs involved in trafficking, drug dealing and violent crime.

Children and young people may become involved in gangs for many reasons, including:

- Peer pressure and wanting to fit in with their friends
- They feel respected and important
- They want to feel protected from other gangs or bullies
- They want to make money and are promised rewards
- They want to gain status and feel powerful
- They've been excluded from school and don't feel they have a future

Children and young people involved with gangs and criminal exploitation need help and support. They might be victims of violence or pressured into doing things such as stealing, carrying drugs or weapons. They might also be abused, exploited and placed in dangerous situations. It is important to spot the signs and act and report quickly if you think a child is being groomed or is becoming involved with a gang.

## County Lines

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation, it is the term used by police for criminal gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas, market and coastal towns, using dedicated phone lines or 'deal lines'.

County Lines is a major issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and missing persons.

Vulnerable people's travel may be 'arranged and facilitated by a person, with the view to them being exploited', which amounts to human trafficking. County Lines involves child criminal exploitation.

Criminal gangs use children to move drugs and money, hide weapons and secure dwellings of vulnerable people in the area, so that they can use them as a base from which to sell drugs. Children may be trafficked away from their home area and stay in accommodation to sell and manufacture drugs. Often, children are pressurised in such a way as to feel they have no choice other than to follow the instructions of those exploiting and subjecting them to abuse.

Buses, trains, trams and coaches are used to facilitate the movement of a young person when they're being exploited. Fast food outlets and roadside services may be used for amenities and food stops. Hotels, salons and car washes may be places where exploitation happens 'behind closed doors'.

Children from any community or social background can be groomed into county lines. Initial contact can be made physically or through social media. Young people aged 14-17 are the most likely to be targeted by criminal groups, but there are reports of seven-year-olds being groomed into county lines.

Primary school children are seen as easy targets because they are less likely to get caught. The grooming might start with them being asked to 'keep watch', but soon escalates to them being forced to stash weapons, money or become drug couriers.

**Signs a child or young person may be being criminally exploited or has joined a gang:**

- Sudden loss of interest in school, decline in attendance or frequently absent from school and doing badly in school.

- Going missing from home, staying out late and travelling for unexplained reasons, being found outside of the local area, or regularly breaking their curfew.
- In a relationship or hanging out with someone older than them.
- Talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them.
- Associating with known or suspected gang members.
- Being angry, aggressive or violent.
- Becoming emotionally “switched off”, being isolated or withdrawn.
- Expressing aggressive or intimidating views towards other groups of young people, some of whom may have been friends in the past.
- Starting to use new or unknown slang words, unusual ways of talking or hand signs.
- Having unexplained money and buying new things.
- Sudden changes in appearance, wearing clothes or accessories in a particular style, gang colours or uniform, similar to the people they are mixing with or getting tattoos.
- Spending more time on social media and being secretive about time online.
- Making more calls or sending more texts, possibly on a new phone or phones.
- No longer wanting to attend leisure, sport, family or social activities.
- Avoiding or being scared to go into certain areas.
- Self-harming and feeling emotionally unwell.
- Taking drugs and abusing alcohol or having large amounts of drugs on them.
- Committing petty crimes like shoplifting or vandalism.
- Unexplained injuries and refusing to seek medical help.
- Carrying weapons.

## **A Carer's Role**

Be aware of where your children or young people are when they're out, who they're with and what they're doing on social media. Get to know their friends. Encourage positive activities, sports, social clubs and work. Liaise frequently with the school and the team around the child.

Speak to children and young people honestly about the consequences of violent or illegal behaviour.

If a child talks to you about grooming, it's important to:



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- Listen carefully to what they're saying
- Let them know they've done the right thing by telling you
- Tell them it's not their fault
- Say you'll take them seriously
- Explain what you'll do next
- Report what the child has told you as soon as possible.

Always report your concerns to your supervising social worker or Soundly Fostering's out-of-hours service, which can be reached by telephone on: 01842 818793

If there is a risk or immediate danger, police should be contacted, and the child or young person's social worker informed.

