New county lines support service will offer lifeline across England and Wales

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A new Home Office-funded service to support vulnerable children and young people criminally exploited through county lines will aim to help 225 young people exit or reduce their county line activity over the next nine months.

Run by charity St Giles, who established the first ever specialist county lines support services helping young people and their families, it will help young people in London, Merseyside and the West Midlands. Working closely with local partners in these areas, caseworkers will offer intensive one-to-one support for each young person and the wider family if needed.

The work addresses continued concerns around the grooming and exploitation of young people into county lines and will help young people and their families take back control of their lives. Existing specialist services are already running at capacity and the indications from the frontline are that there is a substantial unmet need for more support.

The current COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have meant that new approaches to county lines interventions have been adopted over recent months. When face-to-face work directly with the young person has not been possible, caseworkers have focussed on providing family support to concerned parents to help build a positive family network and offer young people support online and over the phone.

For the first phase of the project, this approach will continue until restrictions are further eased and face-to-face contact resumes.

St Giles's existing county lines interventions adopt a peer-led ethos, using professionally trained people with direct first-hand experience of the issues the young people are now going through. Having lived these lives themselves, they can engage young people who may be highly resistant to offers of support and become role models of positive change.

"Many young people tell us that they see no way out of county lines," said Evan Jones, Head of Community Services at St Giles. "Our staff are living proof that positive change is possible. This funding will enable us to support hundreds of young people who are currently beyond our reach and end the misery and suffering that they and their families are experiencing. Whilst the consequences of county line involvement can be severe, there is light at the end of the tunnel if the right support is in place."

The Home Office has provided the St Giles with £860,800 in funding for the service in 20/21. This forms part of the Government's wider investment of £25 million to tackle county lines.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said: "The exploitation of children is an abhorrent crime. I will use every measure we have to stop vulnerable children of all ages from being exploited by these ruthless county lines drug criminals.

"St Giles deserve great credit for their intensive support for victims. Through the £25 million I have put in place to roll up this criminality, together we will help to end the abuse and misery faced by children exploited by these shameless gangs."

Sophie Linden, Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime, said: "County lines operate across the country, exploiting vulnerable young people and driving gang-related violence. In London, the Mayor has invested almost £4m in the Rescue and Response programme to better understand, target and respond to county lines, providing crucial ongoing support for more than 900 vulnerable and exploited young Londoners since 2018.

"I am pleased that this additional investment recognises our groundbreaking work, and will help this programme reach even more vulnerable young Londoners. Providing funding for the Rescue and Response programme to be rolled out nationally would see vulnerable young people across the country get the support they urgently need."

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The Director of the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit Clare Gollop, said: "It is reassuring to see further efforts being made to protect and rescue young people in the West Midlands who are being exploited by criminal gangs for financial gain.

"These vulnerable individuals are often coerced into selling drugs by dealers who are prepared to use extreme violence to intimidate and control.

"We must recognise these young people are victims and act quickly to protect them, providing practical and safe ways to leave the situation.

“This is a promising project at the frontline. It is, however, important that we all offer these young people an attractive alternative to the lifestyle they think they can have by working for criminal gangs. Put simply this means jobs, safety and support.

“By intervening as early as possible, we can prevent serious violence from affecting our communities.”

Detective Inspector Jimmy Belmar from Merseyside Police said “I am delighted to see more funding being used to protect and support our young people from the harsh realities of county lines activity.

“It is well known that criminals often use children and vulnerable members of society to transport and supply dugs across the country.

“Being involved in this type of crime is extremely dangerous. When someone starts moving drugs and/or dangerous weapons from place to place, you put yourselves at significant risk – whether that is getting stopped by police and ending up with a criminal record or coming into contact with another dangerous individual which realistically could end up with you being seriously injured, if not worse.

“It is paramount that people living in Merseyside or in neighbouring counties tell the police if they know who is committing these crimes and exploiting young people. Criminals take advantage of young people, enticing them into a life of crime and damaging their future prospects.

“We continually seek to bring offenders to justice through proactive policing, acting on community intelligence and working with our partners including St Giles who have a proven track record supporting vulnerable young people. This further funding will go hand in hand with methods already in place and I hope this only amplifies the safety of all those living, working and visiting Merseyside.

“Ultimately everyone should be warned that if you get involved in crime, you risk facing consequences. But, when we identify vulnerable young people during our enquiries, we ensure they are treated with sensitivity and understanding. Our primary will always be to target those who seek to coerce them for their own selfish gain. Together, we can ensure Merseyside remains a safe place for all those growing up here.”

The lockdown has restricted county line activity and many young people supported by St Giles have taken it as an opportunity to exit county lines and re-engage with education and training. As restrictions further ease, caseworkers are concentrated on continuing this progress as a renewal of gang activity means negative influences start to increase. A flexible fund will be integrated into the project to help families with unforeseen effects of the pandemic. It will minimise the chance that these effects become barriers to young people’s positive progress.

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For further information please contact Tamsin Gregory on 07770 017368 or email her here

Notes to editors

The project will operate in the following locations working closely with existing local providers. Integral to each will be specialised support for girls and families who are affected:

- Merseyside – offering casework across the region with a focus on North Wales and other key destinations.
- London – offering added capacity to the existing MOPAC commissioned multi agency Rescue and Response service. The team will also have a focus on helping young people involved in London ‘borough lines’ – where young people are exploited to transport drugs within London boroughs.
- West Midlands –The team will provide a rescue and response service to young people from the West Midlands who are found engaging in county lines activity and in addition, provide targeted support to young people who are at risk of exploitation.

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