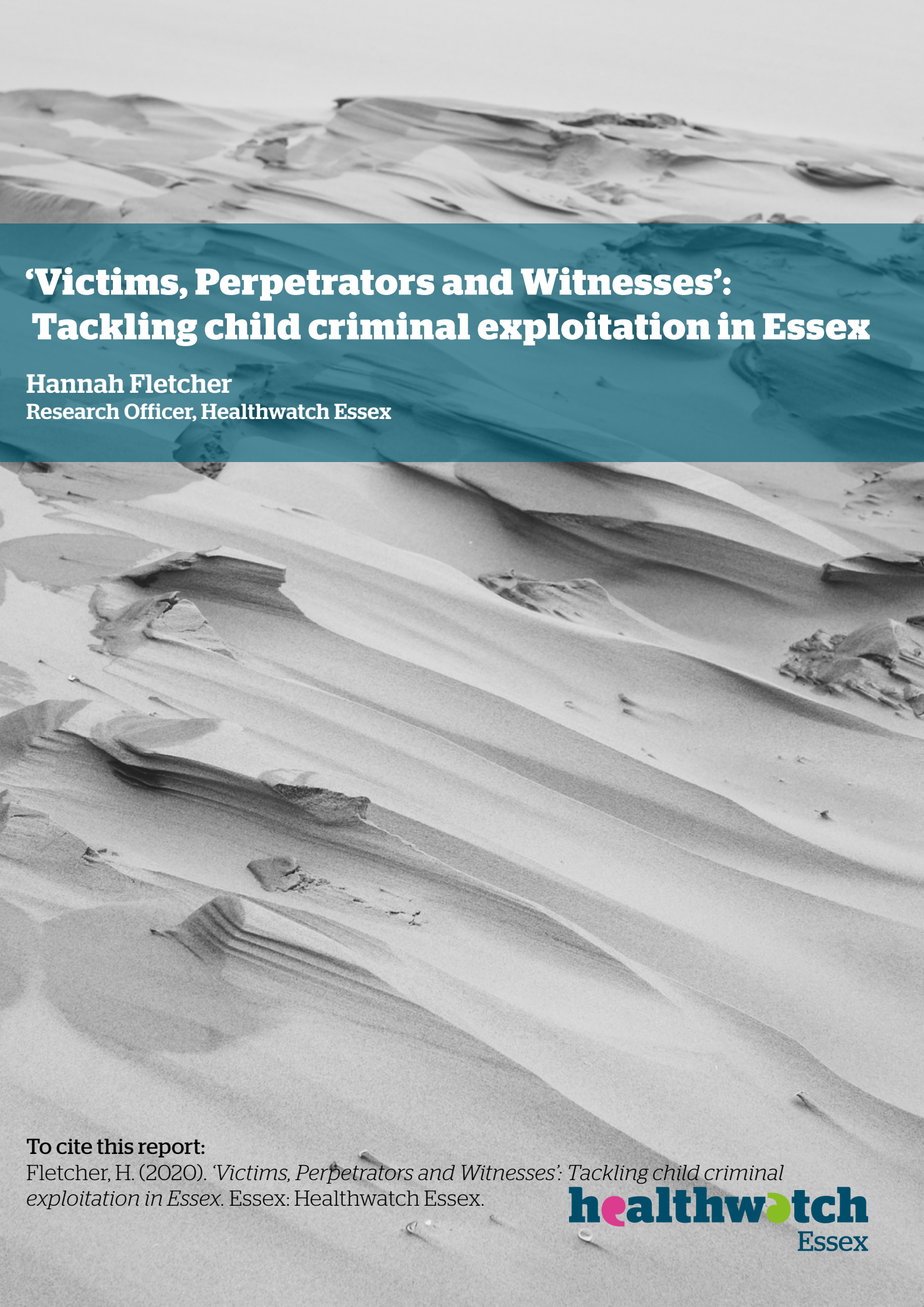

‘Victims, Perpetrators and Witnesses’: Tackling child criminal exploitation in Essex

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Executive Summary

Engagement and reach

The findings and recommendations of this report are informed by our conversations with:

- 15 children and young people (CYP) aged 13-18, affected by or identified as being 'at risk' of child criminal exploitation (CCE), residing in areas of recognised deprivation.
- 35 professionals with experience of working to tackle CCE across the education, youth work, social care, community safety, local authority, and criminal justice sectors. These professionals were employed in a range of positions, such as CEOs, senior leadership roles, teachers and project workers within statutory services, community interest companies and charities.

Headline findings

- Professionals disagreed on the extent of CCE in Essex, with some claiming services are overwhelmed and others believing the issue is exaggerated through 'fearmongering'.
- Overall, professionals agreed that it was important to consider exploited CYP as victims, as opposed to perpetrators, but were also aware there is some way to go before practice catches up with such a perspective.
- Professionals described a highly saturated provider market, which they felt could threaten the sustainability of this work through an expanding array of services relying upon limited funding.
- Professionals found it difficult to identify the most suitable services to work with or refer CYP to, and opinion varied on how to judge the efficacy of services.
- Education professionals are committed to being part of the solution in safeguarding CYP from CCE but feel overwhelmed by the severity of issues they encounter and the non-formalised expectation to deliver an increasing number of interventions themselves.
- Teachers felt that increasing responsibilities due to funding cuts and more selective referral criteria in services hindered their ability to deliver high quality education to CYP and that services they had previously worked with were now beyond their reach.
- When education professionals did make referrals, they noticed response times had become slower following funding cuts.
- Parents of CYP affected by CCE require support for safeguarding their children as well as coping with their own experiences of trauma.
- Work is underway in Essex to support parents affected by CCE, but professionals wanted to see this work expanded to encourage joint service working with CYP and their families.
- A gap exists within the health and social sector regarding work around CCE. Professionals in our study acknowledged the need for joint working, though we only learned of one piece of work that took place in a health setting. This is not to say that no other work with the health system is taking place, but highlights there is a capacity and need to further engage the health system in working to overcome CCE.

Recommendations

Drawing together our findings and understanding of the existing policy and service context, we make the following recommendations:

- There is no easy method for gathering data on the number of CYP affected by CCE within Essex but continuing to refine the current picture can better inform the need for services and funding. It is important that such work considers the experiences of professionals 'on the ground', such as teachers and detached youth workers who do not always feel recognised by decision makers, yet these perspectives are essential to understanding exploitation.
- Work on embedding contextual safeguarding must continue to be integrated into practice in order to identify and mitigate the risks of exploitation. Procedures need to reflect professionals' perspective that CYP affected by CCE are victims of crime, and not always perpetrators.

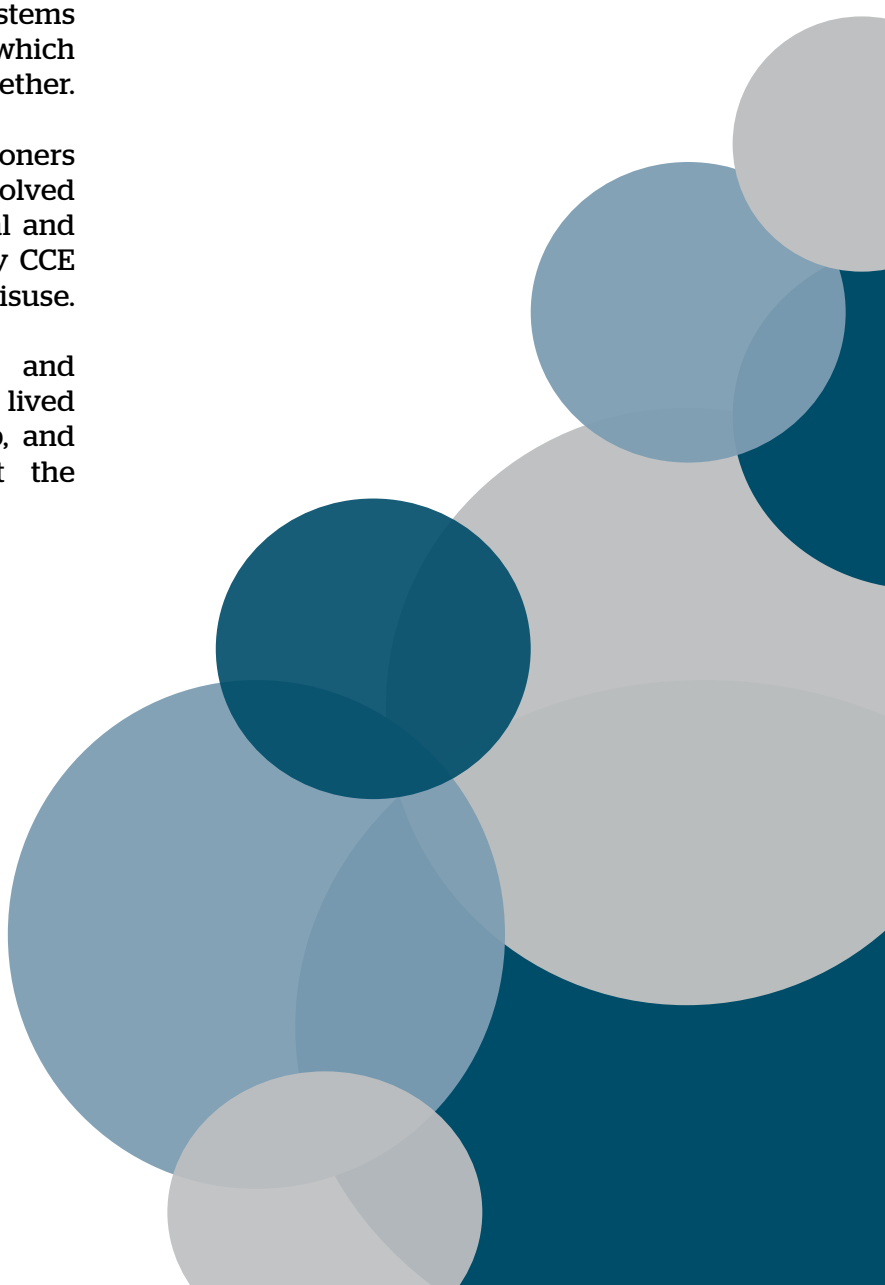
- There is a need for system-wide quality assurance measures to offer some form of benchmark by which to appraise service effectiveness and suitability. This would also better inform funding decisions, resolve concerns around newer services and streamline referral pathways.

- The current reliance on the education sector to deliver interventions that address a proliferating amount of multi-faceted and complex social issues cannot be sustained without appropriate resourcing or capacity. Education professionals feel as though they are dealing with CCE alone and enhanced support and guidance from surrounding services would ease this mounting pressure.

- There is also a need to increase and expand the existing support for parents of CYP affected by CCE. A family systems approach offers a useful method by which to support parents and CYP together.

- More health professionals, commissioners and decision makers should become involved in tackling CCE given the sexual, mental and physical health risks for CYP affected by CCE and the increased chance of substance misuse.

- Collaborative work within the health and social care sector that embraces how lived experiences of health and care overlap, and are often inseparable, would benefit the safeguarding of CYP from CCE.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr John Day for support in data analysis, editing and summarising this report.

Our thanks to all professionals who agreed to speak to us as part of our study, your commitment to transparency and passion for safeguarding children and young people has made this report possible.

We especially thank the young people who shared their lived experience as part of this study. We are grateful that you trusted us with your voices and honoured to represent you in this report.

Contents

Glossary

Discussions of child criminal exploitation, county lines, and 'gangs' are often accompanied by a number of concepts and phrases which this glossary aims to clarify for the reader. Where possible, we base these definitions on those provided by agencies in Essex for purposes of consistency.

Child Criminal Exploitation [CCE]

When an individual, or group, exploits an imbalance of power (such as age, gender, physical strength, and wealth) to coerce, control, manipulate, and deceive a CYP to carry out tasks which are often criminal in nature. CCE is common in county lines networks and can often take the form of CYP receiving something such as drugs, money, gifts, or friendship in exchange for criminal acts. CYP often do not recognise that they are being exploited, considering themselves in control of these circumstances [1].

Contextual safeguarding

The identification of, and response to, significant risks to CYP outside of the family [1]. Traditional safeguarding approaches often focus on risk factors within the family home, whereas contextual safeguarding also addresses the risk to CYP, in public and social contexts, such as the relationships CYP form in their neighbourhoods, networks, in schools, and online [2].

County lines

County lines refers to organised criminal networks exporting illegal drugs (primarily crack cocaine and heroin), usually from urban bases to UK locations such as suburbs, market towns, and coastal populations through the use of a dedicated mobile phone - a 'county line' [3]. County lines networks can exploit CYP to transport money or drugs across localities, often by train, to protect adult gang members from being intercepted by police. CYP exploited by county lines networks may live in the area the network is based, or in areas where drugs are supplied [2].

Child Sexual Exploitation [CSE]

Like child criminal exploitation, CSE is a form of exploitation in which children and young people are victims, who cannot consent to exploitative acts. Methods of grooming children and young people for CSE are similar to that of child criminal exploitation: promises of money, gifts or affection, and a false sense of having consented to the exploitation, with threats of violence or retribution used to keep CYP in abusive situations. As with CCE, victims of CSE can be trafficked for purposes of exploitation, and CYP criminally exploited by 'gangs' may also be sexually exploited [4]. Existing literature suggests girls may be more at risk of CSE within CCE, though boys are also at risk [5].

Children and young people [CYP]

In England, a child is considered to be anyone below the age of 18 [6]. However, in recognition of the different needs and life experiences that children experience between birth and their 18th birthday, the term 'young person' is often used in reference to those approaching the end of childhood, typically aged between 14 and 17. We have been unable to provide a universally agreed definition of a young person, and have found this term used to describe a broad range of ages from 13-25. In this report, we use the term CYP to refer to a 'child or young person' or to 'children and young people' to represent the broad age range of those who are criminally exploited.

Debt bondage

A manipulation technique commonly used in county lines networks that causes a CYP to believe they are in debt to their exploiter/s and must repay this debt through continued criminal acts. Examples include: staged robbery, whereby drugs or money carried by CYP is 'stolen' by another 'gang member' [7], CYP

'working' to pay-off the drug debt of a family member, or the cost of a mobile phone they have been given – originally as a gift [5].

Gangs

The language of CCE is largely tied to that of 'gangs'. Much of the literature used in this study refers to gangs, as do some of the services, statutory and voluntary, existing in our county. However, within this report we have made a conscious effort to replace the language of 'gangs', such as 'gang involvement' or 'gang member', with the language of CCE in order to remove any implications of consent and to recognise exploited CYP as victims. Where it seems necessary to reference 'gangs', we put the term into quotation marks in recognition of the problematic nature of this term.

'Gangs' terminology is also problematic in its vagueness; the word can be used to describe collections of people ranging from CYP peer groups through to organised criminal networks. For the purposes of this report, and its tie-in to existing literature, we generally consider 'gang' to refer to a criminal group that profits from its criminal activity, and exploits CYP for the purposes of making money illegally [8].

Grooming

Refers to a number of tactics used by exploiters to coerce CYP into CCE. These can include promises of money, protection, and friendship, and prevent CYP from recognising the exploitation [2]. Exploited CYP may be exploited to groom other CYP. Examples of peer grooming include grooming in schools, online, and via music videos on social media platforms portraying gangs as glamorous and exciting. Following this grooming stage, CYP are often threatened by acts of violence or retribution in order to trap them in exploitation [5].

Human Trafficking

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 [9] explains the criteria for human trafficking in the following example:

- A person commits an offence if the person arranges or facilitates travel of another person ('V') with a view to V being exploited.
- It is irrelevant whether V consents to the travel (whether V is an adult or a child).
- A person may in particular arrange or facilitate V's travel by recruiting V, transporting or transferring V, harbouring or receiving V, or transferring or exchanging control over V [section 2].

Therefore, it has been possible for prosecutors to use human trafficking legislation in the prosecution of exploiters who have arranged or facilitated the travel of CYP to exploit them criminally, through the sale and transport of drugs [5].

Knife crime

Commonly refers to knife assaults, and knife carrying, occurring in a community or public setting. CYP affected by CCE can be threatened or wounded by knives and may carry knives themselves [10]. Within this report we consider 'knives' as any article 'which has a blade or point, or is sharply pointed' in line with the *Criminal Justice Act 1988* [11, section 141a].

Looked after children

Refers to CYP in the care of their local authority who may be living with foster families, living in a residential children's home, or living in residential settings such as schools or secure units. The term is often embedded in procedure and policy, though the National Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) [12] finds that many of these CYP prefer the term 'children in care'. Many CYP living in care report positive experiences, though existing literature on CCE identify these CYP of being at elevated risk of exploitation.

Modern slavery

As with human trafficking, the definition of modern slavery can apply to victims of CCE. CYP who have been exploited into 'working' for county lines networks, held against their will in properties away from home, and are controlled via threats, meets *The Modern Slavery Act's* definition of 'slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour' [9, section 1].

Missing episodes

County lines networks use exploited CYP to transport drugs or money outside of their local area, meaning they may stay away from home for periods of time. When this happens, it is likely that a CYP's parents or guardians are unaware of the CYP's whereabouts, and that CYP is therefore missing. 'Missing episodes' refers to repeated incidents of CYP going missing, as well as the length of time their whereabouts is unknown. Not all CYP who go missing are victims of criminal exploitation, and all CYP who go missing can be exposed to a range of risks, from physical harm through to the risk of missing education [13].

Pupil referral unit [PRU]

According to the government, 'PRUs teach children who aren't able to attend school and may not otherwise receive suitable education. This could be because they have a short- term or long-term illness, have been excluded or are a new starter waiting for a mainstream school place' [14]. CYP attending PRUs have repeatedly been linked to greater risk of CCE, which we discuss more in our 'Youth violence and knife crime' chapter.

Spotify

Spotify is a music streaming service commonly used by a range of people. Through the form of app or online you can download or listen to music for free with adverts or pay a monthly subscription which allows further features and ad-free listening.

Trauma-informed

The trauma-informed approach recognises that people who have experienced a range of traumatic experiences can find aspects of health and social care services retraumatising. When applied to CCE, trauma-informed practice aims to ensure that services, in their work with CYP, do not mimic the traumatic experiences CYP may have faced. For example, the showing of graphic or violent images, using interventions that cause shame, or doubting the validity of a CYP's story are all ways in which services may inadvertently deepen CYP's distress. To prevent further harm to CYP, and improve the outcomes of interventions, trauma-informed work promotes environments and practices conducive to safety and recovery [15].

Youth violence

Also referred to as 'peer on peer violence', youth violence describes violent acts by CYP against other CYP in community or public settings. As well as physical violence and knife crime, youth violence can include sexual violence and intimate partner violence [16].

Introduction *By Hannah Fletcher & John Day*

In accordance with the Health and Social Care Act 2012 [17], Healthwatch Essex gathers and represents views about health and social care services in Essex. An independent charity, Healthwatch Essex aims to influence decision makers so that services are fit for purpose, effective and accessible, ultimately improving the service user experience.

Since 2014, we have produced a series of reports highlighting the health and social care experiences of young people in Essex. Our trilogy of SWEET! reports focused on the experiences of children and young people (CYP) from underprivileged groups such as those living in areas of recognised deprivation, receiving care in a secure mental health unit, and young carers. Through this work we became increasingly aware of child criminal exploitation (CCE), particularly in the context of 'gangs', county lines and a range of pertinent interconnected health and social care issues including mental health, sexual health, drugs and alcohol, offending, and education.

Existing literature highlights the importance of agencies working together to tackle CCE and, as a nationally contested social issue, the vast range of organisations required to comprehensively address CCE [7, 8]. As a relatively large county containing a diverse population and geographical landscape, Essex likely represents a region where many of the tensions, successes, and failures of CCE policies and practices are comparable and relevant to other areas of the UK. Essex has a population of approximately 1.47 million people [18] residing in urban, rural and coastal locations, and also borders London. Within Essex there are 549 schools [19]; 12 district and borough councils, and two unitary authorities [20]; seven clinical commissioning groups [21], and a sizeable voluntary sector. As a provocative topic where the parameters of what constitutes criminal behaviour are rarely straightforward, there is no clear picture of the current scale of CCE, nationally or locally, though existing data suggests less than half of CYP affected by CCE are known to services [8].

Following our in-depth engagement with CYP and professionals tasked with reducing and preventing CCE, this report explores the issues of categorising exploited CYP as victims; youth violence and knife crime; raising awareness around the risks of CCE; professionals' work with parents; the funding climate and capacity in which professionals currently operate; and the type and extent of support offered and provided to CYP affected by CCE. In fleshing out these issues in greater detail, we pay attention to areas of concern voiced by those who we spoke with, to offer recommendations as to how existing policies and practices might be developed in the interests of preventing, reducing and dealing with CCE in Essex. Specifically, we discuss the need for models of quality assurance within the saturated provider market of Essex and more transparent and comparable information about the efficacy of available services for CYP, the undue and unsustainable pressures experienced by teachers to deliver interventions within existing conditions of economic austerity, and the need to expand support services for those affected by CCE to recognise the trauma experienced by parents. Finally, we argue that the necessity for these developments is indicative of the broader and persistent lack of collaboration within the health and social care sector, where, for the most part, social care and health services, providers and professionals continue to work independently, which is detrimental to multi-agency efforts to combat CCE.

To guide our analysis of CCE across Essex, we draw upon Howard Becker's [22] seminal work on deviance to acknowledge the complexities of how key stakeholders, including CYP themselves, simultaneously contribute to the tensions that play out between groups who hold contrasting perspectives and experiences of the CCE environment. Therefore, we are sensitive throughout to the complicated 'us and them' relationship that regularly emerges between and amongst the CYP involved in CCE and the professionals attempting to remove CYP from CCE. While we explore the everyday experiences of CYP early on in our report to set the scene, it is our thorough engagement with a broad variety of professional voices in the area of CCE which makes this report original in terms of understanding CCE across Essex. Becker's sophisticated perspective of deviance also enabled us to move beyond simplistic portrayals of CCE as an individual act. As reflected in the title of our report, the CCE environment is structured by various labels, with contrasting labels frequently applied to the same person performing the same act in the same context, according to the morals and interests of those applying the label. Thus, the labels regularly used in CCE are inseparable from the behaviours which result in people being perceived as a 'victim', 'perpetrator' or 'witness', and need to be understood together, as collective and socially contructed actions [22].

Engagement

Before we began our engagement with CYP and professionals, we familiarised ourselves with the existing guidance and literature on CCE [8, 16, 10]. This provided a basis for our discussion with professionals and CYP, as well as an overview of the terminology, challenges and successes within CCE so far.

Within this study we spoke with 50 participants; 15 were CYP and 35 were professionals. The 15 young people we spoke to were aged between 13 and 18, eight of whom were female and seven were male. These young people were working with professionals across three services in four different areas of Essex, having been identified as at risk of, or previously affected, by CCE. We recognised the need to engage safely and sensitively with CYP who may have faced difficult experiences and followed guidance from CYP service providers throughout the engagement process. Where organisations felt it appropriate, professionals working with these CYP were present during our discussions. We have removed any potential identifiers of the CYP that feature in this report, to ensure their anonymity.

We then reached out to a number of organisations based on our existing networks, which in turn signposted us to other organisations. For example, Essex County Council facilitated our introduction to four of the schools who took part in this study.

The professionals we spoke to were based within a range of services working with young people in Essex, as well as five professionals carrying out 'gang' specific work in the bordering localities of Suffolk and London. The decision to reach out to organisations in neighbouring areas allowed for an element of comparison between CYP service provision within and outside of Essex, while also ensuring that CCE cases which originated in Essex were fully explored. In the interests of developing a sophisticated overall perspective of CCE across Essex, we sought maximal variety of professional voice and perspective, by reaching out to a range of organisations involved in attempting to tackle CCE. As a result, we engaged with statutory services, community interest companies and charities across the education, youth work, social care, community safety, local authority, and criminal justice sectors. We spoke with professionals working in a range of roles, such as Chief Executives, senior leadership personnel, teachers and project workers. We worked with services located within all five Clinical Commissioning Groups in Essex, including areas of relative affluence and recognised deprivation. One of the organisations we approached chose not to participate, as they felt CCE in Essex has been over-researched.

Our conversations with CYP and professionals took place between June 2019 and January 2020. Conversations with CYP were based at the location where they received support and discussions with professionals were staged in their work environment. Engagement with CYP took a conversational style and explored issues they felt affected them and others in their local area by drawing on their stories of lived experience. Engagement with professionals revolved around their lived experiences of working in CCE reduction and prevention, and their views of current service provision. As engagement progressed, we added nuance to our conversations by raising topics identified by professionals during previous discussions. Professionals have also been anonymised within this report.

Our analysis in the following chapters initially focuses on aspects of CCE most frequently referred to by those we spoke with. Within each chapter, we then develop a more in-depth and refined discussion of contentious issues where there was a lack of consensus, often due to the contrasting but equally important experiences of those who engaged with us.

Background: CYP Voices

The 15 young people we spoke with about their lived experiences of CCE were receiving intervention from statutory or charity organisations with the aim of preventing and diverting young people from involvement with the criminal justice system and associated factors of CCE. Generally, the young people expressed vulnerabilities and issues that much literature in this area has already identified, though it is important to note that these young people do not represent the full spectrum of those who may be at risk of being groomed for CCE. Elsewhere in this report we discuss the lived experiences of professionals working with young people at risk of exploitation, who do provide a broader understanding of CCE.

Fourteen of the CYP we spoke to were living in areas of recognised deprivation within Essex. Three young people described their locale as lacking any type of 'work culture' with a high dependency on welfare, which they felt contributed to the issues their area faced. Many of the young people we spoke to were in alternatives to mainstream education, often following exclusion, and others had been identified as being at risk of exclusion. Several young people had a relative currently serving, or who had previously served, a prison sentence, and some had also been involved in the criminal justice system themselves.

The prevalence of 'gangs', county lines and CCE within areas of recognised deprivation

Young people unanimously reported that 'gangs', county lines and CCE were prevalent in their area. They felt that these were perceived as issues that occurred only in cities but also explained that this was not the case.

'Just because [name of town] isn't London doesn't mean it doesn't have a London attitude...' - Male, 15

Three young people revealed there were 'gangs everywhere' in their town and surrounding areas, with tensions existing between 'territories'. Another young person added that the issue had also been prevalent in his school, and that this was probably a 'widespread' national problem, rather than just a regional one. One participant told us that he knew people who were involved with an infamous 'gang' in the area, who he alleged controlled estates and had stabbed people. Several young people said that girls would often 'date' adult males who sold drugs without always recognising that this was exploitation. Three female participants told us that it was commonplace to be approached by people asking them if they wanted to 'make bread,' which they understood to mean becoming involved in the selling and transportation of drugs. Another young person had been approached by 'dealers' to attack a young person who was on 'their turf', and on other occasions had been asked to 'hold stuff' by dealers. Another young person told us she had previously encountered a 'trap house' (a property used for the sale of illegal drugs) during a period of exploitation by an adult who sold heroin and crack cocaine.

Young people frequently attributed these issues and experiences to poverty and unemployment in their areas and a noticeable increase in the demand for Class A drugs. Some also believed that the amalgamation of these issues in the same place made their areas susceptible to a culture of grooming, with one young person saying people wearing tracksuits are targeted for 'recruitment', especially in areas closest to the epicentre of 'gang territories'.

'While people want a pipe or a zoot, there'll always be someone selling...' - Male, 15

Substance misuse and county lines

Eleven of the young people spoke about often being exposed to drug use in their community, peer group or family. Most of these young people said cannabis use was particularly incessant among students at their school, and the most popular drug sold by the young people recruited to do so.

'Everyone knows a dealer...' Female, 17

'Most weed sellers just sell weed...' - Male, 15

Three young people speculated this was because cannabis is cheaper and easier to obtain than alcohol. Another added that she believed cannabis was calming, and 'not addictive at all'. Three other young people spoke about the use of cocaine and MDMA among their friends or relatives, with one young person's sibling having been hospitalised as a result of drug use. She believed that the people who sold these drugs were usually older, and not the same people who sold cannabis.

Young people were of the position that most county lines operations sold heroin and crack cocaine, which young people selling cannabis were not usually

connected to. However, the young people were aware that such drugs were being sold in their communities and said it was common to see people who were experiencing addiction, which they believed was linked to poverty and unemployment.

'These problems might be because of the poverty and unemployment in the area, maybe. People have got nothing to do or no money to do anything...' - Male, 15

Two young people also said it was common to be approached in their communities to purchase drugs.

Feeling threatened in the community

Nine young people told us they did not feel safe in their local area due to the threat of violence, robbery, assault, and other criminal activity. Three participants told us this was because of tension between rival gangs. Four young people told us that the perceived risk affected their confidence to spend time outdoors in their neighbourhood. For example, two young people said they had friends who they had not seen for several years, and another told us she only left her house to visit her girlfriend. One young person said she needed to leave the house in order to work but felt unsafe when doing so. Two young people told us that, when outside, it was common to be approached by people in their area who would then attempt to steal from them, especially if they were alone and when it was dark in the evening.

One young person told us that a relative had committed a crime which resulted in the whole family being targeted for violent retaliation. The relative was not allowed to enter the town for his own safety, yet the young person and his family continued to be threatened with violence. He told us this threat meant that, like his relative, he had also not gone into the town centre for several years.

'I always have to watch my back...' - Male, 16

Another young person told us that he had been accused of making derogative comments about a person, which had resulted in 'beef' between the two, and subsequently being threatened with violent retribution. For this reason, he told us he rarely left his house alone and when he did, he would take his bike in case he needed to escape quickly.

'Having beef with someone will mean you can't go to certain places and must always be hyperaware...' - Male, 15

One young person told us it was common for men and boys to aim derogatory or threatening comments at young females. While some of the young people told us that they wanted to be able to leave the area when they were old enough, others said they did not want to leave their town because friends and family were there.

Violence and knife crime

Young people told us that fighting was common among their peer group, for respect and protection.

'I would fight anyone with a problem with my brother...' - Female, 17

Three of the young people told us they had been excluded from school for fighting, and another had been questioned by police in relation to fighting. One of these young people told us that having a reputation as someone who fought meant that 'everyone respected' him, and he had previously been approached by 'dealers' to 'stick up some kid who was dealing on their turf'. Young people also told us they had fought to avoid being picked on, or to protect themselves when they had been attacked.

The young people we spoke to were aware of knife crime incidents. Two young people had witnessed stabbings, with one later learning the stabbing had been 'gang' related, and the other young person observing a 'little kid' stabbing someone. Two young people knew of someone who had been stabbed to death. One young person had lost his teenage cousin, who was stabbed during a robbery and another said his adult friend had died in a county lines related stabbing. Another young person knew of a close friend who had recently been stabbed, and one young person told us a relative had almost been stabbed.

Three young people told us they were aware that young people carried knives. Two young people explained that this was not always directly linked to drugs, or county lines, but more often about feeling able to defend themselves if they were attacked. Two participants told us that young people often carry weapons 'just in case', and others explained:

'People carry knives for protection rather than with a plan to do violence. They carry them so they can feel safe...' - Male, 15

'If you've got beef with someone in an area you're going to, you'll need to carry a knife...' - Male, 15

One young person, previously exploited by a county lines gang, told us he had been stabbed three times. At the time, he had been living in London, and went to ask a teacher from his school for help but was instead sent home. Some young people explained they needed to protect themselves because asking for help from the police would make matters worse:

'It's not an option to tell police because you'll be called a snitch and will face repercussions...' - Male, 15

Criminal justice, punishment and protection

The majority of young people had experienced some degree of involvement with the criminal justice system as a perpetrator, victim or witness. Consequently, they expressed complicated feelings about the police and the role policing played in their community. One young person told us:

'I've got no trust in the police, but would trust them if I was going to get stabbed...' - Female, 17

There were intricate dynamics at play that resulted in young people feeling conflicted about the role of policing. For example, young people with relatives who had served, or were still serving prison sentences felt a sense of distrust toward police, as did young people who had been arrested themselves. For some young people, police involvement could be a regular feature of family life. One young person said that his relative's house was often raided in relation to drugs and was angry that police 'knock the door down and trash the place'.

Some young people also felt they were targeted by police because of the way they dressed, their age, or the fact they were male. One young person told us he could 'not sit down in town without being searched' by police, and so avoided town for this reason.

'Nine out of ten searches are just on boys in tracksuits with nothing on them...' - Male, 15

There was also a sense of distrust amongst young people who had been, or were related to, victims of crime. This was due to their belief that the perpetrator's punishment was not severe enough. For example, one young person felt their relative's murderer had not been given a long enough sentence and was troubled by the knowledge the perpetrator was able to watch TV and play games in prison. He was also concerned that the perpetrator's sentence might even be reduced for 'good behaviour'.

'Police aren't harsh enough...' - Male, 17

Another young person told us his family were offered police protection following threats of violence, but the police had not been able to prevent some of these threats being carried out.

Other young people shared the attitude that punishments were often not severe enough to deter young people from being groomed into CCE or other criminal behaviour, including young people who had previously been arrested or questioned. One young person told us that some of his friends were able to 'get out on probation' by 'snitching' on others, and also said that some friends had been required to attend an hourly meeting once a week, which he did not feel was much of a disincentive.

'There is no motivation to not be involved other than the law; and that's not a big concern...' - Male, 15

'If someone's arrested, they're released the next day and back to offending...' Female, 17

One young person felt that the police had 'given up' on her area and would no longer patrol it. However, one young person did feel that police did a good job of keeping his area safe, and another added that she did see a strong police presence in her town centre. One young person told us she would like to see a stronger police presence around housing estates in her town.

Lacking quality leisure time

Young people often told us that where they lived there was a lack of things to do in their free time. This was further compounded by a lack of money to pay for activities, or the sense of feeling unsafe by being outdoors.

'The only thing to do for free is chilling on the street.' - Male, 15

'There isn't much to do other than walk around town and sit down.' - Female, 13

Vulnerabilities: coercive 'choice' and grooming

We recognise that exploited CYP cannot consent to their exploitation, and have been manipulated, groomed, and coerced into involvement. In relation to this, young people spoke about factors they felt could make CYP more vulnerable to exploitation and easier to groom.

Money

Twelve participants cited money as one of the reasons CYP may not recognise exploitation. Most of the young people we spoke to had considered their employment options and were aware that the amount of money that came with apprenticeships or part-time jobs was less than they might be given if they sold or transported drugs.

'Why work part-time in a shop? A 13-year-old can make more than an adult…' - Male, 15

'It's the easiest way to make the most money… 40 hours a week on minimum wage is not a good enough alternative…' – Female, 17

While the ability to buy designer clothes and other luxury items was cited as part of the reason young people could be drawn to CCE, most young people spoke about the role money could play in supporting families living in poverty. These young people did not display a carefree relationship with money, which might be expected among most adolescents, but often regarded making money as a duty and responsibility, in the same way that a financially independent adult might. For example, one young person who had previously been criminally exploited through county lines told us he had 'made' up to £1,000 a week, which he used to support his younger siblings.

'People get involved to make money if their family ain't got none…' - Male, 16

'People might need the money, plus it pays more than a lot of other things…It's quick money, cash in hand…' - Male, 15

For this reason, CYP felt that once a young person was involved in the act of selling or transporting drugs in exchange for money it would be difficult for them to cease contact with their exploiters.

'If they like the life, why would they change? If they make a thousand pounds a day?' - Male, 17

The young people in our study were often aware of the financial model for selling and transporting drugs, and three female participants told us it was not unusual to be approached by people they did not know and be asked if they wanted to 'make bread' through such means. Another young person explained that selling cannabis and cocaine are less lucrative than selling heroin and crack cocaine, as one could 'only expect to make £20 profit from seven grams of cannabis'.

After giving extensive consideration to potential means of making money, young people frequently told us that 'legitimate' routes to earning were often inaccessible to them until they turned 18.

'When you're a kid there's no way for income… if a friend shows you a hundred pound you're going to want it…' - Male, 15

Young people were also often conscious that family members who worked in legitimate employment could still live in relative poverty. For example, one young person told us that a relative who worked full-time only had £50 a week 'for himself' once all his bills had been paid.

'Dealing pays so much more than minimum wage…' - Female, 17

Gaining a sense of status and belonging

Eleven young people told us that being part of a 'gang' was viewed, in some parts of youth culture, as being glamorous or 'cool', which they thought could explain why young people from more financially-secure backgrounds were also susceptible to CCE.

Some people are from a good home but want to be cool…' – Female, 15

'It's seen as a lifestyle people like. All rich kids want to be road men, all road men want to be rich kids. People make music that glamorises the lifestyle and rich kids want to be a part of that. But it's not a game, it's real life…' – Male, 15

Involvement with criminal gangs was also thought to give CYP a sense of self-importance, as well as respect from their peers.

'You're not no one…' – Female, 13

'Girls find it hot if a man has a knife, money and expensive clothes, and acts gangster…' - Male, 17

Two young people we spoke with connected this sense of status to having money, with owning designer clothes often seen as a symbol of wealth. One young person, speaking about a friend, told us:

'He's not got that kind of money... if someone's got something he wants, he feels less of a person. He doesn't want to walk around in Primark clothes. Everyone sees it as a terrible thing to not have money...' - Male, 15

Three young people told us that CCE grooming tactics could also provide CYP with a sense of belonging, as feeling wanted and needed could be a powerful draw.

'Money's just the cherry on the top...' - Male, 15

'You're like one of them...like chosen family... It was flattering to have attention...' Female, 13

Similarly, a young person said that those who felt they were unpopular, or did not fit in, could be particularly attracted to this sense of belonging.

'Kids who aren't cool look up to these people...' – Female, 15

One young person explained that when she began secondary school, she initially maintained good grades and never got into trouble. However, she soon made friends with 'older people' who she socialised with outside of school. She soon became unconcerned with doing well in school and by the time she was put on a school pastoral support plan she explained feeling more interested in being 'powerful', adding:

'I liked the power...' Female, 13

Feeling protected, low self-worth and normalcy

Two young people said that if they felt unsafe when outside in their neighbourhood or at home, being involved in a 'gang' could allow them to feel a sense of protection through association with people older than them, who may carry weapons or 'have reputations'.

'You get involved because when you're with them you feel protected...' – Female, 13

Some young people felt that those who perceived themselves as having few opportunities could encourage an attitude of having 'nothing to lose'.

'...they ain't got no life...' - Female, 15

'Teenagers feel that their life isn't worth a lot and that they won't get anywhere. It's just the way this generation is...' - Male, 17

One participant felt that young people who experienced crime and violence as a 'normal' factor of life, due to exposure in their home life or neighbourhood, were more likely to be drawn to the grooming tactics used in CCE. A young person told us:

'You copy your parents and friends; if your best friend sells...' - Male, 17

Low awareness of grooming

Young people often perceived involvement with 'gangs' or other forms of criminal activity as being their own choice, rather than a form of exploitation. This caused a perception that being part of a 'gang' was an option, a temporary arrangement, and something young people could exit safely at any time. One young person explained that some people might need to be involved in criminal activity forever, but young people with more opportunities, such as education, could simply view involvement as a stop-gap until they were old enough to get a 'well-paid job' of 'at least £20,000 per year'.

Several young people in our study did not believe that some of the behaviour they had been exposed to, associated with young people selling drugs, was to do with 'gangs' or CCE. Instead, they thought the people who had exploited them were their friends, and therefore did not believe that anything bad would happen to them.

Much of the existing literature on CCE acknowledges an overlap with child sexual exploitation [8]. Some of the female young people we spoke with also viewed romantic relationships with older people as a choice and therefore did not see the dynamic as problematic or exploitative. For example, one young person told us the headteacher of her school asked if she felt it was appropriate when young people formed relationships with older people and 'gang' members.

Her response was:

'depends on the person...depends on how worthy you are...' - Female, 15

Another young person told us that when she was younger, an 18-year-old man had supplied her with drugs and bought her expensive gifts, such as stays at hotels. The man, who sold heroin and crack cocaine, also had a 'nice car', yet at the time she did not realise that she was being groomed and exploited, but instead felt that spending time with him was 'glamorous'. She said it was common for girls to be supplied with drugs by older boys and men, but that girls, such as herself, cannot always identify the signs of grooming without parental advice.

Debt bondage

Existing literature on models of CCE often mention the prevalence of debt bondage as a method used by exploiters to further trap young people within their exploitation [2]. While young people may initially be groomed into CCE by the promise of money or expensive goods, in exchange for the selling or transportation of drugs, exploiters may then arrange for the young person to be robbed of the money or drugs they are carrying to create a debt that will need to be repaid. The exploiter then instructs the young person to continue to work for them for free, as a form of fictional repayment for the exploiter's fabricated loss of profit. Young people were often aware that debts occurred but seemed largely unaware that they might be intentionally created by exploiters. Most young people believed that debt arose from irresponsibility or carelessness, rather than deliberate exploitation. When we asked one young person about the possibility of a CYP losing money or drugs, she said:

'[that person] gotta pay it back. If you lose a ticket of coke you'll be cheffed. Deep shit. Big L. It's the cat's loss...' - Female, 15

Another young person believed that if someone got in debt it would only be right for them to pay it back within a reasonable timeframe.

He was aware of the concept of debt bondage, but said young people were only exploited in this way because they did not 'work with their friends':

'There is a difference between people that want you to make money or want you to make them money...' - Male, 15

This prompted us to ask him how a young person could tell the difference between those types of people, to which he said:

'You can't tell the difference until it's too late. You will only learn with time.... it's a risk you have to take, but life's a risk...' - Male, 15

'Getting out'

One young person, who had previously been criminally exploited, spoke about the difficulties of trying to leave his exploiters. Having first lived in London, his local authority rehomed him in Essex, hoping that the distance would prevent his exploiters from following him. However, he told us he was tracked down by the exploiters, who continuously contacted and threatened him. Eventually he approached a member of staff at his college in Essex, who referred him to a gang-specific intervention programme, wherein he was mentored by an adult who had previously been involved in a 'gang', which he identified as helping him cut ties with the 'gang'.

Another young person told us that exiting exploitation is difficult, as it is easy to get involved but difficult to 'get out'.

'They make it awkward. They might retaliate...' - Female, 13

Another young person said that those who are drawn into CCE by the sense of protection may sometimes be aware of the risks, but still feel it is their best option at the time.

'...deep down they know they aren't protected...' - Female, 15

'Victim today, perpetrator yesterday, witness the day before': categorisation and labelling in CCE

In early 2013, 'systematic failures' were identified around safeguarding CYP who had been sexually exploited, in what later became known as the Rotherham Abuse Scandal [23]. This contributed to a nationwide push to recognise exploited CYP as victims and, as a result, the language of safeguarding moved away from terms such as 'children involved in prostitution' to 'child sexual exploitation' to dispel any connotations of consent from CYP [24]. Since then, several professionals working with CYP have demanded the same approach be taken towards CCE. In early 2019, the Children's Commissioner [8] warned that the call to learn from the past failings regarding child sexual exploitation (CSE), including treating CYP as victims instead of criminals, was not being heeded in response to CCE:

Tackling gang exploitation needs a paradigm change in thinking, which stops treating these children as criminals responsible for their own situation and instead sets out to protect them (pp. 3-4).

Seeing CYP as victims

There are myriad of reasons why CYP who are criminally exploited are victims, and not perpetrators, of crime. This is further explained in the Southend, Essex and Thurrock (SET) *Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures* [1] which states that a CYP cannot give consent to being exploited, and that CYP 'do not make informed choices to enter or remain in exploitative circumstances' (pp. 246-247). Furthermore, under the Children Act 2004 [25], exploited CYP are identified as needing services, which might require immediate protection in some instances. For reasons such as these, treating exploited CYP in a criminal fashion can fail to safeguard them.

Nationally, the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* [9] is increasingly utilised to demonstrate that criminally exploited CYP are victims. The definitions of 'slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour' (section 1) outlined by the act are relevant to CYP who have been forced to work for county lines gangs, held against their will in cuckooed properties (often homes of vulnerable adults taken over and used to sell drugs), or controlled with threats. This act also defines human trafficking as arranging or facilitating the travel of another person with a view to that person being exploited, regardless of whether or not that person consents, as is the case for CYP who travel out of their local area to transfer money, drugs or weapons for county lines gangs.

We found that the professionals we spoke to in Essex, across all levels, were wholly on board with the approach of recognising that exploited children were victims. A great deal of work is being carried out across the county to enforce this message, including training for professionals; procedural updates; and multi-agency approaches, yet it was felt there was still some way to go. One professional explained:

'The victim/perpetrator dichotomy is one of the biggest issues...'

Two statutory professionals further explained that criminalising a CYP who had been exploited can risk furthering their exploitation. For example, if police arrested a CYP and seized drugs, money or weapons, the CYP could then be indebted to their exploiter, meaning:

'there's no escape for them...'

It is not uncommon for CYP to struggle in recognising themselves as victims of exploitation and in need of protection [7]. Many of the CYP we spoke to felt that those in their age group who sold or transported drugs did so largely through their own choice. Professionals told us that CYP who did not realise that they had been exploited often considered themselves criminals and feared speaking out through the belief that they would be criminalised and imprisoned. One of these professionals went on to say that CYP who are criminally exploited may have previously broken the law, or have breached an existing youth offending order, and, as a result, might be unlikely to trust services with details of their exploitation.

Striving for parity with Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

It was felt by some professionals that victims of CCE were still not recognised as being as vulnerable or requiring the same level of support as victims of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), suggesting a uniform approach to all forms of CYP exploitation is required. For example, a child victim of sexual exploitation may have been previously referred to as a 'child prostitute', implying some degree of choice, whereas professionals now refer to CYP as victims of CSE.

A statutory professional also said that within CSE, categories of risk refer to the perpetrator, as opposed to the victim, which further removes any potential blame from the child.

One professional believed that a unified definition of child exploitation is needed, explaining that the current definition of CSE comes from the Department for Education whereas the definition of CCE comes from the Home Office. This professional felt there would be value in 'tallying up' the different aims of these organisations to create a shared understanding of child exploitation between safeguarding procedures and the criminal justice system.

Decriminalising the language of CCE

For many professionals, an important part of recognising exploited CYP as victims was decriminalising the language used to describe them. Terms such as 'gang member' or 'gang affiliated' were said to imply a sense of choice and therefore blame in CYP's exploitation, which could act to prevent them from being seen and supported as victims. One professional pointed out that the etymology of the word 'gang' had criminal, racial and gender connotations that not only implied prejudice as to who might be 'in a gang', but could also cause victims to be missed who did not comply with this stereotype. This professional added that such an understanding of 'gangs' might cause organisations to spend resources on targeting demographic groups they think are likely be at risk of exploitation whereas, in his experience, the reality was different to stereotypical expectations:

'Girls are just as active as boys…'

Several professionals raised a further tension between the labels of 'trouble-maker' and 'troubled-child'. These professionals explained the focus should be on the causes of behaviour, as opposed to punishing the consequences. One professional felt that within criminal justice, exploitation could be confused with anti-social behaviour and that there is a need to define the difference between a CYP who is 'naughty' and a CYP who is being exploited.

Struggling to get the balance right

Numerous professionals pointed out that the binary labels of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' are rarely as fixed and neatly defined as is often depicted:

'You have a young person who might be a perpetrator today, but was a victim yesterday, and a witness the day before that…'

This is addressed in the Southend, Essex and Thurrock *Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures* [1], which states:

Potentially a child involved with a gang or with serious violence could be both a victim and a perpetrator. This requires professionals to assess and support his/her welfare and well-being needs at the same time as assessing and responding in a criminal justice capacity (p. 476).

Professionals who identified this as an issue acknowledged that a criminal justice response was still sometimes required alongside a safeguarding response to stop acts of abuse and violence carried out by CYP and protect other victims. A statutory professional added to this by urging that perpetrators of abuse (sexual or violent) should not be ignored, even when the perpetrator is a CYP, though felt that trauma-informed therapeutic interventions were more appropriate than criminal interventions.

This need for nuance carried over in the way some professionals viewed the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The NRM is a framework which identifies potential victims of modern slavery through 'first responder' referrals and helps inform a picture of nationwide exploitation. In 2019, referrals to the mechanism had increased by 52% from the previous year, thought partly to be a result of increased awareness of the NRM and modern slavery, with 43% of referrals pertaining to minors [26]. Referral to the NRM can prevent CYP from being criminalised by recognising them as victims of exploitation, but some professionals told us that an unintended consequence of this could result in CYP 'not being treated criminally when there is a need'. Another professional perceived that not being able to respond with criminal justice interventions could mean CYP who exploit other CYP could view themselves as 'untouchable' by police and continue with their exploitation.

However, a statutory professional told us that while she was aware these concerns existed; she had

seen no evidence to suggest a CYP referred to the NRM became 'untouchable' to the criminal justice system. Another statutory professional said that ultimately, regardless of whether a person was considered a victim or a perpetrator, everyone involved in the sale and transportation of drugs, whether 'a vulnerable person who's been cuckooed or a hardened criminal', was at risk of extreme violence, so services must therefore attempt to prevent this risk at all levels.

Youth violence and knife crime

Essex Police reported a 22% rise in serious crimes involving knives in the year leading up to September 2019 [27] and 10 professionals also told us they had seen increasing amounts of peer-on-peer violence and knife-carrying through their experiences of working with CYP over several years. Crucially, this group of professionals also indicated that, from their perspective, the prevalence of these issues remains on the rise. It is important to note here that reported knife crime has increased nationwide, and the overall crime rate in Essex is lower than the national average [27].

A CYP who carries a weapon is at risk of significant harm to themselves and others [1]. This places schools, who have a duty to protect the safety of all students, in a troublesome position connected to the disparate consequences between the 'victim/perpetrator' labels already discussed in this report. School exclusion is a likely course of action faced by a CYP found in possession of a knife at school, yet CYP who have been excluded from school are at significantly greater risk of CCE. Ofsted [10] has stated that 'it is clear that children need help and support to prevent them becoming either victims or perpetrators of knife crime' (p. 6). In the sections below, we examine the issue of knife-carrying among CYP in instances where it is both related to and separate from CCE; how schools are trying to manage the issue; different approaches schools can take toward exclusion; and knife-carrying in the wider community of Essex.

Overlap and disconnect with CCE

In methods of exploitation, including 'gangs' and county lines, violence can be used to intimidate, control [8], establish status and access resources such as money or drugs [2]. Violence, and threats of violence, are also used to prevent victims of exploitation from reporting crimes to the authorities and preventing CYP from escaping CCE [28]. However, several professionals found it important to emphasise that youth violence and knife crime were not always connected to CCE, and that CYP who were not criminally exploited still sometimes carried knives. They believed it was important to treat youth violence and knife crime as an issue that could be detached from CCE, to understand why CYP carry knives outside of any connection to 'gangs' or county lines.

'The bigger picture is youth violence…'

Several professionals felt that, particularly within recognised areas of deprivation, knife-carrying and youth crime had become somewhat normalised to CYP:

'Carrying weapons and smoking cannabis has become a new social norm; a total social shift in what is acceptable…'

'It's an entire social shift in how young people are acting and should not be focused on drugs and county lines…'

In the section below we seek to understand why this might be the case.

Fear and coercion

Professionals told us that CYP who carry knives, whether linked to CCE or not, do so through fear for their safety or peer pressure. Professionals believed that CYP carried knives as a form of self-protection, particularly when going to areas they deemed to be unsafe, or unfamiliar.

'Students do say they carry knives in the community as they provide a sense of protection…'

The SET *Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures* [1] have expanded on this:

Fear and a need for self-protection is a key motivation for children to carry a weapon – it affords a child a feeling of power. Neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation and social exclusion generally have the highest rates of knife and gun crime. (p. 474)

This, again, gives rise to the issue that statutory interventions can treat someone either solely as a victim or a perpetrator, which we look at below specifically in relation to schools.

Victim or perpetrator

Our chapter 'Victim today, perpetrator yesterday, witness the day' examines the victim/perpetrator dichotomy that statutory professionals could encounter when trying to understand the best course of action for CYP who are criminally exploited. Our study also found that a similar dilemma was faced by education professionals when a CYP was found to be carrying a knife in school, whether this was because of CCE or not.

The same set of values used to explain why CYP are victims of CCE, and not perpetrators, can be applied in regarding CYP who carry knives as victims: CYP cannot make informed choices; CYP who may be fearful for their lives require protection, not punishment; CYP who have been pressured to carry knives cannot consent to exploitation. At the same time, CYP who carry knives in school pose a risk to other CYP whose safety must also be considered; the presence of a knife in school can place other pupils and staff at risk of injury, or may compel others to carry knives in response to perceived risk.

Carrying knives, CCE, and school exclusion

A common course of action taken against CYP who pose a risk to the safety of others in school is exclusion. While we wish to be clear that not all CYP who carry knives are criminally exploited, the issues become harder to separate when considering them alongside school exclusion. This is highlighted by the following correlates: CYP who carry knives are seven times more likely to have been excluded or suspended than those who have not carried knives; CYP excluded from mainstream education are among those at greatest risk from CCE; CYP who are criminally exploited by 'gangs' are over five times more likely to have been excluded or suspended than CYP who are not exploited by 'gangs' [8].

Furthermore, when CYP are excluded from mainstream education they may be referred to alternative provision such as pupil referral units (PRUs). CYP who attend PRUs are almost twice as likely to know someone who has carried a knife, and also twice as likely to know someone in a 'gang', compared to CYP in mainstream education [10]. A national study found that almost two thirds of a sample of active 'gang members' had been permanently excluded [1].

The reasons why CYP who have been excluded are at greater risk of CCE are multifaceted. For example, a CYP may be excluded in connection to CCE; a statutory professional told us that exploiters manipulated CYP telling them their parents, schools and the government do not have CYP's best interests at heart. Excluding a CYP can inadvertently reinforce this. This echoes research by the Office of the Children's Commissioner [8], which states:

Gangs often exploit the response of agencies to help them gain control of children. For example, when children are arrested or excluded from schools, gangs tell the child that they now have no prospects of getting an education or normal job, and therefore their only choice is continuing with the gang (p. 11).

CYP enrolled in PRUs often attend shorter school days than would be typical in mainstream education. It is thought that these shorter hours of attendance can increase their levels of exposure to CCE as their time spent within a supervised environment could be decreased. This may be further compounded if parents are working longer hours than CYP are attending PRUs and are therefore less able to monitor the whereabouts of CYP. Therefore, it is not only that CYP attending PRUs may be easier to exploit, but that CYP who were exploited before being excluded are at risk of increased exploitation. Ofsted [10] writes:

One factor that schools, LAs [local authorities] and central government need to consider further is that children who are being groomed by gangs to deal drugs and/or carry knives may be coached by dangerous adults to get themselves excluded. Parents told us that their children had been encouraged by adult gang members to carry weapons into school for the sole purpose of triggering an exclusion (pp. 18-19).

Approaches to knife-carrying and exclusion in school

Staff from four of the schools we spoke to told us there had been incidents of knife-carrying among CYP who attended their school. While the numbers of CYP found in possession of knives was considered minimal, professionals perceived this issue to be increasingly prevalent over the past few years.

Schools had taken safety precautions to tackle this issue, which included obtaining the right to search and purchasing a metal detection wand. Schools also spoke of a preventative approach that informed CYP of knife crime and its consequences. We detail the examples professionals gave us of knife crime awareness for CYP in our 'Raising awareness of CCE' section.

Some of the schools we spoke to in this study had a 'zero tolerance' policy toward knife-carrying, meaning any CYP found carrying a knife would be excluded. Staff from one of these schools

acknowledged that CYP carrying knives were likely to be victims as well as perpetrators but told us it was important to take a 'hard line' approach for multiple reasons. One reason was to consider the immediate safety of other CYP at the school, another was the belief that a 'zero tolerance' policy made it clear to CYP that there would be consequences for carrying, thus acting as a deterrent.

Several professionals in our study worked with CYP who had been excluded for carrying knives. We were told that the 'zero tolerance' approach could sometimes unintentionally place a CYP at greater risk, for example, if professionals did recognise that exclusion may be detrimental to a CYP. For example, we were told that one CYP who had been excluded had been carrying a knife to cut their food with.

In today's education system, exclusion is recommended as a 'last resort' [29, p.6]. Exclusion is also actively discouraged, as any school who permanently excludes a CYP must pay a sum of £4,000 to the local authority and has a responsibility to arrange alternative education for this CYP. Professionals from a PRU told us that schools could make 'positive referrals' to the unit, which in theory meant the referred pupil was expected to return to the school after a period of time and maintain contact while away. However, these professionals felt that many 'positivereferrals' did not have a different outcome to exclusions. They told us it was rare for referred pupils to return to the school or for the school to maintain contact with them, but by making a positive referral the school did not have to pay the £4,000 exclusion fee as the pupil remained on the school's roll.

Staff from one mainstream school told us the school had not permanently excluded anyone for six years, and instead referred CYP to alternative provision, such as PRUs, but emphasised that the CYP's attendance was monitored by pastoral staff who also remained involved in safeguarding matters. Staff from this school said they also tried to maintain familiarity of professional personnel for pupils referred to alternative provision by ensuring access to the same school counsellor. Staff felt that this approach allowed the school to ensure the CYP was still 'safe and looked after' even when they were moved to alternative provision.

Ofsted [10] recommend that 'whether schools have a flexible approach or a more hard line approach, all contributory factors as to why a child has carried a knife into school should be considered before they carry out an exclusion' (p. 56). Some professionals in our study echoed this, but for others, the issue remained that a school would come under great scrutiny and potential sanction if a CYP who had previously been found in possession of a knife, but had been allowed to remain in school, had then injured another CYP.

Outside of school

While this section of our report has largely focused on the school setting, due to the complexities inherent to overlaps in knife crime, CCE and exclusion, it is important to acknowledge that youth violence tends to be most common between 4-6pm; the hours directly after students leave school for the day [10]. For this reason, a professional working for a national charity told us that parts of London had funded after school clubs with the explicit intent to reduce violence.

Beyond the school gates, CYP carrying knives may face criminal justice interventions. For purposes of public safety, we were told that policing teams have taken numerous approaches to reducing the possession of knives in the community, which has included knife sweeps of public areas, metal-detecting knife arches at the entrance to community settings such as parks and colleges, and knife amnesty bins positioned at police stations.

This is an ongoing challenge, as those in possession of knives regularly adapt their methods of evading detection. For example, professionals told us people had begun hiding knives to avoid being charged if stopped and searched. Professionals from a CYP charity told us they were aware of boys giving their knives to girls to carry, as they believed girls were less likely to be charged with an offence. How CYP are treated when found outside of school in possession of a knife is discussed more extensively in our section 'Victim today, perpetrator yesterday, witness the day before'.

Raising awareness of CCE

During our conversations, professionals spoke about the importance of raising awareness of CCE across all levels of society in order to spot the signs of exploitation and safeguard CYP from harm. This echoes national recommendations that state the importance of society-wide awareness [7], including CYP, their parents and guardians [10], the professionals who work with them [1] and members of the public.

We asked professionals about CCE awareness-raising provision in Essex and they pointed out that the provider market is currently saturated, which has resulted in different messages being promoted by different organisations, via contrasting styles of delivery such as theatrical productions, talks from former 'gang members', and sessions by statutory organisations. Some professionals raised concerns that private companies could promote a culture of fear, often referred to as 'scaremongering', which some professionals believed to be a tactic to create a continued need for these companies' services. Other professionals felt that these services were valuable in engaging CYP through establishing trust and credibility. These issues will be discussed in this section of the report.

Raising awareness among CYP

Existing provision

Professionals described a large provider market in Essex that could be confusing to navigate, inconsistent in its messaging, and expensive to access. Within this study we learned of 30 different organisations in Essex offering awareness-raising services to CYP around CCE and associated issues, though this is not a definitive list of provision. Eighteen of these organisations were statutory services such as police, local authorities, and community safety partnerships; seven were private companies, whose services were usually commissioned by statutory organisations; and five were charities working with CYP, offenders, or both.

Most of these organisations offered awareness-raising through school assemblies; though some offered classroom resources, workshops, film showings and theatrical productions. Most sessions were targeted at CYP attending secondary school, though some catered to primary schools or colleges. Most organisations delivered these programmes in a school setting, though some had occasionally delivered programmes to youth groups and sports clubs. Provision covered different aspects of CCE, but mostly pertained to 'gangs' and county lines, knife crime, and grooming tactics used across CCE and CSE. Some programmes took an internet-safety focus, and others dealt with drugs and alcohol awareness.

Most of these awareness sessions were facilitated by professionals such as teachers, police officers and youth workers, although five organisations used facilitators with direct lived experience of offending, CCE, knife crime and/or substance misuse. Four of the organisations using lived experience were companies founded by the person who shared their lived experience in their sessions.

All schools who participated in our study had used assemblies to address the topic, though these were provided in varying ways such as utilising school staff as facilitators, using external 'gang'-specific speakers, or using statutory organisations, with some schools using a combination of these. Schools had also raised awareness of CCE through external theatrical productions, workshops provided by external organisations, film showings, and PHSE (Personal, Social and Health Education) classes.

Quality and effectiveness of provision

Overall, professionals believed that these awareness sessions were informative to CYP but held differing opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of different provisions. For example, there was disagreement among professionals about the effectiveness of sessions facilitated by speakers with lived experience of CCE, 'gangs' and county lines. Some professionals felt that speakers with lived experience had more credibility among young people and were able to demonstrate that their happiness and wellbeing had improved as a result of exiting exploitation and offending, and professionals praised the impact these presentations had on CYP. A professional from one such organisation told us that facilitators with lived experience were in a good position to answer CYP's questions, and dispel myths about 'gangs'. This chimed with Ofsted [10] findings at a more national level:

Some schools favoured using outside agencies to lead on the curriculum in this area and see these agencies as having greater credibility among young

people, better knowledge of the subject area and, as a result, having more impact on children's learning (p. 28).

However, three professionals believed that these sessions could inadvertently glamorise CCE because of the perceived 'coolness' of the speaker. Furthermore, it was thought that using a speaker with lived experience could suggest to CYP that it was possible to make large sums of money by breaking the law and then turn their lives around without consequence. One statutory professional, who generally found speakers with lived experience useful, said that some speakers would talk about experiences they had lived through several decades ago and it was said that this reduced the relatability the speaker could have among CYP.

Several professionals told us they were wary that newer, private companies could unnecessarily create fear around the topics discussed in order to extend the demand for their services. However, it was sometimes thought that these services were still preferable to more reputable services, which had been externally evaluated and approved, as it was felt that these could be 'London-centric' and did not necessarily represent the experiences of CYP in Essex.

One school had hosted a session delivered by members of a local football club on the topic of knife crime, which was deemed successful. It was believed that the football club held credibility among the young people, but without the inadvertent glamorisation of the issues discussed. Other provision that professionals found effective included a day programme for Year 6 students on safety across a range of topics, a session by former police staff, and work carried out by a children's charity on awareness of grooming.

Professionals often expressed that awareness-raising sessions, across organisations, could employ 'scare tactics', such as graphic images or descriptions. Two professionals emphasised that these tactics do not conform to the recommended trauma-informed approach and are also proven to be ineffective. As the Early Intervention Foundation [16] found:

Deterrence-based approaches generally attempt to deter youth from criminal behaviour through scare tactics or confrontational techniques, which are intended to make them realise the negative consequences and harsh realities of that behaviour. Several reviews of these types of juvenile awareness programmes, using high-quality studies, have consistently found that they increase youths' offending (p. 21).

We also learned about a film that was available to be shown in secondary schools across the county that portrayed lived experience of online grooming. The person depicted in the film had experienced exploitation at age 14, but a professional said it was frustrating that the film had received a certificate-15 which could seem like a missed opportunity to raise awareness among younger CYP.

While all five of the schools that participated in this study had used CCE awareness-raising provision, professionals found that there were a number of barriers that prevented other schools from doing the same. For example, it was sometimes thought some schools feared that raising this topic could imply that the school was admitting to having an exploitation problem, which could harm their reputation. It was also said that some schools could reject provision in the belief that CCE was not a risk among their pupils. Finally, several of the awareness offers came with cost implications for schools and it was believed that schools either did not wish to spend money in this way or could not afford to do so.

Further need

Going forward, several professionals wanted to see provision extending beyond the scope of a one-off assembly or play. It was sometimes considered that this was not enough to raise awareness of CCE significantly among CYP. For example, two professionals said that while CYP often enjoyed theatrical productions, such plays could have a 'hit and run' effect by raising awareness of a concerning topic without necessarily providing a sufficient structure of support and signposting. The concern was that this could potentially result in education professionals fielding questions from pupils and parents pertaining to an area outside of their remit of expertise. These professionals believed there was a need to extend CCE awareness into safe and honest discussions among pupils, such as embedding the topic into other parts of school learning. One professional suggested that

awareness of exploitation should be engrained in a whole-school approach in order for it to become part of CYP's critical thinking skills.

Eight professionals across statutory and voluntary services stated that schools were expected to raise awareness around a growing number of topics. One professional even heard that an argument made against external organisations providing CCE awareness was the expectation for schools to deliver this themselves.

'The challenge is that teachers have mounting duties and responsibilities...'

'Teachers are being pushed and burdened...'

Education professionals told us that they would like to see more awareness-raising in the wider community, outside of school. They also stated a need for increased resource, both capacity and finance, to enable schools to facilitate these demands. Others thought that CCE awareness should be included in the PSHE curriculum to ensure all schools were engaging with the topic.

Overall, professionals expressed a clear need for a more simplified provision offer in the county. At present, with so many organisations offering their services to schools, professionals wanted a clear understanding of effectiveness, value for money, long-term sustainability, and messaging. It was also believed that a streamlined approach could ensure a greater parity of information and messaging received by CYP across different schools.

Awareness raising for parents and carers

For parents to safeguard their children against the risks of exploitation it is important for them to be equipped with an awareness of the signs of grooming and exploitation. Ofsted [10] found that, when speaking to parents of children who had been criminally exploited:

None of the parents had considered that their children were being criminally exploited because none of them had heard of county lines. They all believed they would have been able to prevent their children perpetrating or becoming victims of knife crime if they had had more information about its causes and contexts (pp. 29-30). Ofsted has recommended that all schools consider 'how well they are alerting parents to the dangers of knife crime, its causes and the preceding signs of exploitation'.

Education professionals in our study said that parental awareness of CCE was varied. Some parents were considered 'quite knowledgeable,' others were thought to know that 'something was wrong' without necessarily being able to identify exploitation, and others were seen as having 'no idea'. Generally, these professionals claimed that parents were 'often unaware of the dangers' of CCE or 'unequipped' to deal with exploitation.

Professionals from a CYP charity told us that parents needed to know the right course of action to take if they were concerned about their child, explaining that some parents were hesitant to contact services. especially as they knew these services were stretched and felt worried about 'making a fuss'. Three professionals believed that working parents could have a reduced understanding of where CYP were, or what they were doing, during working hours. For example, parents who may leave early and arrive home late, or parents who carry out night-shift work could be unaware of CYP's actions outside of school hours. One professional pointed out that this could make pupils from PRUs particularly vulnerable given that these pupils often received fewer hours of schooling than mainstream education, meaning there was more time where they are not in school but not with their parents.

'Parents don't realise their kids have double lives...'

It was thought that, as well as raising awareness of the risks CYP can be exposed to, parents needed to know how and when to report a missing episode, how to gather evidence and intelligence, and who to share this information with.

Existing provision

Professionals in this study mentioned 16 organisations that provided awareness-raising for parents. Most of these organisations overlapped with those mentioned above, and again comprised of a mixture of statutory, voluntary, and private companies. As with CYP provision, many of these organisations presented an assembly-style talk to parents or showed a film or play.

Two schools described their own provision for parents on the topic. One of these schools told us

they were working to ensure parents were aware of CCE and hoped this would upskill parents to become better judges of risk. When pupils joined the school in Year 7, a presentation by a children's charity on keeping children safe was incorporated into the parents' welcome event, and an internet safety talk was delivered as part of parents' evening. This school also produced a safety update newsletter for parents, with the intention of 'drip-feeding' information to avoid creating unnecessary panic. Another school also provided an annual online safety session for parents.

Quality and effectiveness of provision

Overall, professionals found that these sessions were useful to parents but believed that the biggest challenge was non-attendance of the parents for whom its sessions were considered to be most useful.

'The parents who should come never do...'

One school told us that they had prevented young people from being drawn into CCE by working closely with parents via face-to-face meetings and phone calls, but this relied on a degree of cooperation from the parents. Another school told us that parent involvement was the biggest success factor in their work to safeguard CYP at risk of CCE, but said that some parents could be in denial that these risks were present and did not deem it necessary to attend awareness sessions. As these awareness sessions were usually hosted in schools, education professionals told us it could be a barrier for parents who felt negatively about the education system.

Going forward

Professionals generally believed that more awareness-raising among parents was necessary. One professional said that engaging with grandparents was also important, stating it was often grandparents who stepped in if a parent-child relationship broke down. Some education professionals told us that their school had previously provided parenting classes but that budget cuts had seen an end to this. They believed that there was a need for these resources to return in order to upskill parents. It was also considered important to provide sessions in a non-judgemental environment, with professionals explaining parents could often experience a sense of blame if their child had been exploited, which we look at in more detail in our 'Relational safeguarding: working with parents and guardians' section.

Awareness raising for professionals working with CYP

Many statutory and voluntary sectors work with CYP, such as health and social care, education, and criminal justice. Equipping these professionals with CCE awareness enhances the likelihood of the signs of grooming and exploitation being spotted.

Existing provision

Professionals in our study mentioned 17 organisations that provided awareness-raising for professionals working with CYP on CCE and associated risks. This comprised of statutory services, private companies, and a charity with some overlap with the providers mentioned above. However, unlike the awareness-raising provision for children and parents, awareness-raising for professionals more often took the form of training sessions and presentations, or conferences. Offers also included toolkits and resource packs, a theatrical production, and a day event for teachers and pupils.

Professionals told us that these organisations delivered awareness-raising across government, police, social care, education, and the third sector. We did not hear of awareness-raising sessions delivered to health professionals, though this is not to say this does not occur.

Quality and effectiveness of provision

A statutory professional told us that it was important not to confuse the workforce by separating the topics of CCE, CSE, 'gangs' and county lines, human trafficking and modern slavery, but to acknowledge them all within the shared language of exploitation and safeguarding. This professional added that by focusing on exploitation as an overarching theme, professionals could understand that the risks of CCE do not relate solely to 'gangs' and county lines. Three educational professionals said that awareness-raising had its limitations, explaining that they had attended many talks and conferences but felt that there was

not a clear, concise message about the action they were required to take around CCE.

Going forward

A statutory professional stated a need for professionals to be aware of contextual safeguarding. She said that safeguarding around interfamilial abuse is 'well understood and ingrained' among professionals, but contextual safeguarding – which considers safeguarding risks beyond a CYP's family – requires further training and development, adding that contextual safeguarding does not currently fit neatly into established safeguarding processes.

Awareness raising for the wider community

Professionals in our study described efforts to raise awareness of CCE within the wider community, particularly focusing on local commercial businesses and statutory services that could be well-placed to witness CCE including; fast food chains, transport operators and waste workers. It was believed that this would enhance the likelihood of exploitation being spotted and acted on appropriately. Nationally, a multi-agency report recommended community awareness as best practice in preventing and ceasing exploitation [7].

Existing provision

Across our study, professionals told us about eight targeted projects designed to raise awareness of CCE in the wider community. These interventions were again provided by statutory bodies, charities and a private company. All except one of these awareness-raising offers took the form of training sessions and presentations. The audience of professionals in the wider community was vast, and included: fast food restaurant staff, hotel staff, licensed taxi drivers, waste collectors, local business owners, car rental businesses, and transport providers including cleaners, engineers, ticket collectors and coffee shops.

We also heard of a national charity campaign that came to Essex, aimed at raising awareness of county lines and reporting information. The campaign vehicle targeted three areas of Essex identified by police where staff spoke to members of the public about county lines. Part of the campaign included advertisements on Spotify, and in washrooms and service stations (due to the association with motorways and county lines activity).

Quality and effectiveness of provision

The charity campaign mentioned above was perceived to be effective as it coincided with an increase in reporting of heroin, cocaine and county lines. A professional from the charity stated that the Spotify advert had reached approximately 181,000 listeners, over 90% of whom did not skip past the advert. This professional also added that the charity's website received a 45% percent increase in traffic during the campaign, with increased searches of the terms 'modern slavery', 'cuckooing' and 'human trafficking'.

Going forward

Two professionals planned to reach groups in the wider community who were not currently targeted by awareness-raising efforts. A charity professional hoped that diversifying its volunteer base would allow awareness to be increased in wider demographics within the county. A statutory professional said that more work was required to raise awareness in faith communities that were not currently being engaged.

Relational safeguarding: working with parents and guardians

In this section of our report, we use the term 'parents' to include adults with care-giving responsibilities to specific, individual CYP. We use the term 'parents' for the sake of brevity, but in this context, it can include grandparents, guardians and other carers.

In 2014, Pace [30] proposed a relational safeguarding model designed to support families of CYP who had been sexually exploited. Initially, the model was generally applicable to all forms of child exploitation, and in 2019 Pace updated the model to specifically include CCE. Relational safeguarding can be applied in instances of contextual safeguarding, where the perpetrator is someone outside of a CYP's family, and aims to change the approach from immediately treating parents with a degree of professional suspicion to recognising them as partners in the safeguarding process, and secondary victims of exploitation instead. Professionals generally agreed with the principles of this approach and viewed parents as an important part of the safeguarding response. This section of our report examines relational safeguarding in more detail, and how professionals in Essex work with parents affected by CCE.

Providing support and requiring support

Professionals believed that working with parents affected by CCE was crucial for two reasons. First, that collaboration with parents enhanced the effectiveness of safeguarding, and second, that specialised support for parents of exploited children is needed to help them process the emotional stress and trauma they are likely to experience. These two factors produce a dual-identity in which parents are protectors, but also in need of protecting. As Pace [30] states:

The complex and at times contradictory reality of CSE presents a dichotomy for agencies. Parents require a dual approach: they should be treated as safeguarding partners yet at the same time they need agency support for their own wellbeing and to help them in turn support their child. This dichotomy does not easily 'fit' with the child protection model (p. 10).

Parents as safeguarding partners

In our study, professionals told us that working in collaboration with parents was often the most effective factor in achieving positive outcomes for CYP and had successfully prevented and ended some cases of CCE. For instance, a professional from a national charity advised parents of exploited CYP to routinely search their bedrooms, to potentially give them 'an out', should CYP alert their exploiter that their parents were aware of the exploitation. Professionals also said that educating parents on how to report missing episodes, evidence, and intelligence could help authorities to build a case against a perpetrator. An education professional also told us that working with parents was valuable when addressing factors beyond a school's control. For example, evidence shows that siblings of criminally exploited CYP face increased risk of exploitation [30]. Additionally, if a school pupil has siblings who do not attend the same school, the school can still address this issue by working in collaboration with parents.

Parents as victims

Grooming tactics used by exploiters can intentionally weaken a CYP's relationship with their parents to make exploitation easier. Parents whose children have been exploited are likely to face many unsettling experiences. These include, but are not limited to, violence and threats from the exploitation perpetrators; a sense of being unable to fulfil parental responsibility; a breakdown of parent-child relationships; trauma and stress; disruption to family, work and home life; and damage to the stability of the family environment [30]. Pace elaborates on the difficulties of this scenario:

The trauma and disruption to family life cannot be underestimated. The emotional, mental and physical resilience needed to maintain a job, keep a home routine, control finances and support siblings is significant. Trying to retain a sense of normality, while simultaneously safeguarding a child who is hostile to boundary-setting and will not disclose their whereabouts when missing from home, is extremely challenging (p. 5).

Professionals believed that supporting parents as victims not only benefited parents but increased their capacity to continue safeguarding CYP.

Deprivation, stigma and victim-blaming

While professionals accepted the principles of relational safeguarding, we also heard of instances

in which parents had been implicit, or complicit, in CCE to varying degrees. We heard of an instance where a CYP was 'recruited' into a 'gang' by their own parent, as well as instances whereby a family's financial need resulted in them 'turning a blind eye' to where the money provided by the CYP came from. The CYP we spoke to in this study believed that CYP involved in CCE often provided financial support to their families. This has also been acknowledged in the SET *Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures* [1], which says that across the SET patch, 'parental debt that seems unmanageable' (pp. 480-481) has been observed as a potential factor in CCE providing household income, adding:

This situation can lead to circumstances where parents are either cognisant or passive of their child's offending if it contributes to managing household debt. This can lead to children being particularly vulnerable to exploitation by gangs.

There is evidence that CYP who have difficult family lives are among those at greatest risk of CCE. This includes looked after children [5], CYP whose parents misuse substances, and/or CYP whose basic needs are not being met at home [8]. Professionals in our study did note a link in the presence of these factors among the lives of CYP targeted for CCE, but acknowledged that being aware of the risks is not the same as assuming the presence of these factors is the fault of parents. There are many other risk factors outside of the family home, and beyond parents' control that can make CYP vulnerable to CCE. Not all CYP who are criminally exploited are from 'dysfunctional' families, and not all CYP from families facing difficult circumstances will be exploited. As Pace [30] notes:

The focus for the cause of the sexual exploitation should be on the perpetrator rather than the parents' socio-economic difficulties or domestic issues. Furthermore, to assume that sexual exploitation happens to children of 'dysfunctional' households, increases the likelihood that sexually exploited children from more 'stable' households will slip through the net and miss early intervention (p. 6).

Therefore, there exists a tension between standard child protection processes, which Pace claims 'assumes the child's family background is a root cause of their abuse', and the relational approach which regards families as victims. This creates a further dichotomy of parents as either victims or perpetrators which is similar to the CYP victim/perpetrator dichotomy we address elsewhere in this report. For example, SET *Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures* [1] states that 'many parents are aware of the widespread perception that the gang problem is ultimately a product of poor parenting' (p. 474), and professionals told us that in their experience parents of exploited CYP could feel embarrassed, ashamed, or blamed. These professionals told us this could prevent parents from engaging with services, and professionals told us that parents could be hesitant to report CYP's missing episodes to the authorities through the fear that their CYP may be brought home in a police vehicle which could bring negative judgement from their neighbours. Pace [30] explains that 'all too often, parents are sidelined and either ignored as "forgotten safeguarders" or deemed "failed carers"'. They add: 'we need to confront this issue and remove the oppositional thinking or absence of thinking about parents' (p. 2).

Professionals in our study felt it was important to work alongside parents in the safeguarding process, but not to ignore the link between CCE and social factors such as poverty or family dysfunction. They believed that in the vast majority of cases it was inappropriate to apportion blame to parents and to instead offer support to CYP and parents alike. Professionals told us that earning respect from parents was an important factor in forming these relationships, and Essex Safeguarding Children Board [31] stated:

Parents tell us that support works well when they are respected and listened to by practitioners (p. 6).

Further barriers to working collaboratively with parents

Professionals described additional barriers to collaborative working between parents and professionals. Some parents were unsure if they should report their concerns to the authorities, knowing that services were stretched and not wanting to 'make a fuss' unnecessarily. Some parents also feared that contacting the authorities might mean a CYP was arrested, which could have negative implications for their future. Several professionals told us that working parents could be away from the home for extended periods of

time due to commuting, working long hours, or night shifts. It was felt that CYP could face a greater exposure to risk during the hours they were not in education and their parents were not at home, yet parents were often unaware of the whereabouts of CYP during this time. Other professionals told us they sometimes encountered parental denial, where parents did not believe their CYP were at risk of CCE, and therefore did not engage with support.

Provision for parents

Within this report, our section on 'Raising awareness of CCE' addresses the ways in which organisations in Essex are informing parents of the risks of CCE. Beyond awareness-raising, professionals told us about nine organisations which worked with parents of exploited CYP. Of these, six are statutory organisations, including five schools; two community interest companies; and a children's charity. All organisations primarily addressed the needs of CYP and had expanded their offer to include parents. The approach of many professionals in our study often conformed to the relational model by increasing parents' capacity to safeguard CYP, enhancing the possibility of early intervention and prevention, involving parents in the safeguarding process, and recognising the importance of wellbeing for the whole family [30]. This is not a definitive list of provision but simply a summary of the provision professionals referred to in our discussions.

Schools told us they worked with parents to build relationships between CYP's school and home life. These relationships, if successful, enabled information sharing and joint decision-making, through facilitating a level of trust that enabled parents to contact the school with their concerns, or would take the advice of education professionals into consideration. A professional told us that parents often felt more comfortable asking a school for help as opposed to social care or police, particularly if they had previously had negative experiences with these agencies. Another professional told us the school's pastoral staff provided mediation between CYP and parents that could improve the parent-child relationship.

The two community interest companies worked with parents in a similar way, through regular visits and check-ins, conflict mediation, and advice. Other professionals mentioned peer-to-peer support for parents facilitated by a children's charity.

Going forward

Professionals largely practiced the principles of relational safeguarding but recognised a need for contextual safeguarding to be embedded in professional policy, procedure and protocol. Professionals believed this would increase the effectiveness of safeguarding interventions by working with the whole family, and not just seeing a CYP in isolation. As Pace [30] summarises:
A relational safeguarding model ensures both child/ren and family are at the core of interventions and areas of conflict are dealt with in a collaborative manner. The model engages with the emotional and relational dynamics of grooming, in terms of broken relationships within the family which can be missed by the child protection model that focuses more strictly on noting behavioural indicators of increased risk or vulnerability for the affected child (p. 11).

While there is limited evidence of best practice in the field of CCE, particularly pertaining to 'gangs' and county lines, the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) [16] has classified work with families, such as family therapy, as effective. They state:

Family and parent-focused interventions recognise that creating and sustaining positive changes in children and young people when they have challenging, complex and sometimes chaotic homes is very difficult (p. 18).

Professionals from a range of services unanimously told us that work with parents needed to increase both in volume and intensity but felt that the largest barrier to achieving this was financial resource - one organisation told us they were providing their parents' work unfunded. Pace [30] recommends that commissioning processes include the provision of specialist support for parents when commissioning services to meet the needs of CYP affected by CCE, and going forward, interventions designed to safeguard CYP from CCE should also ensure provision for parents.

Pressure on the system: Funding, capacity and sustainability

Over the past decade, the UK has seen reduced public spending under the government's austerity programme, marking the biggest cuts to funding since the Second World War [32]. This has resulted in significant changes to the ways in which services operate, including services that work with CYP. As of 2019, the Children's Commissioner [8] noted that youth services had been cut by 60% on a national scale. Ofsted [10] has also said that spend on early intervention and prevention services has decreased by 60%, explaining that these services are often reduced to protect interventions for higher need CYP.

This is the backdrop against which professionals must attempt to safeguard CYP from exploitation. Professionals who spoke to us frequently associated conditions imposed by austerity measures with the contemporary environment where exploitation could take a firmer hold, characterised by reduced policing, less in-school interventions from mental health, social care and public health professionals, and increasingly selective referral criteria for specialist services.

'There are not enough resources in general, everyone is stretched...'

'Everyone's trying to do it on a shoestring...'

Austerity measures have also contributed to reduced social security entitlement, increases in unemployment, and poor economic growth [32]. This, at least in part, can explain the sense of unavoidable poverty, hopelessness, and lack of opportunity that CYP at risk of CCE often report.

It is also important to mention identified correlations between CCE and mental health, as in this section we present concerns professionals expressed toward access of mental health services for CYP. The Office of the Children's Commissioner [8] states that CYP assessed by children's services are 77% more likely to have mental health issues identified when associated with 'gangs' in some form, and also 95% more likely to have social, emotional and mental health issues recognised as a primary educational need. This may be explained by trauma following exploitation, but it is also the case that perpetrators can target CYP with existing mental health issues.

Reduced service capacity; increased thresholds and waiting times

Professionals told us that one of the most impactful changes to services, amidst funding cuts, was the tightening of referral criteria. Reduced funding could cause services to reduce the number of CYP they worked with, and therefore raising referral thresholds allowed them to prioritise those in greatest need. Education professionals, in particular, told us that CYP who previously qualified for specialist support were now less likely to be accepted by services. This included Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)[2], 'gang' specific services, and statutory interventions.

Professionals said that increased thresholds created an environment in which CYP needed to 'get worse before they could get better'; essentially, having to deteriorate or be at greater risk before qualifying for support. SET *Safeguarding and Child Protection Procedures* [1] states:

There are also situations where a young person may be on the path to significant harm from serious youth violence and gangs but not yet reached that threshold. (p. 479)

Even when referrals were accepted, professionals told us that many services had long waiting lists that could result in a CYP waiting for months before receiving support.

Increased pressures in education

Education professionals told us reduced support from services placed an overwhelming responsibility on school staff to manage the issues associated with CCE with little to no support from surrounding services. In some instances, education professionals worried this could make it harder for local authorities to understand the scale of CCE: if fewer CYP at risk of CCE were known to services, it could cause the problem to look smaller than it was, which in turn could make it harder to justify expenditure and provision.

'Social care and EWMHS thresholds are harder...'

'Why would social care know about the scale of the problem? We don't make referrals to social care because the criteria is too high...'

2. Known as EWMHS in Essex: Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health services

Ofsted [10] has highlighted the issue of raised thresholds, nationally, saying some schools:

...reported that referral thresholds for early help have become so high that the school is left to deal in isolation with serious concerns when, in the past, they would have had more support (p. 22).

Education professionals told us they were increasingly dealing with issues that detracted from their core roles but felt morally obliged to do so when other services were unable to intervene. This included administering first aid to pupils who had self-harmed, taking pupils to A&E who were experiencing mental distress, supplying and laundering school uniforms for pupils living in poverty, and buying food for CYP who came to school with no lunch.

'There's increasing pressure on teachers to deliver holistic interventions and engage...'

'The sorts of issues and deprivation is normal to us now...'

This was compounded by the reduced presence of supporting agencies in school such as school counsellors, school nurses, and local police officers. One professional said the level of need in the school warranted a mental health professional on-site every day but said that current access only allowed for a mental health worker to visit the school in response to specific incidents. Professionals expressed a sense of abandonment by services they had previously worked closely with. One told us if they called social care services for advice: 'usually the advice is that social care isn't involved and they tell us just to meet with the parents', or that outcomes of social care meetings focussed on what the school should do.

One school was mainly attended by pupils from two towns, though staff told us neither town had a police station. They said the police used to support the school more, but in recent years cited reduced 'manpower' as a barrier. Ofsted [10] writes:

Some schools leaders told us that the most effective agency they work with is the police. They value highly the presence at school of a local police officer. They also said that although that now this role is no longer ring-fenced, officers are not at the school as much as before and that, like all other services, the police are sometimes slower to respond to schools' needs than in the past (p. 26).

On top of this, schools faced their own reductions in funding. One professional told us it was difficult to manage enhanced responsibilities in a climate where staff needed to 'make decisions on which paper to order as it's ten pence cheaper'. Another professional, who had worked at a PRU for several years, told us that the number of pupils at the unit had more than doubled in the last decade, but the staff ration had remained the same. Funding cuts, combined with increased pressures and responsibilities, meant professionals believed the quality of education often suffered:

'It's harder now for teachers to teach...'

'Teachers are being pushed and burdened...'

This is problematic, not least because educational attainment is one of the fastest routes out of poverty [33]. The number of full-time equivalent teachers has been in decline in England since 2016 which, in part, has been linked to 'relatively lower pay as well as the evolving requirements and increasing pressures...' [34, p.45], and the continuation of this trend could further exacerbate the current issues. Education professionals felt strongly that they were overstretched, and things could not continue in this manner.

'Staff are having to make it up as they go... We feel out of our depth with the issue...[County lines] is a business; it's sophisticated...But it feels like it's school staff versus this problem, and we're outnumbered...'

'Everybody's stretched...All staff are so stretched, but care so much about the kids...'

Short-term funding and sustainability in the voluntary sector

Funding cuts had also changed the way in which charities and community interest companies were able to support CYP. Professionals told us that the current funding model often funded specific, short-term projects. This threatened the sustainability of such organisations, particularly smaller, regional ones that could face closure at the end of each funding period.

This posed problems to the consistency of support that CYP received. Naturally, CYP's need for support does not neatly fit into funding cycles, meaning that if a CYP was referred to a six-month programme two months before funding expired, there was a risk that CYP would be 'dropped' mid-programme. The prospect of funding being renewed was often uncertain, sometimes up to the end of the current provision, meaning organisations were having to consider their next source of funding on a constant basis. We heard of one instance where two organisations had delivered funded work in partnership, but as the end of the contract approached, one organisation 'jumped ship' in order to pursue another source of funding to guarantee their activity for another year. While professionals felt this was understandable, from an organisational perspective, it had resulted in a number of CYP being 'dropped' before the end of the programme. But consistency was seen as crucial to work with 'vulnerable' CYP.

'With young people, the last thing you want to do is say "We won't be here in four months"...'

Professionals told us that the current commissioning model worked by identifying a need and then commissioning a specific solution. This could mean that new projects and organisations were more likely to be funded than existing work.

'There's funding for new things but not funding for things that already exist. You have to go with a whole new project...'

Professionals told us that in response, new organisations were often being created and funded. This meant the provider market had become saturated, and new organisations would also need to find additional funding at the end of the funded period. Therefore, a larger number of organisations were relying on the same sources of funding, and with new organisations arising others were facing closure, and valuable skills and experience being lost.

All of this connects to the issues faced in education, with Ofsted [10] saying:

LAs, partners and schools are having to reconfigure the way they join up their response to safeguarding across all education settings in their area. The voluntary and community sectors, which are often well placed to make an important contribution to multi-agency and partnership work, have encountered increasingly short-term funding that makes it difficult for them to plan their contributions for the long term. (p. 7)

With organisations across voluntary and statutory sectors often applying for the same funding, organisations that policy has encouraged to work together to tackle CCE are in some sense set up as competitors. Professionals described a fractious environment where funding competition could result in poor working relationships between organisations, which could even include attempts to discredit other organisations.

'[Organisation] bid for the same contract [organisation] got. Since then, they've been paving the way to get back in...'

The short-term nature of some funding could also mean that organisations were unable to request funding for core organisational costs. Core costs include premises rental and utilities, but also resources for staff wellbeing such as clinical supervision or access to counselling. Some professionals said that working with exploited CYP took an emotional toll on staff and had known staff to experience emotional transference or distress.

'Everyone is talking about "trauma-informed" but there's a big gap in how much we are being there for workers...'

Professionals said that the emotional strain for charity workers could eventually lead to 'burn out', resulting in skilled workers leaving the sector or being unable to carry out their roles effectively.

Evaluation and monitoring

In a county with such a diversified and saturated provider offer, professionals, particularly in education, told us they could struggle to judge which services they should be working with, and how effective that service was.

As Ofsted [10] has said:

School leaders are balancing the risks of engaging outside agencies against the costs associated with commissioning them and need assurances

that what they pay for will be of good quality, appropriate for their children and effective (p. 28).

A clearer understanding of effectiveness would not only enable schools to better plan their expenditure but could also streamline commissioning decisions and therefore better utilise public funds. While existing funding processes often monitor and evaluate the work they fund, this can be largely inconsistent depending on which body commissioned the work, and to what aim. Some professionals also told us that funding bodies themselves could sometimes be too stretched to rigorously scrutinise funded work, or to make additional quality checks such as examining expenses or making observational visits. Statutory organisations could be inspected by regulatory bodies such as Ofsted or Joint Targeted Area Inspects (JTAI) though again, there was variation in how agencies measured success and the outcomes they considered to prove impact.

Early intervention and prevention projects particularly struggled to evidence the benefits of their work as it is not possible to conclusively prove that CYP would go on to offend, be excluded, or be exploited without the intervention of the programme. Therefore, some programmes measured their success based on quantifiable data such as the number of CYP who attended an awareness session, or the percentage of CYP who completed a programme. This is helpful information, to an extent, but does not capture meaningful impact. Some programmes incorporated feedback from CYP and teachers into the evaluation of their service, though it was sometimes felt this did not present an accurate portrayal as it was limited to the immediate time after a session or programme, whereas gathering feedback over an extended period of time after the intervention could provide insight on the lasting impact.

Going forward

The current picture professionals paint of public spending is not sustainable, though there may be cause for some optimism as we also heard from professionals that increased public funding was beginning to return to policing and detached youth work. Other statutory professionals acknowledged the need to create more sustainability in funded work, as well as the need to assure the quality of funded programmes.

Provision in Essex for CYP affected by CCE

This section of our report aims to collate the understanding of service provision in Essex as described by the professionals we spoke to, including how effective these programmes are from the perspective of professionals and how the programmes themselves attempt to shape our interpretations of best practice.

There is little existing research available on the success rates of interventions used in CCE [16]. Several central government departments have produced recommendations and guidance in relation to working with CYP affected by CCE, though professionals recognised that this advice could sometimes seem contradictory. For example, the criminal justice approach to CCE has traditionally differed from the social care and education approach, which we examined in our 'Victim today, perpetrator yesterday, witness the day before' section of this report.

Several professionals in our study directed us toward the Early Intervention Foundation's (EIF) *What works to prevent gang involvement, youth violence and crime publication* [16] as providing a basis for effective intervention. For this reason, within this section, we largely refer to EIF's findings alongside professionals' own perceptions of 'what works'.

As the provider market in Essex is currently saturated and diverse, we discuss existing interventions in terms of approaches services employ in general, as opposed to describing individual services, particularly as many services combine a number of these approaches. But before we go on to do so, we first examine early intervention, targeted intervention, and the importance of both in the context of CCE.

Early intervention

Early intervention means identifying and effectively supporting CYP deemed at risk of poor outcomes. Such risks might include exclusion, offending, or exploitation. Early intervention aims to mitigate these risks by addressing problems early on and is regarded as a necessary part of responding to CCE, not least because, as the Children's Commissioner [8] has said: 'Once a child is within a gang, extricating them is very hard' (p.9), and: very large numbers of children in England are growing up exposed to risks which could pull them into gangs, and that it is possible to identify the cohorts of children and families where risk is higher. Furthermore, most of these risks can be reduced with the right support at the right time (p. 20).

Many early intervention measures aim to mitigate risk through awareness-raising, often taking the form of school assemblies or public campaigns. We address these programmes separately in our section on 'Raising awareness of CCE'.

Targeted interventions

While it is always preferable to prevent exploitation before it can occur, CYP are being, and have been, criminally exploited and specific support is required to both tackle the negative effects of exploitation and safeguard against further occurrences. Such interventions may be targeted at CYP who: disclose they have been criminally exploited, are involved in the criminal justice system, and/or are known to go missing. When effective, targeted interventions can reduce rates of reoffending, mental health symptoms, and violence among CYP affected [16].

Building trusting relationships

Professionals from seven organisations spoke of the importance of CYP's ability to trust the professionals who worked with them, which has also been raised by the Children's Commissioner [8] and the multi-agency Joint Targeted Area Inspection report (JTAI) [7] which say, respectively:

...the single most important thing is for them to have a relationship with at least one trusted adult who can help divert them away from gangs and access other services (p. 9).

Relationships between children and professionals that were based on consistency, stability and respectful communication were having the most impact in supporting effective interventions with exploited children (p. 13).

Yet professionals recognised that developing trust could be difficult when CYP were surrounded

by more than one service: social care, education, criminal justice, and so on. They believed that CYP could feel overwhelmed by the number of professionals working with them, which could reduce their capacity to engage with services. Some agencies in Essex were beginning to create approaches to overcome this by identifying an adult that CYP already trusted, such as a social worker, or relative and offering advice to that adult, rather than the CYP.

'If they already have a social worker, [we] can support with training and guidance...otherwise it would be duplicating the offer and being another person in the young person's life...'

Other services were aiming to offer a range of support into one programme, so that CYP would be able to access support for mental health, drugs and alcohol, and employment and training within one single service. Professionals were aware that Essex was a large county with a saturated provider market, and that further consideration was required in streamlining interventions for CYP.

Several organisations used mentors and/or role models in their work with CYP. It was believed that CYP could find mentoring figures such as sports coaches, or adults with relevant lived experience, more trustworthy and relatable than formal youth workers across the fields of social care, education, and criminal justice.

'Staying with' CYP

The JTAI [7] classified 'staying with the child' (p. 7) as best practice, which involves creating and maintaining support that is both consistent, and persistent, for CYP even when CYP are not considered to be engaging with services:

...we still found some cases when children's social care teams closed children's cases prematurely because children did not engage with professionals, even when there was clear evidence of exploitation and high levels or risk. (p. 13)

In Essex, professionals told us that a particularly important function of the voluntary sector was its ability to provide support that could be more regular and time-intensive than statutory services were able to offer. For example, professionals told us that a CYP referred to social care might meet with a social worker for an hour a week, over a set number of weeks, and CYP who were not considered to be engaging with this programme could have their cases closed.

'When a young person's six weeks of social care is up, they will assess the young person, say they aren't being exploited, and withdraw the case. So they risk becoming vulnerable again...'

For this reason, several voluntary organisations told us that providing unlimited offers of support facilitated the trust needed to make work meaningful:

'There is no time constraint, it can take six weeks to work with a young person to get them to trust us...'

We also heard that such services were well placed to support CYP throughout the entirety of their exit from exploitation, from the point at which a CYP discloses their exploitation up to court cases, and beyond. Some organisations also provided enhanced flexibility of contact, allowing them to work with CYP during evenings, weekends, and school holidays.

Several professionals explained that CYP who had formally completed a programme may still require support in the future, and that having established a trusting relationship with CYP, as well as offering open-ended support, created an accessible support pathway for such individuals. This additional support was not always funded, as it did not easily fit with the criteria for programme funding, though professionals felt passionately about ensuring a way back into services for CYP. We also heard that another advantage to this style of working enabled an in-depth understanding of CYP and their circumstances, which could therefore facilitate the identification of early warning signs that a CYP was at risk. Statutory professionals acknowledged the need for flexible and regular contact with CYP affected by CCE, and some services were able to provide this by offering long-term support or an enhanced presence in the community.

Easy access to support

JTAI [7] regards 'services that are easily accessed' as best practice, along with the importance of 'regular and/or frequent contact' (p. 11). However, professionals told us that services for 'at risk'

CYP face high demand, which we look at in more detail in our 'Funding, capacity, and sustainability' section. Some professionals told us this demand meant they did not advertise their work because they would be 'inundated' with referrals and told us they had intentionally created a 'very tight criteria' to ensure those in most need were able to access the limited number of placements. One service accepted self-referrals from CYP to reduce barriers to access but did say the service was faced with long waiting lists.

Gaining skills and achieving

The EIF [16] has stated:

Skills-based programmes have been found to help prevent problem behaviours, aggression, anti-social behaviour and violence, through developing young people's problem solving, self-control, anger management, conflict resolution, social and emotional and other life skills (p. 16).

Professionals often told us that a sense of achievement was important in supporting CYP at risk of, or affected by, exploitation. They said that by gaining new skills, qualifications, or work experience, CYP could grow their self-confidence as well as improve their employment prospects.

The employability of CYP was considered by professionals as one of the largest factors in preventing CCE, saying that many CYP feel they have no career prospects and are destined for a lifetime of poverty. In Essex, we learned of several programmes that aimed to give CYP a range of skills that could enhance their employment prospects as well as their sense of self-worth. Some organisations awarded CYP with qualifications, or graduation ceremonies, at the completion of a programme; others worked to develop social skills such as team work, anger management, and conflict resolution; and others provided CYP with work experience or volunteering opportunities that could support them into employment.

It was also common for these organisations to retain CYP as volunteers or mentors after their completion of a programme. This was seen as an opportunity for them to continue to develop their social and employment skills, as well as impart a sense of responsibility and worth.

Reducing risk through education and safety planning

In our study we heard of organisations, both statutory and voluntary, that worked with CYP to enhance their awareness of risk and develop critical-thinking skills to aid them in informed decision-making. The EIF [16] has classified programmes aimed at reducing risk, and preventing negative outcomes, as effective in tackling CCE.

Some programmes took an early intervention approach by identifying CYP at risk from various issues, including exploitation, and providing education on a range of topics including drugs and alcohol, peer pressure, and healthy relationships. Other programmes targeted CYP who were known to be criminally exploited. For these CYP, professionals found it effective to inform them of how exploitation 'worked', to allow them to understand that they had been groomed and manipulated.

'Explaining the process of how they've been exploited helps them see it.'

Several of these programmes also incorporated safety planning, where professionals worked with CYP to enhance their safety in exploitative situations, such as travelling out of the area for extended periods of time. This included a range of measures such as planning to carry a range of personal hygiene items at all times, should their exploiter instruct them to stay away from home, or to stay in contact with a service that could check on them regularly to monitor their safety.

Using a therapeutic approach

The EIF [16] has classified therapy-based programmes as effective, particularly when these programmes operate in a structured format and are delivered by qualified mental health professionals. Family therapy programmes were also classified as being effective.

While we did not learn of any therapy programmes specifically for CYP and families affected by CCE, several services in Essex spoke about the importance of using a trauma-informed approach within their service, acknowledging that exploited CYP have been exposed to trauma and require support that does not cause further traumatisation, fear and stress.

'We take care not to retraumatise by showing graphic or frightening things, which has been proven to be ineffective anyway…'

A statutory service working with exploited CYP had built mental health and substance misuse support into its broader programme, and education professionals spoke about the importance of in-school mental health support in the context of both preventing, and recovering from trauma. Some schools had employed specific mental health professionals in response to perceived levels of need among CYP, with one particular school providing a life coach, a counsellor, a bereavement counsellor, an art therapist and a drama therapist.

Place-based interventions and detached youth work

The EIF [16] found community-based programmes to be promising, though acknowledge a lack of evidence on effectiveness. They say:

There is a gap in terms of high-quality, robust evidence and community-based programmes, but we know that these types of interventions are widely used (p. 19).

The EIF [16] found that 'Many of the most well-evidenced and effective programmes identified were school-based' (p. 52), and professionals often felt in-school interventions were successful because they facilitated joint working with school staff that could identify the CYP most in need of support, and allow work to be tailored to the overall needs of the school. It was also said that the school setting enabled a greater sense of trust than a youth offending or social care setting, and it was also felt that basing interventions in schools could relieve some of the expectation on education professionals.

'It takes the pressure off the school to be the expert…'

Community-based interventions generally take place outside of the more formal settings of school, social care, and criminal justice. Traditionally, community-based programmes for CYP had been delivered in settings such as youth centres, sports facilities, and village halls. These programmes often provide recreational activities alongside opportunities for education, socialisation and gaining skills.

Several organisations told us they based their model of provision on detached working. While there is no agreed-upon definition of detached youth work, the term generally refers to youth work that takes place in a location of CYP's choosing, such as a coffee shop or park, or a place where CYP are 'at', such as a housing estate or high street [35]. Detached youth work aims to remove the expectation on CYP to approach services, and generally works on a one-to-one basis as opposed to group work, which professionals regarded as beneficial in accessing 'hard to reach' CYP. Some organisations used a combination of group work at a predetermined setting and detached youth work, and professionals told us that detached youth work was increasing in Essex as it was believed to be particularly effective working with CYP in the context of exploitation.

Cultural competence and lived experience

The EIF [16] has named 'interactive and real-life examples' (pp. 36-37) as potentially effective in work to reduce CCE. A range of services provided 'real-life examples' through using professionals' own lived experience to discuss topics around CCE with CYP. Professionals often told us that CYP found real-life examples more relatable and reliable, and this was often provided through the utilisation of professionals talking about their own lived experience.

Some professionals used the term 'cultural competency' to describe professionals who utilised their own lived experience in their work with CYP. However, other professionals were often disparaging of lived experience speakers, claiming that such speakers 'glamorised' exploitation, or exaggerated the scale of CCE in Essex. Utilising lived experience in this way is not a new concept. For example, models of addiction recovery are often facilitated by those in recovery themselves. The difference is that peer-to-peer programmes operate from a position of equality, but CYP and adults are not natural peers: dynamics of authority and power exist between adults and CYP, and CYP may be considered more impressionable, or less able to understand the nuances of complex experiences, which could be the cause for discomfort among professionals. Either way, further investigation is required to prove, or disprove, that professionals speaking about their own lived experience is ineffective to CYP.

A number of professionals also felt cynical about the use of lived experience, believing that this could be used to leverage funding:

'External organisations create the idea among adults working with young people that they're incapable of dealing with the problem and must therefore buy a solution from somewhere else.'

Some professionals believed that simply having lived, or grown up, in Essex made them more culturally competent than professionals with lived experience of CCE who they claimed usually came from London.

'There is a different picture across Essex than there is in London...'

'External organisations tell adults working with young people "you don't understand it", but that can be a contradiction because these organisations are often run by people who grew up in London...The people who live [here] and teach young people are just as, if not more, able to understand them...'

One professional claimed outright that interventions using lived experience did 'not affect change in young people', but others claimed that having someone who 'understood what you had been through' made a positive difference. There was an obvious friction between professionals with lived experience, who often ran community interest companies, and statutory organisations, and we also address this in our 'Raising awareness of CCE' and 'Provision in Essex for CYP affected by CCE' sections.

Deterrence

Our 'Raising awareness of CCE' section of this report addresses organisations that use 'scare tactics' to deter CYP from CCE, sometimes known as 'scared straight' programmes, which attempt to prevent CYP from risk-taking behaviours by frightening them. Many professionals told us that these methods were not only ineffective but could potentially be harmful by contradicting a trauma-informed ethos.

The EIF [16] has stated:

...focusing on deterrence or discipline were associated with a 2-8% increase in young people's rates of recidivism (p. 21).

Professionals told us that some services in Essex had shown graphic imagery relating to knife crime or substance misuse. Some services targeted at CYP deemed 'at risk' took them to court proceedings, or prisons, to deter them from offending behaviour. This is not to say that the latter of these programmes is ineffective, but that careful consideration is required when exposing CYP to potentially distressing situations. (EYS) As one professional said:

'[These] kids don't need to be broken, they're already broken...'

Conclusion

Overview of findings

One of the central findings of our study was the vast range of services in Essex currently working with CYP in relation to CCE and the associated risks. In response to the saturation of the provider market, a number of statutory agencies have started to formally collaborate in this area, though there remains disagreement on the efficacy of some interventions, as well as the scale of the threat of CCE in Essex. Examples of recent joint-working included establishing relationships with police forces in other counties, raising awareness of CCE among local businesses, and utilising the voluntary sector to enhance capacity of statutory services. Other than one example, we did not hear of any collaboration with health professionals. This is not to say that this does not take place but does show a need for enhanced working between the health and social care sectors.

Professionals largely agreed with a move toward contextual safeguarding that embodies recognising exploited CYP as victims; viewing parents and families as secondary victims; the importance of building trusting relationships; and not overcrowding CYP with different agency responses. Professionals felt there was some way to go to fully embed contextual safeguarding within practice.

Contribution to existing knowledge

Several of our findings align with existing research and policy pertaining to CCE, some of which we have been able to explore further by taking a detailed look at the tensions between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' labels, and the dual-identity of parents as secondary victims and safeguarders. Our findings consider the implications of these tensions, as well as ways in which they might be resolved.

We have also presented accounts of CCE from the perspective of numerous professions and sectors, including local authorities, social care, education, and charities. This has allowed us to offer a snapshot of the types of services that organisations see themselves providing in response to CCE, which ranges from early intervention and prevention to more tailored and specific programmes.

The scope of our study meant it was not possible to pursue all potential avenues of questioning, and further investigation is needed around some of the issues we were made aware of through our engagement. This includes work to form a clearer picture of the scale of CCE in Essex, to include the perceptions of both senior statutory professionals who often believed some portrayals to be exaggerated, and 'front line' professionals such as teachers and police officers. Further work is also required around the efficacy of newer community interest, or private, companies that use lived experience testimony when working with CYP, to address existing tensions between these organisations and more established statutory bodies.

While our study gathered a generalised snapshot of provision in Essex, we did not complete a definitive list of provision or scrutinise its purported efficacy, as relayed to us by professionals. We were also limited to the number of organisations we could engage with based on the timeframe of our engagement, although we were able to gain a wide variety of perspectives.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, there is an obvious need for quality assurance models to support the streamlining of service navigation. Organisations working with CYP, such as schools, youth clubs, and intervention programmes want assurance that the services they work with or refer to are effective and appropriate, particularly when cost is involved. Such measures would also inform funding decisions and could resolve concerns around the quality of more recent services.

Education professionals in our study were committed to being part of the solution in safeguarding CYP from CCE but felt overwhelmed by the issues they were encountering in schools and overstretched by an expectation to provide an increasing number of interventions. Teachers felt that increasing responsibilities hindered their ability to deliver high quality education to CYP. This cannot be sustained without increases to the resources or capacity of schools, as well as

increased support from surrounding agencies, which many teachers feel are currently beyond their reach.

Professionals in our study often acknowledged a need for expanded provision for parents affected by CCE in Essex. Based on our findings, we agree that support for parents should be expanded, with any such expansion to consider where services could best support parents and CYP together, while also drawing upon available research on family-based support and therapy. Parents are currently at risk of being overlooked as victims or safeguarders but can play an essential role in keeping CYP safe. Furthermore, enhancing the awareness and support available to parents would complement the aims of relational and contextual safeguarding.

A gap exists within the health and social sector regarding work around CCE. Professionals in our study acknowledged the need for joint working, though we only learned of one piece of work that took place in a health setting. This is not to say that no other work with the health system is taking place, but highlights there is a capacity and need to further engage the health system in working to overcome CCE. It is important that health professionals, commissioners and decision makers are involved in tackling CCE given the sexual health, mental health, substance misuse, and physical health risks for CYP affected by CCE. Collaborative work within the health and social care sector that embraces how lived experiences of health and care overlap, and are often inseparable, would benefit the safeguarding of CYP from CCE.

Future directions

We recognise that the voices of parents and other family members are absent from our study, and an important next step in developing knowledge around CCE is to consider the lived experiences of parents and families in relation to awareness, service provision, and support. It is likely that parents whose CYP have been affected by CCE will be managing their own trauma, which may also be detrimental to the wellbeing of the whole family. Parental experiences of CCE are important in developing our understanding of how early intervention and specialist provision can work with families to reduce the risk of CCE and improve familial wellbeing.

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