

Evaluation of the County Lines Pilot Project

*Update Report
for St Giles Trust Pilot,
January 2019.*

JHCONSULTING


St Giles Trust

Evaluation of the County Lines Pilot Project

Update Report for St Giles Trust Pilot, January 2019

Introduction

The County Lines Demonstration Pilot Project was funded by the Home Office to test out what helps vulnerable children move away from involvement in county lines drug distribution networks. It began in September 2017, with the objectives of trialling a range of interventions that had the potential to:

- reduce the number of children involved in county lines activity;
- improve the lifestyles and life chances of those who exit county lines activity, to reduce their likelihood of becoming re-engaged with gangs and crime;
- understand how a range of interventions can work effectively together to help children affected by county lines activity;
- develop a model that effectively tackles the issue of child involvement and exploitation in county lines activity, and
- facilitate enhanced intelligence and partnership working across agencies involved in crime, social services, safeguarding, health and other key agencies relevant to children involved in county lines activity.

An independent evaluation was carried out by JH Consulting in April 2018, to assess the extent to which the interventions were contributing to achieving these objectives for children, families and statutory services, and the key learning points from the pilot. It was linked to wider scoping research that draws together key learning from across over 20 different areas in England and Wales, identifying the key issues for vulnerable children involved in county lines, as well as emerging responses in tackling them.

This further evaluation of the St Giles Trust casework support and Peer Advisor programme elements of the pilot presents key findings for the period to the end of September 2018, along with a set of recommendations to help take the work forward. It is best read in conjunction with the original evaluation report to gain the full picture of this pilot.

The report draws on additional evidence collected over a six month period between April and October 2018. This was gathered through in depth discussions with SGT caseworkers, professionals from statutory services, children being supported and their mothers, as well as examination of casework updates, statistical analysis from Kent police and other project material.

Names have either been removed or changed to protect the confidentiality of respondents who are thanked for their frank and open contributions.

Executive summary

- The Home Office funded St Giles Trust county lines pilot project ran for 12 months from September 2017. It involved providing one-to-one casework support for vulnerable children involved in county lines drug running activity in the Margate and Dover areas, and the establishment of a team of trained volunteer Peer Advisors who could offer additional support to such children.
- In total, 38 children and their families have been provided with one-to-one casework support. Of the 35 children remaining on the caseload in September 2018, 85% have positive outcomes:
 - 11 (31%) children successfully exited county lines activity
 - 19 (54%) children at decreased risk and are in the process of exiting the activity
- Positive outcomes for children include:
 - 5 who have re-engaged with education (including some moving back into mainstream education and achieving GCSEs) and 3 who have moved into employment;
 - improved relationships with positive family members;
 - decreases/cessation in offending and going missing – Kent police report 50% of children experienced a reduction in reported crime (as either victim or suspect) and missing episodes across the cohort have halved;
 - improvement in health – less or no alcohol and/or drug use, improved eating and sleeping, better engagement with other services including mental health, and
 - development of greater stability and resilience.
- Of the 5 children who are not experiencing positive improvements in their lives, three are serving custodial sentences in youth offending institutions. SGT caseworkers are continuing to support them and their families at this ‘reachable moment’, so that when they are released over the next two to six months they have the option of resuming the positive work that can help them to successfully rehabilitate. This extremely important aspect of the service is highly valued by professionals – *“It’s imperative that they continue that relationship in custody – it makes him feel valued, that someone is still interested in his future”* and by mothers and children *“He asks when the caseworker is coming to see him. He needs that positive person in his life when he is in there and when he gets out”*.
- By Spring 2018, all children being supported were from Kent, confirming the trend for increased recruitment of local children to county lines activity. There are fewer referrals of girls to the service and they have proved more difficult to engage. However, the new cohort of referrals made in early October 2018 includes, for the first time, girls who are being sexually exploited and used as drug mules by the same county line.
- The pilot has continued to demonstrate that one-to-one specialist casework enables children to make the move away from and exit county lines activity. Caseworkers’ lived experience and/or cultural competence remains an essential feature that provides the much needed credibility required for children to develop relationships of trust. Added to this, their trauma informed approach and understanding of contextual safeguarding are key features, along with a high degree of flexibility, tenacity and dedication.
- The projected caseload of 30 has been continuously exceeded during the course of the pilot, despite the absence of any project promotion. Spaces created by positive exit from county lines activity in September 2018 have already been allocated to new referrals. Caseworkers

continue to deliver a very effective service but are severely stretched and this may reduce the potential for positive results, particularly given that some of the new cohort include children located in Canterbury. This adds a third geographical location with significant travel implications and the need to establish relationships with the professionals in this area. Additional support in the form of more caseworkers and trained Peer Advisor volunteers could significantly increase the benefits for vulnerable and exploited children.

- The mix of male and female and ethnically diverse caseworkers that have worked/are working on the Kent county lines specialist service over the last 12 months has provided useful learning. A number of mothers and professionals commented that *“having positive male role models is really important because many of them don’t have that in the family”* and that *“It’s good to have a mix of gender and ethnicity to reflect the young people and because they have different needs – some want more of a mum figure, others need the ‘cool’ young guy to relate to.”*
- Caseworkers are continuing to work in effective partnerships with statutory sector staff including police, social services, YOT and alternative education providers to produce these outcomes. Some staff understand the vulnerability and risks to life experienced by the children and display the professional curiosity needed for an effective approach. However, there is a need for more training to increase understanding and improve responses.
- Children, parents and professionals, as well as SGT caseworkers have found the pilot’s precarious funding situation highly unsettling. SGT has very quickly managed to establish a fully functioning specialist service in an area where there has previously been no presence. The positive and fruitful relationships with children, families and professionals, as well as the protocols and processes for delivery can be so easily lost if secure, adequate and longer term funding is not provided. The Home Office and Kent Police & Crime Commissioner’s (PCC) have now announced a 3 year joint funding package which will secure current posts, add a specialist girls worker and some schools interventions. This has come about through lobbying by local stakeholders including parents, a Member of Parliament, the PCC and SGT.
- The effectiveness and results of the pilot should be considered enough reason to fund this service. However, added to this is the proven cost benefit to the public purse. Kent police estimate that, averaged over a 6 month period, the cost saving in the reduction of missing episodes alone is over £250,000 (for an annual project cost of £89,600). In addition, casework support has enabled a number of children to avoid being put into local authority care or secure accommodation, the costs of which range between £3,200 to £8,000 per week.
- The Peer Advisor element of the pilot has enabled trained and skilled volunteers with lived experience to provide support for children involved in a range of gangs, drugs, anti-social behaviour and county lines activity. Significant work has taken place with Tunbridge Wells Community Safety Unit (CSU), with SGT staff and volunteers identified as integral to the success of innovative cross agency outreach to engage disaffected young people some of whom have long histories of drugs and gang involvement.
- The Peer Advisor model is also providing a potential starting point for the development of county lines specialist services in areas where there are none. One volunteer with lived experience of county lines has recently secured an apprenticeship in the Youth Justice Service created for him so that he can continue his training and move into a paid career in this area.
- Alternative education providers are continuing to struggle with the challenges of trying to engage children involved in county lines in education and in tackling the issue of being targeted by county line recruiters. Some are making significant efforts to tailor curricula and hours to

meet the needs of these students but there are a number of difficulties including the restrictions placed on them by national guidelines. SGT caseworkers are proving very effective in supporting children to engage in education – *“All of the kids who’ve worked with St Giles have done better because of their help.”*

- The Missing Child and Exploitation Team (MCET) of Margate Task Force are continuing to provide a joined up approach to identifying and supporting children involved in county lines. Monthly meetings with SGT staff enable effective partnership working, including appropriate intelligence sharing. Two children have been referred to the National Referral Mechanism. They are receiving very good support from SGT, however, if there was no specialist provider this would not be the case and highlights the continuing gap in support for children being exploited on county lines as part of modern slavery.
- The process of carrying out this evaluation over a twelve month period, and the accompanying national scoping work has identified how the plight of these children throws into sharp focus shortcomings in a range of public services. Whilst lack of resources is not the only issue, it is clear that austerity has and continues to play a significant role. The reduction in the capacity of publicly funded services will impact disproportionately on those who rely on them most. Vulnerable and criminally exploited children are one of the most needy groups and whilst the support of an independent caseworker is clearly an important intervention that cannot be provided by statutory sector staff, if public services were able to respond more quickly and effectively it would make a significant difference to their progress. Indeed, it may have helped to prevent them being drawn into county lines in the first place.

Recommendations

- The stable longer term funding secured for the service provides the opportunity for statutory partners and SGT to continue to identify what works most effectively in helping children affected by county lines involvement, including how statutory partners’ responses can continue to be strengthened and the vital and complementary role of specialist services delivered by the voluntary sector.
- Commissioners of pilot projects should carefully consider how, where such pilots are highly successful, they may be resourced in the longer term to avoid the unnecessary challenges faced by the Kent OT project.
- Drawing on the positive impacts of ‘informal’ work with professionals, additional funding for more widespread specialist training for statutory sector staff should be considered, to help to build greater understanding of children’s involvement in county lines including vulnerability and risk, and how to respond effectively
- The Modern Slavery Act and National Referral Mechanism should continue to be reviewed to see how this legislation and process can more effectively support children (and adults) who are exploited on county lines, particularly in establishing specialist support and effective safeguarding.
- Alternative and mainstream education provision should be urgently reviewed to understand how it can better meet the needs of all children placed in it, including those involved in county lines activity. This should include reviewing Ofsted criteria to incentivise better inclusion and support, and training/development for teachers and support staff.

Key themes arising from the update

The county lines pilot project began in September 2017 with the aim of testing out a range of interventions to support vulnerable children involved in county lines drug dealing between London and Kent so that they could exit the activity.

St Giles Trust's project elements included one-to-one casework (Kent OT) with children involved in county lines activity and their families, and establishing a team of skilled Peer Advisor volunteers with 'lived experience' who could provide support for affected children. The pilot originally ran to the end of March 2018, and Home Office funding was then extended to the end of September 2018. The Kent Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) then provided further funding for the casework element, but only until the end of March 2019.

Finally, after a significant amount of lobbying from families, the local Member of Parliament, the PCC and SGT, a 3 year joint funding solution was agreed. This funding secures the existing 1.6 caseworker posts and supports a specialist girls caseworker, responding to the recommendations arising from the evaluation.

The unstable and very short term funding that has been a feature of the pilot has resulted in the one negative of the project – an inability to carry out longer term planning and provide the 'service supply confidence' to enable the project to reach its full potential. This is explored later in the report as it is an important learning point for commissioners of successful pilot projects.

The pilot project has continued to provide a range of very effective support for children involved in county lines activities, as well as their families and a range of professionals working with them.

Positive exit from county lines

In total, 38 children and their families from the Margate and Dover areas of Kent, and three London boroughs have been provided with one-to-one, in person casework support between September 2017 and September 2018.

Of the 35 children who remained engaged, by September 2018:

- 11 (31%) children had successfully exited county lines activity
- 19 (54%) children were at decreased risk and are moving towards exiting the activity
- 5 (15%) children remained involved in/on the periphery of activity or were in custody

There are a range of very positive outcomes for the 11 children who have successfully exited county lines activity, including:

- 5 who have returned to education, including 2 who have achieved GCSE passes
- 3 who have moved into jobs

Of the 5 children who have re-engaged in education, 2 have achieved GCSE passes. This is something that the children, their mothers and professionals hoped for but had seemed completely out of reach. 2 children have also moved back into mainstream education from a PRU.

As will be explained later in the report, this is very unusual. It should not be the case, but it is very rare for a child to move out of a PRU once they are placed there, even if their time in alternative education was intended to be temporary. These two movements will have taken great effort and persistence on the part of the children and professionals, supported by SGT caseworkers. It also demonstrates the positive outcomes that can be achieved when children are provided with continuity of support for the all too rare transition from alternative provision into mainstream education.

The 3 older children who have moved into jobs are working in construction trades and warehousing. One is earning a very good wage already and this has made a huge difference to his attitude towards being part of a county line, where money plays a key role in seducing children into drug running.

Other key areas of change and progress include:

- improved relationships with family
- cessation or reduction in alcohol use
- cessation of Class A drug use, and reduction or cessation of cannabis use
- no longer associating with negative groups/individuals and no longer going missing
- no longer or rarely coming to the attention of the police
- improved eating, diet and sleep patterns
- better engagement with services, including mental health
- reductions in anger and violent outbursts
- new relationships with girlfriends; one young man who has become a father, is in a stable relationship with the mother and is being well supported by grandparents

Some children are in the early stages of this change, and it also must be remembered that these are adolescents, susceptible to the same mood swings and inconsistent behaviour expected of any teenager. Events such as changes in school or home life, an associate being released from custody, rumours amongst 'friends' or just normal human despondency can tempt a child back into involvement in crime and county lines activity.

Recently, a key adult player in one county line was removed through enforcement activity. Whilst this is positive in terms of removing one source of exploitation, it usually causes shifts in power and/or new players emerging who will be keen to re-exploit vulnerable children. Some instability in the local children has been observed and professionals and the SGT caseworker are working closely with them to identify the reasons for this and potential issues, and to address them quickly to ensure that they are kept on track.

The 54% of children who are in the process of exiting county lines are still very vulnerable to these risks because they are only just building the resilience and self confidence required to ride out the changes, squalls and storms of life. It is not surprising that a child who has been involved in an escalating range of exploitation, violence and coercion over a period of two, three or even five years will take some considerable time to be able to lead a more positive life. They will require consistent support from caseworkers over the next few months to enable them to sustain their progress more independently.

Local recruitment to county lines continues

The original cohort of referrals to the casework service was expected to include a significant number of London children who were being trafficked as part of county lines to Margate and other parts of

Kent. The early realisation that 85% of the cohort were in fact local Kent children revealed the change in 'business model' of county lines activity, shifting to much greater grooming and recruitment of local children. This finding was reflected in wider scoping work where many other county areas were observing an increased number of local children involved in running drugs for county lines. This is explored in greater detail in the April 2018 evaluation and scoping reports.

The trend of local recruitment has continued. The caseload of children being supported by SGT is now exclusively in Kent. Kent police report far fewer appearances of London (or Liverpool) based county lines individuals, and these tend to be adults in their 20s and 30s.

Since the April evaluation, the MOPAC funded county lines service for London children being trafficked to county areas has been established. This means that any London children who are now identified in Kent can be supported through this service. Given the limited capacity of the Kent service and the general lack of specialist services this is very welcome.

Most of the children on the Kent caseload are living with their birth mother/family, with a minority being in foster care. The original report provides a profile of the cohort, detailing the range of complex and severe issues experienced by these children. These include being victims and perpetrators of extreme violence, drug and alcohol abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system or being well known to the police, not in mainstream education (with most not in any education at all), mental health issues and numerous missing episodes travelling to various locations including the South West, Brighton, Wales, Blackpool, Cambridgeshire and many others.

Two children on the pilot caseload were deemed eligible for the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) which is intended to provide those exploited as part of modern slavery with some, fairly limited, protections and support. The NRM and Modern Slavery Act in relation to county lines is discussed in more detail in the scoping report. However, the experience in relation to these two children supports the finding that whilst the NRM provides a marker as to a child's exploitation under modern slavery, there is no adequate support available for the child unless there is a specialist service such as SGT's in place. In addition, the offence types that children are likely to commit when involved in county lines activity will often mean that they are not eligible for immunity from prosecution.

One of the Kent children referred to the NRM has needed to be placed in a number of different areas over a period of months, for his own safety because his life was being threatened by the line elders because of a drug debt. This relocation to a place of safety was not part of the NRM support as this is only available to adults not children. Through a series of unfortunate events, this child is now on remand in a YOI. The level and nature of the coercion used to 'persuade' him into running drugs which led to his arrest is not yet clear. However, one of the contributory factors in him committing the offence is that, having established some level of safety in his most recent local authority placement, another child known to the exploiting county line was placed in the same establishment which put him at very severe risk.

SGT caseworkers have continued to support this child and his mother through an extremely turbulent time. The value of this support is evident in the mother's testimony:

"I am writing to express how huge the impact Peter (SGT Caseworker) has had Mark's (son) and my life. Peter's constant support and strength has not only been instrumental to Mark but absolutely invaluable to myself. Peter is always there if I need to pass on information following calls from Mark or other professionals and he is never far away if I need to offload..."

Mark relies heavily on Peter's knowledge and ability to understand how he feels and what he is going through. Peter is without fail the first person Mark asks for when he needs a chat, he would love to be able to see more of Peter but sadly he is spread too thin and it's a shame there aren't more 'Peters' in our area.

With Mark on remand, Peter has had to travel long distances and leave home at ridiculously early hours to get to court/prison but has always been there for Mark and myself no matter what. He goes above and beyond for us both and I certainly could not have got through this last 9 months without him and I know the same goes for Mark. Thank you St Giles Trust for providing us with this incredible support."

The new cohort of children referred to the project in October 2018 to fill spaces created by those who have successfully exited activity includes for the first time girls who are being sexually and criminally exploited by a county line. In addition, one boy is only 12 years old – the youngest referral to date. Some of the referrals, including the girls, are located in Canterbury where police enforcement activity has identified them as highly vulnerable and in need of specialist support.

Casework remains highly effective

As highlighted in the original evaluation report, the casework delivered by SGT is very effective in helping many children exit from county lines activity. The discussions for this follow up evaluation revealed much about the range and quality of the relationships that caseworkers have developed and that are at the heart of this success:

Children

"I love her. She helps me a lot with my anger. She calms me down. I'd probably be in jail if I didn't have her. She understands me, she doesn't judge, she just talks it through with you. She would be the first person I'd call when I'm in trouble."

"You can talk freely. You know he understands because he's been there."

Parents (of children aged 15-17)

"I've been through 5 years of hell with him being involved in everything, including running drugs in Blackpool and all over the place. Things are going fantastic now. The penny is really dropping with him about real life. He's communicating, not kicking off. I haven't seen him drunk for nearly a year now and it used to happen every Friday. I go through his room and I'm not finding any evidence that he's working (on a line) for anyone. That's very different. He doesn't just disappear out and he's starting to get his relationships back with the family. He came to a family meal at his grandparent's the other day -the first time in 2 years."

"The boys need somebody who's experienced it, who isn't speaking out of a text book. He (caseworker) will fight his (son's) corner to try and make sure that he's got access to the things he needs to move on. Sometimes it can be difficult to get hold of him because he's so busy but the other day I had a real panic and he came and spent the evening to sort it out."

“St Giles is the best. We’ve had so many other workers who have worked with my son that I didn’t know at all. The social worker has been seeing him for 18 months and he has no relationship with him at all, or me. But I have a relationship with the St Giles workers and that makes a huge difference. We can work together to try and find the best way for him.”

“Without Simon (caseworker), life wouldn’t be worth living. He understands where we’re coming from and he’s been so reliable – coming to court, going well over and above what he’s paid to do. My son’s no angel still, but he’s a million times better than 12 months ago. I don’t find him passed out on the kitchen floor on Valium or walking around with a knife down his pants.”

Professionals

*“The caseworkers have got such a great ability to engage the young people – they are so disconnected from everything that it’s incredible that the caseworkers have been able to establish and maintain these relationships over such a long time – that’s a real strength. The spaces that those conversations create are really important for safeguarding those children – they’ll talk about risks and disclose really important things. Also, our relationship with St Giles means that we can concentrate on enforcing the (court) orders whilst they put in the hours helping them to comply and to do all the things that they need to so they can get back on a positive path. They (children) know that we talk, but they also trust that not everything they say gets back to us – only the things that we have to know.” **YOT worker***

*“They’re all confident in talking to her, they trust her. All of the kids who’ve worked with St Giles have done better because of their help. They open up to the caseworkers, they talk and that’s so important. The kids tell me that they (caseworkers) aren’t patronising – they’re honest and real. The service is invaluable, essential. I can’t praise it enough because it really does make a difference.” **Alternative Education Provider***

“Peter (SGT Caseworker) has been working with me on several cases and again I think the value of him being on board has been crucial for the young people. One of our new joint ventures is Kevin, a young man it has taken time to engage, but we appear to have now developed a positive relationship with Peter supporting him engaging with YOS and feeling things are moving forward for him.

I would also again like to mention Mark (another child) who the previous SGT caseworker worked tirelessly with and Peter has continued to support to date. Mark is a young man with huge potential but he needs a high level of support with professionals he trusts and Peter was able to engage Mark very swiftly and foster a positive relationship which really is testament to Peter’s abilities as a worker as Mark does not like or take to males easily.

*I believe St Giles fills a need in Kent across the county where young people need support without a requirement through either court or other legal processes. The young people view Peter as a support and his focus is very much the young people. If they are no longer involved in organised activities and the risks have been reduced they no longer need Peter although they may want him. He is one man and there is a high level of need. I hope this gives you some idea of the importance of continued work from St Giles Trust in Kent as I believe as a front line worker, he is of huge value to the young people I am working with.” **YOT worker***

The ability of caseworkers to help children engage with services that they are required to, as in the case of YOT, and those that are there to provide specialist support, for example, for addiction or mental health needs is vital and evident in the pilot. Providing this alternative, supported route as a 'honest broker' who can be trusted by both the child and the agency is a key success factor in the work.

As identified in the original report, the ability of caseworkers to understand the extreme risks that children are experiencing as part of a contextual safeguarding approach and the impact of previous trauma on the children and their behaviour are also key contributing factors to the success of the approach.

For this age group, the summer period is often a time when trouble tends to break out. Kent Police had experienced a very challenging time in the summer of 2017 with significant drug and violence related crime taking place and involving a group that included many of the children who were subsequently referred to the St Giles pilot. Summer 2018 appears to have been a very different experience for all concerned, with noticeably fewer disturbances:

"The summer was a pleasant surprise. We were gearing up for them going missing and for trouble, but it's been quiet and just one or two missing episodes. Some have gone into custody, but the good thing is that the ones that were left haven't picked up where they left off."

In addition, a number of children have re-engaged in education after the summer break. This is particularly positive in demonstrating that caseworker support is having sustainable impact. Children who have been out of education for considerable time, as is the case for many of the Kent cohort, will find it difficult to sustain their motivation for learning and the summer period is well known for being a time when children can be distracted and lured into less positive activity.

A mix and balance of caseworkers

As highlighted in the previous section, caseworkers' lived experience and/or cultural competence remains an essential feature that provides the much needed credibility required for children to develop relationships of trust. Over the 12 months of the pilot, 5 caseworkers have had involvement with the children – 3 men and 2 women with four being from BAME backgrounds and one White British. Most children have had two caseworkers because of changes that needed to take place at the end of the first period of Home Office funding in March/April 2018. This diverse mix of caseworkers has enabled useful learning to take place.

The majority of children involved in the pilot have experienced and/or continue to experience issues around absent or inconsistent parents. Whilst the caseworkers are not parents, they often represent the type of consistent positive adult who can bring some stability into their lives. This is particularly the case for the significant number living with lone mothers. Even where these mothers are working very hard to provide stable and positive environments for their children, one adult alone can really struggle with an adolescent who is experiencing problems.

Given that the majority of children are male and many of them do not have fathers or positive male figures in their lives, male caseworkers have provided *"really good role models for them"*, as illustrated by the comments of mothers:

"She (previous caseworker) was fantastic and my son really connected with her, but it's so good for him to hear from a male caseworker."

“It’s very good for him to have a positive male because he has no contact with his dad and he’s got sisters, no older brothers or anything. He’s very fond of Alfie (caseworker), he even called him when he was on holiday.”

A number of contributors recognised that there was great value in having a range of caseworkers – *“She’s a sort of motherly figure for him (son). She took on some of the hours that the YOT had given him and that helped to keep him out of the gang. Then the guys (male caseworkers) were really good because they talked about the nitty gritty of being in a gang and all that it isn’t all as good as it seems.” “The female caseworker was absolutely brilliant, but it’s great that the boys have a male caseworker now as well. We were worried about the change, but it’s actually been of great benefit to them.”*

As reported in the original evaluation, local children involved in county lines activity reflect the ethnic make up of their local area. The majority of Kent children are White British, however, there are some children who are from BAME backgrounds. Whilst ethnicity was not raised as a particular issue or factor by most contributors, there are clearly instances where it matters, as in the case of one mother and her foster son:

“She (caseworker) has been amazing, very supportive and flexible. There aren’t many black workers down here, so it’s really good to have someone who understands my culture and Isaac’s background. Now Isaac looks up to him (male caseworker) and he’s black too and that really helps.”

The ability of the project to provide positive BAME role models is particularly important since many (white) children drawn into county lines aspire to be what they think is ‘black and cool’. Understanding and seeing BAME men and women who have the respect of others (including the children themselves) and are ‘cool’ but who are not involved in county lines is an important message.

Supporting those who are in custody

During the course of the pilot, some children were charged with offences that took place before SGT became involved with them and were subsequently prosecuted and given custodial sentences. Others lapsed during their support from SGT and found themselves being sentenced to periods in youth offending institutions, including for breaches of court order/YOT conditions, often sparked by fear or a lack of resilience in challenging situations. Where SGT caseworkers had established relationships of trust with children before they were sentenced, support has continued for these children and their families. This has proved to be a very important aspect of the service.

The first example provided below gives a clear illustration of the fragility of the progress of these children. Not all will end up in custody, but the story provides very clear evidence of the triggers that can produce a downward spiral even for those who are apparently making very good progress.

This 16 year old had been heavily involved in county lines for at least 2 years. By March he had been making really good progress with the SGT caseworker, including working towards his GCSEs and even wanting to become a peer mentor for others to help them avoid getting involved. Unfortunately, a number of triggers led to him experiencing some form of ‘psychotic breakdown’ as well as becoming involved again in a range of drug and violence related offending, although not working for a county line. In addition to the trigger factors identified by the mother, discussions with the child also revealed he was in a state of high anxiety because an associate was being

released from custody and he believed that he would be targeted because he had not received a custodial sentence for related offences. He thought that the associate would see him as a grass.

Mother: *“He was doing really well and then a number of things happened. The funding ran out for St Giles so the caseworker changed, his favourite teacher left school and he got a letter saying he was going to be taken to court (for a previous offence). He started smoking weed again and he has a bad reaction to it. Then he was drinking every day, not going to school, buying a lot of coke and going to parties. He stole a bike and had an accident and broke his leg. I was hoping that would stop him but it didn’t.*

He was only sleeping a few hours and he was manic. I tried to explain to CAMHS that he was off his rocker but they didn’t do anything. When he went to court he was given a community order with a mental health order but he just couldn’t seem to comply and he kept on breaking it. So he was given 18 months (custodial sentence). He spent 2 months in isolation. He was paranoid and self-harming. It took 6 weeks for him to be seen by the hospital. By then I think the drug induced psychosis had reduced to anxiety. He’s now looking back over the last few months and trying to understand why he did things.

It’s really important that SGT keeps in touch with him in prison. There are others in there that are involved in the gang and I think he could easily get drawn in so he needs to have the chance to talk things through with the caseworker. I’ve never seen anything in prison that really understands or tackles the gang problem. He’s on a knife edge – he fluctuates between thinking he’ll set up his own line or going to college and getting a career. He finds it hard to resist the idea of the money from county lines. He needs to know that the caseworker will stay with him and be there when he gets out – I’m very worried about what’s going to happen in between the time he gets out and when he can start at college. SGT has a big role to play in helping that so that he doesn’t get drawn back in.”

Two other examples reflect a similar need for this support:

Mother of 17 year old in YOI: *“Isaac is asking if the caseworker is coming to get him when he gets released from prison. He trusts him. He was really helpful with Isaac when he was in prison before – he wouldn’t come out of his room at all and the caseworker helped him so that he did.”*

Mother of 16 year old in YOI: *“There’s an entire wing of gang members and the prison has said that they’ll keep him (son) away from them. He’s asked when David (caseworker) will come and see him. He’s said to me ‘Mum, instead of having Christmas presents could you pay for David instead’. He holds him (son) together, always.”*

YOT worker supporting a number of the caseload: *“It’s imperative that the caseworkers continue their relationship with them when they are in custody. It makes them feel valued because St Giles is still interested – they haven’t been written off because they’re in custody. I see it as a time that can be positive for them, and safe, with the right support.”*

Casework support for those in custody is by necessity a lighter touch intervention and whilst it does have some impact on the capacity of caseworkers to take on other referrals, it is vital that this continues.

It often takes many months for investigations to culminate in charges and court appearances. Where children have made significant positive progress in the intervening period and have moved

away from county line and other negative activity, the 'sudden' shock of a court summons can and does have a serious impact, including children regressing. Similarly, because in these local networks, many children are known to each other, when one is released from custody there can be an unfortunate ripple effect of anxiety about potential reprisals or even just a shift in the pecking order. These impacts take a lot of very skilled and intensive management.

Engagement in education remains a challenge

The April evaluation and accompanying national scoping report identified the challenges posed by the lack of engagement in education for children involved in county lines activity. At the point of referral to SGT's specialist casework service, none of the children involved in the Kent pilot were in mainstream education. This remains the case with the new referrals to the Kent service as well as the cohort for SGT's Cardiff based county lines pilot. Around 85% of the children being supported through the MOPAC funded London county lines service are also not in education.

A significant number of the Kent children had been placed in alternative education and many were on twilight timetables at pupil referral units (PRUs), meaning that they attended for one or two hours after the normal school day had finished. This was generally because of disruptive behaviour which was adversely affecting other children. An alternative education provider commented that: *"Reduced timetables aren't the answer and we're in the process of trying to deal with that. But sometimes it is important so that we can support mental health needs or to help a child deal with something like anger management. If it works better that they go to the gym for the first hour and then come to school then that's positive – it's just trying to make sure that they're not doing the wrong things when they aren't here."*

The very aggressive behaviour of some children can be very difficult to deal with. One child has proved impossible to place in an educational establishment because he exhibits very violent behaviour and has *"created enemies in every place which means that things will kick off if he's put in any of them."* This issue was reflected by an observation of the SGT Peer Advisor Co-ordinator in West Kent who has been working to establish relationships with a range of agencies – *"Mainstream schools have not responded at all, but alternative provisions have and are desperately struggling with the influence of gangs over their pupils (who travel in from all areas) and are having to refuse youngsters due to their connections on a regular basis."*

Understandably, PRUs really struggle with this very difficult problem and it is clear that some form of additional intervention or support is required to provide education for these children in other locations and to tackle the reasons why they cannot be placed in any educational establishment. Clearly, SGT can contribute to the solution but it is a much more widespread and systemic issue that requires a raft of interventions.

The very positive results for children's education described earlier in the report demonstrate that with the right kind of specialist, consistent and tenacious support, children who have not been in any form of education for months or years can re-engage and achieve. This has required good teamwork between the caseworker and the PRU and/or mainstream school, including caseworkers advocating and negotiating on behalf of children. For the two that transitioned back into mainstream education this involved significant negotiation on how this would be managed, particularly where the child had not been in any routine of getting up in the mornings. Agreeing part-time attendance as a starting point for re-entry into full time school was a particularly challenging area of negotiation.

Contributions to this evaluation from an alternative education provider highlight other significant challenges:

Other agencies not recognising the problem: *“Last year we had 3 girls and 6 boys who were known to be gang affiliated, but because we’re not experts, we aren’t always believed by the police or social services. I raised an issue about one child with the police and YOT worker but they didn’t think he was a problem, now he’s in custody. Having the caseworker (SGT) at meetings with us is really helpful because they will listen to her because they know she has the knowledge. It’s also really good for me – she knows so much and I can check out things with them to see if I’m overreacting or if something needs to be done.”*

A need for much more focus on mental health: *“A lot of students have mental health issues that are a huge contributor to their poor behaviour and there isn’t enough focus on mental health and wellbeing. It’s needed for the students and the parents – involving the parents much more in the education would really improve things, so that they can learn too.”*

Challenge in being able to offer a curriculum that meets needs and promotes aspiration: *“Vocational studies used to be a big thing, but recently there’s been a swing back to academic. Our students engage much better with vocational and practical studies. Their careers are being forgotten. Only one student went on work placement last year. There are so many barriers – DBS, safeguarding, health and safety. A lot of our students have English as an additional language too which makes it even harder. We’ve recently introduced enrichment activities like team building but, ironically, the students aren’t so keen because they don’t have grades attached to them!”*

Enabling the transition back to mainstream education: *“There’s no doubt that we are dumping grounds for students that no-one wants and the students feel that. I’m trying very hard to build relationships with our mainstream schools and I’ve succeeded in getting a managed move for one student back into mainstream. It may not seem like much, but in the current climate it’s a big achievement – it shouldn’t be, it should be what happens routinely. But also if the school puts them in an internal unit it destroys their trust – they think that the teachers don’t like them. The St Giles caseworker can help to build that trust, but it needs a change in the mainstream schools too.”*

Earlier in the report, the positive impact of casework support on children’s engagement in education was highlighted. Alternative education providers value highly the support that SGT is providing and it is clearly a vital element of helping children away from county lines and towards more positive futures where they can gain the recognition and income that might otherwise be sought through county lines involvement. In West Kent, Peer Advisors have also been working with alternative education providers with one giving an impactful presentation on gangs and crime which resulted in him being asked to return and provide some follow up support with students. Another PRU has also requested some one-to-one support for students.

Stable funding solutions and additional capacity are required

The proposed caseload of 30 children was oversubscribed by November 2017 and it was clear that those receiving support would need significant time to achieve sustainable exit from county lines activity. The extension of Home Office funding was not confirmed until after March 2017 and, whilst it was very welcome, provided just six months more support for the pilot. Whilst the Home Office was making its decision to extend funding, SGT was able to use a small underspend to keep the

service going. It was clear that the vast majority of children needed ongoing, unbroken caseworker support if they were to maintain progress towards exiting county lines. Kent PCC then agreed to fund the service through to March 2019, enabling additional children to be referred, but not providing the long term and adequate funding required to take forward what is a highly successful pilot. Finally, in late December 2018, joint Home Office/Kent PCC funding was agreed for a three year period and included additional resource for a much needed specialist caseworker for girls.

The uncertain and short term funding that the pilot has been subject to undoubtedly hindered the full potential of the service from being realised. The type of experienced and dedicated staff necessary to deliver effectively in this highly challenging work are in huge demand. SGT has only been able to offer six month contracts to these staff and despite their significant commitment to the work and the children, this creates financial uncertainty for them and, more importantly, creates a high level of uncertainty for the very vulnerable children and families that they are supporting.

Amidst overwhelmingly positive comments from mothers and professionals about the casework support, the one area of concern was the short term and uncertain nature of the funding which inevitably impacts on staffing, which remained until the longer term funding was confirmed in late December 2018:

“Because they (SGT) don’t know whether they’re going to be funded or not, the changes all happen so fast and you don’t know until the last minute if there’s going to be anyone to help or not, and who that might be. It’s very unsettling when you’ve been in a really good place of having someone there even when things are bad. Now they say they have funding until March, but that’ll be here before we know it, and what’s going to happen then. It’s that kind of change that sets things back.” **Mother of 16 year old currently in custody**

“We need to know that this is going to continue to be funded. Knowing that we’ve got the support of the St Giles caseworker is essential for our students.” **Pupil Referral Unit professional**

“We are really grateful for the extension of funding, but we need to know it will be there in the longer term and we need more caseworkers – we have a huge need for this service.” **YOT professional**

“St Giles have been working in collaboration with Kent Police, specifically in the Thanet and Dover areas for the past year. Children that are exploited by county lines have real difficulty in truly engaging with statutory services with the fear of arrest and enforcement activity making it hard for my officers to get to the heart of the exploitation. For this reason, a service that sits outside of the statutory framework and provides a voice for the child to bridge the gap is invaluable. In my 20 years of policing I have never be so sure of the need for a service that provides this intensive engagement and support. The service that we have piloted would benefit a significant number of children in our communities and would strongly support any avenues for funding.” **Detective Inspector, Kent Police**

Whilst SGT should ensure that any changes in caseworkers are handled smoothly and with effective and supported handovers, funders should be aware that short term funding and/or last minute funding decisions can have serious negative impact for this type of intensive and fragile work.

Establishing a specialist county lines service in a completely new area that has fewer other specialist services than London, is remote from SGT’s main centres and where caseworkers have needed to establish partnerships with professionals in statutory and voluntary sector services is a significant challenge. SGT has managed to do this very effectively in a remarkably tight timeframe.

A key learning point for commissioners of pilots is to consider how successful interventions may be funded after the pilot period and to have plans in place to do this well before the end of the pilot period. Whilst providers such as SGT accept their responsibilities in terms of exploring funding options, the onus should not be solely on the pilot provider to do this where the successful interventions help to support the delivery of the commissioner's objectives – in this case the Government's Serious Violence Strategy and the priorities of Kent PCC.

As highlighted in the April evaluation report, the capacity of caseworkers is stretched because of a number of factors. These include the level and intensity of need of the children (and their families), the requirement for high levels of partnership working with other professionals in order to maximise success and the increasingly wide geographical spread of cases. The additional budget made available through the Home Office/PCC 3 year funding will certainly help to address this issue.

The intention of the pilot was to train Peer Advisor volunteers who could support the caseworkers. Project logistics meant that whilst Peer Advisors have been trained as planned, this took place in the Maidstone/Tunbridge Wells area of Kent and therefore the volunteers have been undertaking a range of other highly valued work in these areas. This is explored in more detail later in the following section of the report.

For the caseworkers, this has meant not having access to this very valuable source of additional support, for example, to carry out some visits to children, accompany them to meetings, work with parents etc. which might have helped relieve some of the pressure. If a Peer Advisor programme could be set up in East Kent this may provide a further partial solution in the longer term.

Peer Advisors bring significant benefits to West Kent

The Peer Advisor model is central to SGT's ethos and practice as an organisation – enabling people with lived experience to gain a Level 3 Information, Advice and Guidance qualification and to offer their support as peers.

For the pilot, this element was also intended to test out how this model could be used to start to grow specialist expertise in areas where there is currently little or no such provision. The idea was to recruit people with lived experience of drugs/gangs/county lines to become volunteer Peer Advisors and to encourage organisations that may not previously have considered taking volunteers 'with a past' to offer placements so that Peer Advisors could deliver support to clients in these settings. The ultimate aim would be for these organisations to consider employing Peer Advisors in paid roles, thereby building the capacity for specialist county lines services.

Nine people with lived experience have successfully trained as Peer Advisors and are providing skilled volunteer support through a variety of placements in the Tunbridge Wells area. Peer Advisors are very positive about the training and placements:

"This is my first volunteering role. The training has been fantastic and I've learnt a huge amount from the Co-ordinator. She's really good at helping you to connect with the staff in the other agencies and supporting you. She does a very good debrief which you can need sometimes. It's given me a lot of self-worth too. I've got a bit of a past and without this I wouldn't have had the confidence to think about work – now I'm thinking I'd like to do something like this. I work with the child and the family – often you need to connect with the family to really understand what's going on with the child. I'm going to stay as a volunteer for a while because I have a real loyalty to this project."

"I was interested in doing this because I thought I'd gain some skills and help some young people onto the right path. My case manager suggested it and I've got the experience of being involved in stuff. My experience lets the young person know that I know what's going on – I don't have to tell them my whole story, it's not about that. The training was good and the resources that they give you. I can speak with confidence because I have that knowledge and my own experience. I did a presentation at a PRU about gang and crime culture. They looked pretty amazed that I was talking about that stuff and they wanted to engage. I can talk to them honestly about the risks of being involved, and also I can give them a voice when they need it."

As highlighted earlier, SGT was unable to recruit and train Peer Advisors in the Margate and Dover areas as was originally planned, which has meant that the Peer Advisors have not been able to support the casework delivery. However, they have been and continue to deliver significant benefits in West Kent where there is no specialist provision. Of particular note is the work that SGT's Peer Advisors have been delivering as partners in Tunbridge Wells Community Safety Unit (CSU):

After initial Peer Advisor training took place, SGT set up a Peer Advisor led initiative, NOW (Neck of the Woods) for young people at risk of becoming involved in gangs and in particular being drawn into county lines. This has enabled the Peer Advisor team to develop relationships with various statutory agencies in the West Kent area including the police, social services and alternative education providers.

As a result, Peer Advisors were invited by Tunbridge Wells CSU to take part in an 'All Out' evening event in April 2018 which involved a range of statutory and voluntary sector partners (police, Kenwood Trust, YMCA, Early Help, Community Wardens) working in small teams to identify and engage with groups of children and young people who were on the street and at risk of involvement in child sexual and criminal exploitation, including county lines.

Children and young people *"really engaged well"* with the Peer Advisors who both had lived experience, one of involvement in drugs and the other gangs and county lines.

The event was judged by the CSU and partners to have been highly successful because it has opened up a dialogue and relationships with children who previously were involved in significant low level crime, with some being exploited through much more serious crime including county lines activity - *"Our Peer Advisor was meeting with one of the (All Out) group and a young man joined them. He then travelled back home on the same train as the Peer and chatted about his experience and fears from his involvement in county lines. He was then referred to us by social services that week."*

As a result of further work arising from the intervention, some children were identified as having links to gangs/organised crime in London and nearby Maidstone.

The 'All Out' event included consulting with children about what kinds of activities they would like to get involved in, which led to a series of very well attended youth engagement sessions that included some facilitated by SGT Peer Advisors – *"Our Peers led three of the sessions and the youngsters were very keen to talk to us and enjoyed the attention they were getting. Our Peers also assisted with other sessions which included a visit to a drug and alcohol rehab unit, a talk about appropriate relationships by a domestic violence specialist organization, and a presentation by the National Citizenship Scheme which were all embedded within fun activities. We took them to some local woods on the last session to do some cooking on open fires which they particularly enjoyed."*

A further highly successful 'All Out' event was delivered in July 2018 and involved the same cross agency team as well as senior professionals including the leader of the council, local councillors and police chiefs. These professionals were impressed at the way in which Peer Advisors were able to engage the children, and they gained a much better understanding of the issues facing vulnerable children and the agencies trying to help them.

SGT Peer Advisors have been following up with one-to-one support for some of the young people engaged through this work, as well as contributing to multi-agency panel meetings to discuss and agree how best to help children referred for support.

Tunbridge Wells CSU were clear in identifying SGT as a pivotal partner in the success of the overall approach – *“They are worth their weight in gold and we couldn’t have achieved what we have without them. It’s a team approach, but their ability to engage the young people is so good and they give them really positive, good advice that they listen to. We are very proud of SGT and we really enjoy working with them.”* The CSU has noted a reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour since this initiative started. Whilst this is clearly as a result of excellent partnership working, the essential role of SGT and the Peer Advisors is evident.

The success of the CSU’s approach and the essential role that SGT played was recently recognised through certificates of merit from Kent Police for the CSU, SGT co-ordinator and the Peer Advisors. These awards are given for outstanding service in the police force. The CSU’s award is the only one that was given to a partnership, demonstrating the value and excellence of the approach.

There are a number of key impacts arising from this piece of work:

- **Helping to raise awareness and understanding about drugs, gangs and county lines involvement** – the lived experience and knowledge of SGT’s Co-ordinator and Peer Advisors has enabled them to share key insights and information about gangs, drugs and county lines exploitation with professionals in statutory and voluntary sector services. This is increasing the overall awareness and understanding of the issues affecting children, including *“children being seen as vulnerable which has meant that services are working quite differently and more effectively with them now.”*
- **Improved identification and support of children at serious risk** – the ability of SGT’s Co-ordinator and Peer Advisors to engage with children on the street and quickly form relationships of trust because of their lived experience and approach has meant that children are much more likely to disclose the harmful events and relationships that they are experiencing. *“Many of the young people we have engaged with have little parental supervision/support and are regularly going missing but not being reported as missing. They spend whole nights out in the parks on a regular basis and a common thread is that they are medicated for conditions such as ADHD and ASD which exposes them to behaviour altering drugs from a young age. Also, their parents have often been drug users or dealers themselves.”*

Through careful handling of this information, children can receive the safeguarding interventions that they need and the Peer Advisors can provide ongoing one-to-one support to help their engagement. *“One particular individual was drug running and was particularly vulnerable, regularly turning up dishevelled and very hungry. We have maintained contact with him and his family and his level of offending is reducing.”*

- **Supporting improved partnership working and a holistic approach** – as in East Kent, SGT is taking a very proactive partnership approach, evident in the involvement in the cross agency CSU work. This is not only vital if the children are to receive the full range of support that they need, but it also is helping to develop greater mutual trust and respect between agencies – *“At urgent strategy meetings with social services, SGT is involved and the work that we do together means that we can speak about what we’re doing with that child. It means that we are all working at the same level with knowledge and understanding and that helps the partnership.”* SGT staff and volunteers also *“feed back intelligence when appropriate around gang activity as we come across it”* which also supports improved partnership responses to crime, exploitation and vulnerability.
- **Enabling better engagement in positive activities and services** – as with the caseworkers in Margate and Dover, Peer Advisors are able to provide the support that children need to understand the benefits of engaging with services and activities. Children who would not normally take up the opportunity of positive activities have readily engaged with the sessions organised by the CSU with partners including SGT.

Demonstrating the benefits of volunteers and paid staff with specialist lived experience

The delivery of the Peer Advisor model in West Kent is enabling agencies to recognise the importance and benefits of involving trained volunteers with the type of lived experience that enables them to understand the realities of the children they are supporting, empathise with them and demonstrate a way out of negative activity including county lines.

For all agencies in Kent, involving volunteers and paid workers who ‘have a past’ as integral partners who are included in confidential and sensitive meetings is providing a new angle that is benefiting the children who are at the centre of service delivery. It takes a level of trust to do this and it is to the credit of statutory services that they are not only open to this way of working but welcome it wholeheartedly and are making the most of the opportunities that it provides.

An intention of piloting the volunteer Peer Advisor model was to test out if it could lead to specialist volunteers becoming paid workers who could offer their expertise in areas that currently do not have the benefit of this but that are experiencing damaging county lines, drugs and gangs exploitation. This has been proven in West Kent. One Peer Advisor has just been offered an apprenticeship in the Youth Justice Service. This post has been specially created for him, recognising that his skills, background and understanding alongside the experience he has gained as a Peer Advisor means that he can make a real difference working with young people who find themselves involved in crime and exploitation.

There are further examples of the model helping to provide a pathway into paid work that will begin to build specialist support in the area - *“One of our Peer Advisors had not worked with young people before but found that she was able to engage really well with them and is now looking for employment with a youth agency. She was a main player in the success of the programme.”*

A need to build on the momentum

Clearly, whilst the Peer Advisor model represents a very good start, there is some way to go before there are enough specialist workers in West Kent to cope with the number and nature of the issues being experienced there. Many of the volunteers, as well as the Co-ordinator are continuing to work

with the children, families and agencies on a voluntary basis for the time being. This is not ideal but shows the huge loyalty and commitment that they have to the project.

What this element of the pilot demonstrates is that it is possible to begin to sow the seeds of specialist support in an area, and that this can be embedded in a range of agencies. What will be important is that host agencies for paid or voluntary workers are able to maintain the ethos of the specialist role so that the work can continue to grow and develop.

Moving forward

The opportunity to carry out a follow up evaluation of the county lines pilot 12 months on from its inception has identified that it has continued to deliver effective solutions to help children who are drawn into the criminal exploitation of county lines.

The casework support is enabling children to move into positive futures of education and work, aspiring to something far more than moving up the hierarchy of a drugs line. The project is clearly having a significant impact on improving the welfare and wellbeing of children, and, in some instances has probably already saved lives.

The Peer Advisor model is not only providing something similar in the way of one-to-one support, but is also changing the culture of existing services by contributing the positive credibility of lived experience and the ability to connect with disengaged children. This has the potential to start the process of establishing county lines specialists in areas that desperately need them.

Through its range of interventions and relationship building, the project is helping to raise awareness, increase knowledge and develop the professional curiosity, contextual safeguarding and trauma informed approaches that are essential to preventing children from being drawn into county lines, identifying them when they are involved and providing the effective means for them to exit.

The recommendations contained in the report are intended to help take forward this work. Training of professionals through SGT's STOP programme and raising awareness in children and young people through the SOS+ programme could help to drastically reduce new recruitment into lines. Combined with casework support to help those already affected, these interventions together could produce a highly effective 'multiplier effect' that is capable of significantly greater impact than the already very successful results of this pilot.