

Evaluating the impact of the County Lines in Cymru (CLiC) Project

Introduction

County Lines in Cymru (CLiC) is a service funded through Children in Need (CiN). Starting in 2017, CLiC aims to support children and young people who have become involved in county lines activity in Cardiff, Swansea and the surrounding area. The three key outcomes are:

- Reducing the involvement of children and young people in county lines operations as gang protagonists, victims and perpetrators
- Improving family relationships for children and young people involved in county lines operations
- Increasing the availability of support for children and young people involved in county lines operations

The interim evaluation carried out in 2019 revealed that these objectives were being achieved, enabling children to move into more positive lifestyles, including reconnecting with their families. CLiC was also developing ground breaking partnership work with the police, social care, schools and other key agencies.

This report builds on the interim evaluation, identifying the further progress that St Giles has made in this essential and sometimes life saving area of work, reviewing the impact of six years of delivery and partnership development. Rather than repeating previous findings, reference is made to the interim report. To gain additional detail of the project's work it is recommended that both are read.

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Summary of findings

CLiC delivers ground breaking, essential and dedicated support

- ❖ Since 2017, CLiC has delivered ground breaking work delivering intensive one-to-one specialist support to 140 of the most exploited and vulnerable children and their families in South Wales, as well as light touch support for over 388 additional children. In line with its aims, CLiC has improved children's self-esteem, empowering them to make positive decisions and seek appropriate help. The project makes a significant and valued contribution to helping tackle the pernicious and serious problem of child exploitation in county lines drug running.
- ❖ Of the 140 children receiving in-depth specialist support, 103 (74%) have exited county lines exploitation and activity and a further 22 of the working age young people have moved into jobs. Given the complexity and degree of exploitation and other issues facing these young people, these are very impressive outcomes and demonstrate the effectiveness of the project.
- ❖ Caseworkers' lived experience, ability to connect with young people, tenacity and dedication is central to the success of the project. In addition, their in depth knowledge and experience of police and court procedures, exploitation and the NRM has been of immense benefit, enabling young people to be properly protected by the law and, in some cases, to avoid inappropriate and damaging custodial sentences.
- ❖ There is clear evidence that CLiC support can help children and young people make lasting changes in their lives, moving away from exploitation and criminality and establishing stable, positive lifestyles. These journeys are often long and involve many ups and downs, as is often the case for anyone trying to escape trauma, coercion and violence.
- ❖ Changes in data collection and recording methods and a lack of staff capacity over the course of the project, combined with additional pressures and data issues during the pandemic mean that project data is incomplete in some areas and the full impact of the project is likely to be far greater than can be formally evidenced.

Invaluable work with partners to help tackle child criminal exploitation

- ❖ The understanding of criminal exploitation of children and young people by the police, social care, schools and other statutory sector services has grown. However, it remains patchy, particularly in relation to children and young people being recognised as both victim and perpetrator, as reflected in the still unsatisfactory application (or not) of the national referral mechanism (NRM) and modern slavery act (MSA).
- ❖ CLiC has not only delivered sometimes life saving services for children and young people, but also supported the development of understanding in other agencies (police, social care, schools) and contributed to the further development of specialist exploitation services across St Giles and more widely. This is helping highly vulnerable children and young people in South Wales and beyond.

A need to increase the response for girls and young women

- ❖ Between 2017 and 2023, only 5 referrals of girls were made to CLiC. Nationally, around 13% of those identified as involved in county lines exploitation are female (National Co-ordination Centre for County Lines, 2021). This suggests that the police (and other statutory services) are not recognising the way in which girls and young women present, including understanding that sexual exploitation is often a feature of county lines involvement.
- ❖ CLiC has clearly responded very well to the needs of the girls who have been referred, indicating that the specialist service required for them is being delivered. However, improvements in the understanding and knowledge of referral partners is needed to ensure that girls and young women are being recognised and referred for help.

Effective responses to the pandemic and cost of living crisis

- ❖ The Covid 19 pandemic saw an increase in criminal exploitation with exploiters taking advantage of reduced safeguarding from school closures and little, if any, contact from social care, as well as significant increased hardship and tension in families. CLiC, in contrast to many other services, continued to deliver as normal, providing an essential service.
- ❖ Post pandemic, the cost of living crisis has placed significant additional pressure on many families, making children even more vulnerable to the false promises of making money quickly to support loved ones and/or to have the clothes and possessions many teenagers understandably want.

An urgent need for continued and increased funding

- ❖ The 2019 evaluation highlighted the increasingly local nature of the criminal exploitation of children and young people through the developing 'business model' of county lines activity. This pattern has continued, accompanied by significant local violence, including homicides, as well as some children and local people being trafficked long distances from home.
- ❖ A 2023 drugs intelligence profile produced by South Wales Police highlights the continuing and increasing threat posed by drug use and linked criminality, including the exploitation of vulnerable children and young people. The police and other statutory services emphasise the importance of a specialist service such as CLiC in helping to tackle these issues.
- ❖ Since 2017, funding levels have restricted the capacity of CLiC to one front line caseworker. Most importantly, this is not sufficient to meet demand and places considerable pressure on a single caseworker dealing with high levels of individual need and vulnerability. In addition, it does not allow enough time for the data recording and analysis essential to evidence the full impact of the project.

Recommendations – action taken and further suggestions

A number of the recommendations made in the interim report have been actioned, including:

- CLiC is working very effectively with key partners with teamwork that supports the public health approach to tackling county lines exploitation, although relationships with health partners are less well developed.
- Earlier support for children on the fringes of exploitation was provided through the St Giles service supported by the Early Intervention Youth Fund, although this funding has now come to an end.
- CLiC is supporting children from Cardiff, Swansea and the Vale of Glamorgan, widening its reach in response to need and to fill the gaps where other voluntary sector agencies are not operating.
- Peer Advisors have continued to be trained and work with a wide variety of partner organisations as well as within St Giles to support young people and families. In addition, a specialist families caseworker also provides support.
- The referral process is more streamlined and enables children to be supported more quickly.
- The caseworker has increased significantly the understanding of other professionals in respect of the NRM process and its importance in protecting exploited children. It is not clear if the learning about the application of the process and issues with the support available have been communicated beyond the project/local area.

The one outstanding recommendation that St Giles has not been able to action is to increase the capacity of the project. This remains an important and is included in the new set of recommendations that follow:

- **Increase the capacity of CLiC** – to relieve the pressure on the current caseworker and respond to the identified demand for specialist support for children, as well as the development of statutory and voluntary sector partner services.
- **Maintain the geographical scope of CLiC** so that vulnerable children in the wider South Wales area can be supported, avoiding a ‘postcode lottery’. This is particularly important given the significant volume of local trafficking and exploitation within South Wales.
- **Address the significant underrepresentation of girls and consider how more exploited girls can be supported.** This will need to include working with referral partners, particularly the police and social care, to raise awareness and understanding of how girls present differently, and to ensure that those identified as subject to CSE are also assessed for their involvement in CCE.
- **Explore how children and young people who are being criminally exploited but who have not yet come to the attention of the police can be supported** – this would require additional funding and referrals via social care, schools, parents etc.
- **Explore how the service can extend its upper age limit** to provide continuity of support for those young people turning 18 on the point of engagement, and those 18+ referred to the project. This will require additional funding for young people outside of the scope of CiN funding.
- **Strengthen data collection and analysis**, including through dedicated admin/data support staffing, to ensure that the full activity and impact of the service can be robustly evidenced and communicated.

Brief background and context

In 2017, CLiC was the first specialist county lines exploitation service in Wales, and only the second in the UK. Originally intended to support children and young people trafficked into Cardiff and the surrounding area through county lines exploitation, it quickly became apparent that around 80% of these highly vulnerable individuals were Cardiff residents. Fortunately, and exemplifying best practice commissioning, CiN funding provided the flexibility to support exploited young people regardless of their home area, enabling CLiC to become established as a flagship specialist service tackling one of the most pernicious and damaging forms of criminal exploitation of children.

Over the last six years, St Giles has established a well founded reputation as the ‘go to’ specialist for criminal exploitation, delivering a range of services for exploited children and young people across England and Wales, with CLiC as the flagship service in Wales. An overarching review of all these services and the issues that they respond to can be found in *Criminal exploitation of children and young people on county lines: A summary of the issues and the specialist services of St Giles (January 2023)*.

The network of services offered by St Giles means that children young people who are trafficked out of their home area and/or are relocated because of a threat to life can often receive continuity of support from St Giles specialist caseworkers. This is vital for those exploited on county lines and there are a number of examples of children referred to CLiC including a boy from the Midlands who was safely returned to his home area through partnership working between the CLiC and St Giles Midlands team, and a Cardiff boy who had to be relocated to London – during the Covid pandemic – who was supported by the London team, as detailed in the case study presented later.

Since the interim evaluation report was written, St Giles has also established a range of services in Bristol and other areas of the south west of England. This is particularly important for vulnerable children in South Wales because of the prevalence of county lines operations that run from and to the south west. Having a presence across these areas not only enables children to be helped, but also contributes to the understanding of exploitation, changing trends and emerging threats to children.

2019 saw the introduction by the Home Office of Violence Reduction Units (VRU), including in South Wales. The VRU funds some services including an NHS Violence Prevention Team operating in two emergency departments (EDs), delivered by specialist nurses and community based caseworkers, as well as specialist St Giles caseworkers. CLiC works with other voluntary sector providers such as Action for Children and MAC, as well as with statutory services, to help maximise the service coverage for exploited children and young people, however, there remains a significant need for CLiC which also currently only has capacity to support some, not all affected children.

Developing the understanding of exploitation

Over the six years of CLiC’s operation, the thinking around exploitation has evolved. Most recently there is an increasing and welcome move to ‘desegregating’ the various ways of categorising exploitation ie: sexual exploitation, county lines exploitation, domestic coercive control/abuse etc. that have traditionally been used. This is helpful as it recognises that these distinctions are artificial – children, young people and adults subject to exploitation may, and often do, experience a range of different and interconnected abuse. This is particularly important in enabling girls and young women’s exploitation to be more fully recognised and understood. Often they are “*put down the CSE route*” which does not recognise the county lines or other form of criminal exploitation they may be involved in. This issue is explored further on page 7.

Similarly, by removing unhelpful categorisation, the many children and young people involved in county lines exploitation who are also subject to domestic violence and/or coercive control can be more effectively supported. Given that the majority of children exploited on county lines have and/or continue to be victims and/or witnesses to domestic violence, this is extremely important.

The useful development in thinking and approach does not do away with the need for specialist services/expertise that can respond to different sources of exploitation. Rather, it means that specialists in any particular field need to work closely together and have mutual understanding of each other's knowledge and skills, keeping the child and their needs front and centre. Ideally, professionals will have a background in a range of exploitation, as is the case with CLiC where the caseworker had an in depth knowledge of domestic violence, including the legal and court processes, as well as county lines exploitation.

A number of sources anecdotally report an increase in violence associated with county lines and other forms of child criminal exploitation. In addition, reorganisation of some services has made it more difficult to identify trends and emerging issues. CLiC plays a vital role in responding to both these issues, as illustrated by feedback from a social worker:

"I used to work in what was then a brand new team for exploited children. I first came across Ruth because she was already working with one of the kids. That team was multi-agency and worked really well but it was split up through re-organisation and that's lost a lot of that specialism. We really need projects like CLiC that have that specialism. Criminal exploitation is a lot more recognised than it was and there are more services, but since the team was split up it's less easy to spot trends. There is definitely more knife crime. More funding is needed for CLiC. It's a great service and we really need it."

Who are the children CLiC supports?

By July 2023, a total of 140 children and young people had received intensive one-to-one support through CLiC. The majority of referrals come from SWP, however, schools and children's social care have also been able to refer some highly vulnerable and exploited children.

In addition to the in-depth and frequently long term specialist support given to those children referred to CLiC, the caseworker's trusted and expert knowledge has also meant that an additional 388 children and young people were supported by CLiC through visits to them whilst in police custody or at home. This support involves sensitive work to explore what each child has been/is involved in and the risk that this might pose. The CLiC caseworker provides information and talks through issues with the child, as well as making referrals to other services where appropriate. This significant additional work is highly valued by all, including the police Child Exploitation Officer who recognises the in-depth knowledge and specialist support being offered.

Data for the 140 children receiving in depth support reveal the following:

Age, gender, ethnicity and disability:

- 49% aged 13-15 years old, 61% aged 16-18 years old, and 1 young person aged 19+
- 96% male
- 50% from non-white British backgrounds

Residency:

- 80% from the South Wales area

- Those from other areas were from London, Bristol, the Midlands, Kent and Surrey
- 28% living in local authority accommodation

Patchy data means that it is not possible to give figures for other important background characteristics of the CLiC cohort. However, it is accurate to say that the majority of children come from homes where there is material deprivation. Some also come from families involved in criminality. Many have experienced some form of trauma, as a victim, witness and/or perpetrator – either prior to and/or during their exploitation. It is important to add that a small number of children come from materially comfortable backgrounds with no obvious issues. That said, there is generally a vulnerability factor that could relate to family tensions, school problems or other issues. It is these issues that county lines elders are skilled at spotting and exploiting.

The figures above demonstrate that, in common with many other parts of the UK, there is ethnic disproportionality when comparing the ethnicity of children referred to the project with the demographics of South Wales. According to the latest ONS 2021 census, the population in Cardiff is predominantly white (79.2%), with non-white minorities representing the remaining 20.8% of the population. Figures for Swansea show a similar pattern, with people from non-white groups representing 8.6% of the population. This indicates that the percentage of children from non-white British backgrounds referred to CLiC (50%) is more than double that of the proportion in Cardiff and six times that of Swansea. Even if some adjustment was made for ‘white other’ groups, this still highlights very significant disproportionality.

Over a six year period, only five girls have been referred to CLiC. This is a much lower proportion than across all other St Giles county lines services which show around 10% of referrals are female. The National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) figures for 2021 show 9% for under 18s and 13% overall. Nationally, the involvement of girls and young women in county lines activity and exploitation has, and continues to be under-identified, as highlighted in *Criminal exploitation of children and young people on county lines: A summary of the issues and the specialist services of St Giles (January 2023)*:

“Female involvement in county lines activity remains only partially recognised, placing girls and young women at increased risk as they are perceived as under the radar by line operators. In addition, whilst the role of CSE in county lines is now better understood there is a still a tendency to only acknowledge the sexual exploitation and ignore the county lines involvement. Conversely, sexual abuse and exploitation of males is often overlooked. This stereotyping is a disservice and risk to both sexes.”

The very low levels of female referrals on CLiC suggests that there is a need for the police and other referral partners to increase their understanding of the nature and presentation of female exploitation to enable girls and young women to access the specialist help that they need. Other reports produced for St Giles explore this issue more detail.

Data collection for CLiC has been patchy for a number of reasons including changes in St Giles and police data systems and having no dedicated admin/data staff on the project, placing the pressure on the single caseworker who is already working above and beyond her contracted duties. In addition, during the pandemic, there were difficulties in accessing data and, because of school and other service closures, in accurately recording participant attendance etc. Whilst this does not take away from the evident impact of the project, it does mean that the full activity and impact has not been recorded. This is disappointing for CLiC as it makes it more challenging to demonstrate to CiN and other potential funders the full extent of the significant difference that the project makes.

Impressive outcomes for a high needs, high risk cohort

Of the 140 young people receiving intensive support, 103 (74%) have been able to exit county lines exploitation and activity, and 22 young people of working age have moved into jobs. These outcomes are very impressive given the degree of exploitation and involvement the children and young people had in county lines drug running. Data gaps again make it difficult to provide robust figures for the number of children who have engaged/re-engaged in education. This is partly due to the impact of Covid on education during the height of the pandemic and the after-effects where many children and young people found it difficult to re-engage with school. That said, it is possible to say that all those who have successfully exited county lines activity have re-engage with learning, training or employment as part of their progress.

Trying to leave county lines exploitation is incredibly difficult – physical and emotional threats, drug debt and other forms of coercion and control take time, effort and the development of belief that there is the possibility of a better life.

The examples given throughout the report demonstrate the challenging journeys that children navigate with the support of the CLiC caseworker to enable them to leave and importantly to sustain a new life. Many of those getting support from CLiC stay in touch with the project after they have exited county lines. Five of those from the original cohort, who are aged up to 23 now, continue to share positive news about jobs, family etc. with the caseworker, and sometimes ask for advice about contacting services for example, for mental health support. This demonstrates the power of the relationships developed by the caseworker.

Effective specialist casework is the key

To date, CLiC has had two highly skilled and experience caseworkers supporting exploited children and young people. ‘Ruth’ established the service and in 2022 moved into a management role, overseeing the work of the new caseworker ‘Eva’. Both caseworkers are regarded highly by children and young people, their parents and other professionals.

The dedication and skill of the caseworkers is evident throughout this report. The interim evaluation highlighted a wide range of positive progress and outcomes resulting from this support, and this has continued in the subsequent years. Children have successfully moved away from exploitative, criminal activities, re-engaged with learning and employment, developed more positive relationships with family and with other professionals and stopped going missing. This demonstrates that CLiC is helping children to achieve the key objectives St Giles has for them to:

- Build connections to move forward – with family, positive friendship groups, professionals delivering other services eg: drugs, alcohol, mental health.
- Build a sense of safety and stability – dealing with debt bondage, benefits issues, safe and stable housing; devising safety plans and not carrying weapons; improving health including better eating and sleeping.
- Build aspirations, skills and positive futures – re-engaging with school/college, sitting exams, getting part-time work to build confidence, moving into legitimate careers.

The comments that follow, in addition to the more detailed examples later in the report highlight the huge and varied range of support that caseworkers have delivered to help children and young people get these results. There is little if any doubt that, without this support, they would continue to be exploited,

and, sadly would have been very likely to go on to become the 'recruiters' and exploiters of other children. It is not unrealistic to say that CLiC not only enables the children it directly helps to exit exploitation, but also may help to prevent new generations of children from suffering a similar fate.

"At a Safer Partnerships event I bumped into Eva and spoke to her about a lad in Year 11 who has significant issues. He's originally from (Europe) though he does speak English, but mum doesn't. He isn't academically gifted and he was kicked off a college course because drugs became an issue. Social care weren't helpful and he could have been permanently excluded. At one point he was stabbed in the hand. A welfare check was done but nothing else happened. His attendance dropped significantly and he was only coming on a Tuesday. We were worried that he was dealing drugs or recruiting others when he wasn't in. Eva got to know him, coaxing him with Costa and chatting. She helped him do his CSCS and college applications too. Unfortunately he's now been kicked out of home and has been placed into semi-independent by social care, but it's with adults who have problems so it's very concerning.

Eva's relationship with him kept him in our grasp. We still knew where he was and that's so important because otherwise you've just lost them. She's trying to get him a method of making money without being involved in criminality." **Assistant Head Teacher**

"My experience of CLiC is that they build a rapport with the young person and the family really quickly. Ruth's got excellent knowledge and a very good way of explaining it to them. She's down to earth and non-judgemental. She gives a real life explanation. She gives them the tools and ideas to help them – like writing emergency phone numbers on a bit of paper and putting it down your sock. Young people call on Ruth if something has gone wrong – that shows the trust. And they are persistent with outreach – they don't give up on children. One young person took weeks and weeks to engage. We started with standing outside shouting up to him and gradually he came round." **Social Worker**

"We now have hope for him, and that he is going in the right direction and being supported. The work you are doing with him is amazing, and we have now cancelled two further referrals for him as we don't want to potentially damage the brilliant rapport you've built up with him. Hopefully you can continue to build up his confidence and self esteem, and we are all really grateful for what you are doing and everything you've done so far." **Social Worker (Child Protection Register)**

The last quote illustrates that CLiC is not only able to help agencies use their often scarce resources more effectively, but also to rationalise service interventions so that they do not overwhelm the child. This is very important as children often disengage when they are 'bombarded' by services (in one case in England, 11 different services), because they are overwhelmed and have so many appointments to keep that they just withdraw.

For those for whom CLiC support was not required or where there was no capacity to take them, referrals were made to other agencies for help where appropriate. Some just needed an understanding ear and the chance to talk through what had happened and how they could avoid it happening again. For all those where there were concerns, monitoring was put in place to ensure that if they were brought into the police station again, further action could be taken to support them. This added value provided by CLiC is likely to have helped a significant number of children and young people to think again about getting involved in criminal exploitation.

The power of simple, practical help

The emotional support, advice and guidance that caseworkers provide is key to the success of CLiC. However, the practical help that the project has also been able to offer also makes a very significant impact in the lives of vulnerable and exploited young people, many of whom have very low self-esteem that is partly linked to poverty. The combination of the Covid pandemic followed by the cost of living crisis has been crippling for many people, and especially so for those already experiencing poverty, deprivation and exploitation.

The following examples show how a relatively small amount of funding has huge positive benefits for children and young people:

“My young person today got ‘my first EVER pair of jeans! Now I don’t have to be embarrassed on my birthday and can look smart.”

“On Friday, I took a young person a voucher of his choosing, and he got a warm winter coat. The voucher also led to mum and gran opening up and asking for help and support with budgeting and a food bank voucher- I don’t think this would have happened without the voucher.”

“Yesterday took a young person to Primark with their voucher- we played bargain hunt and he was determined to spend £50 on the dot. He got loads for his money, including a mattress protector ‘so now it can feel like MY bed instead of someone’s old mattress’. He also said the staff (St Giles) were the nicest people since he moved to the UK, and he felt accepted into the community and no one was prejudiced against him for how he looked. He said he was incredibly grateful and felt special and cared about.”

“One got a hair cut and a hoodie- ‘I LOVEEE them both- thank you so, so much.”

“One young person got a punch bag, ‘to help manage my anger in a better way.”

This help is also recognised by other professionals as extremely valuable, and something that many agencies are unable to offer -

*“The practical help they can give is invaluable – providing a mobile phone or taking them out of area to do activities so that they are away from the risks and danger.” **Social Worker***

*“She did things we couldn’t have done – getting him his passport for ID and NI number.” **Assistant Head Teacher***

Many young people lack the photo ID necessary for training and employment opportunities. St Giles has been able to help some CLiC clients get provisional driving licences or, where appropriate, passports, to help address this issue. However, funds are limited and it would be helpful if CiN or other funders could find relatively small additional finance so that all those who need ID can be helped.

Contributing to developing the public health model

CLiC has continued to develop and extend its work with other public and voluntary sector agencies, responding to the recommendation made in the 2019 interim evaluation that the project helps to support a public health approach to tackle the issue of child exploitation on county lines.

The caseworkers have excellent relationships and collaborative working with South Wales police, social care, schools and others. Professionals in these organisations greatly value their skills, experience and team approach:

“The work you do is amazing, and if possible we’d like you to come and engage more young people.”

Youth Offending Service

“Working with you and having contact details to link in with you could really help us and the young people at risk, we look forward to working with you going forward.” **South Wales police, Organised Crime Unit**

“I went to Barry Station last week and I bumped into a DS who works on the Intelligence Team. We had a discussion about Partners submitting intelligence and your name was brought up. First she said that you are the only person out of the partners who submit intel and said how thorough it was. I just wanted to let you know that your work does not go unnoticed.” **Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Criminal exploitation officer, Public Protection Unit**

“She (caseworker) was amazing and really made a difference. It’s great to have St Giles on board with helping more of our students.” **St Teilo’s School**

“I heard about St Giles via Mike from Barnardos. We were already working with Mike and I asked them if they knew anyone working with criminal exploitation as we had a child we were really concerned about. He was constantly absconding from school, his dad was in prison for drugs and his mum worked multiple jobs which meant she couldn’t be at home much for him. Because Ruth sat next to Mike at the police station and they liaised on referrals. So Ruth came in and kept this lad on the straight and narrow – it made such a difference....

I really want the support from St Giles to continue – we really value their work, the one-to-one support they give. It’s not a tick box exercise and it’s not time limited which is so important. They have the knowledge and experience. They know the types of things that children get involved in. And Eva knows the area. She has a broader picture of friendship groups across schools and that’s so helpful in understanding what’s going on. It’s hugely different them telling something to Eva than to me. The only county lines training I had was one hour at the beginning of the year.

Eva is a natural people person – with the kids and staff. If St Giles could get the funding I’d be happy to give her an office so she could have a presence here. I can’t speak highly enough of St Giles.” **Corpus Christi School**

This feedback demonstrates that the cross agency work delivered through CLiC is having significant positive impact for children and young people. Importantly, information is shared using strict protocols to ensure children are safeguarded but at the same time have a confidential space with the caseworker that builds the trust vital for disclosure. Wider intelligence about the operation of criminal groups/individuals that is shared is done so without breaking individual confidentiality with children and young people.

The work of CLiC extends beyond the very effective one-to-one support, including providing information and briefings for professionals so that they have a better understanding of county lines exploitation. This is helping to develop the greater awareness and ability to act across agencies that is a key feature of the public health approach.

Continuing to support throughout the pandemic

CLiC continued to operate as normal throughout the pandemic. The caseworker had key worker status and observed all rules introduced during the lockdown and subsequent periods. Many services were either not operating or only providing remote access, the latter not being an appropriate option for the

children and families experiencing a continuing level of exploitation that was not affected by the pandemic.

Other research and feedback shows that children and young people were even more vulnerable during this period. The fact that CLiC was there for them throughout an unprecedented and highly challenging time is testament to the dedication of the caseworker and St Giles as an organisation. This was recognised by other professionals, *“During Covid we were still working and I did visits with Ruth. We just carried on – with caution. CLiC was like an emergency service.”* **Social Worker.** In 2021, Ruth was awarded a certificate of recognition from the Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Regional Safeguarding Board for ‘commitment to practice demonstrated during Covid restrictions.’

Ensuring exploited children are treated as victims

Although there have been welcome developments in the understanding and thinking around exploitation, there are still significant issues about children and young people being labelled as perpetrators without an appreciation of their dual ‘status’ as victims. This is particularly the case for those approaching 18 years of age and can be found in the culture of a number of agencies including the police, courts and social care, as highlighted by a social worker – *“We really struggle with our upper age limit (18) and it’s good that St Giles can carry on with them once they’ve turned 18 – there’s so little else for them. The police wait until they hit 18 and then they pounce.”* This is a national issue not restricted to South Wales.

A recent House of Commons Justice Committee commented on research that shows that young people’s brains continue to mature up to the age of around 25. *“In typical brain maturation, temperance—the ability to evaluate the consequences of actions and to limit impulsiveness and risk-taking—is a significant factor in moderating behaviour and the fact that its development continues into a person’s 20s can influence anti-social decision-making among young adults..... The rationale of the (criminal justice) system for young adults should presume that up to the age of 25 young adults are typically still maturing. A developmental approach should be taken that recognises that how they perceive, process and respond to situations is a function of their developmental stage and other factors affecting their maturity, and secondarily their culture and life experience.”* Unfortunately, the Criminal Justice System does not tend to put this into practice, leading to the assumption that those approaching and turning 18 are *“fair game”* for prosecution.

Bearing this in mind and given that all but one of those helped by CLiC were well below this age on joining the project, the caseworker support has been vital in ensuring that exploited children and young people are dealt with fairly by agencies, by advocating for them with informed and balanced information, advice and support. Over the six years that CLiC has operated, the caseworkers have provided support at over 130 court cases. This number is an underestimate as not all repeat appearances after adjournments were counted.

There are a number of instances where the CLiC caseworker has skilfully and appropriately advised young people, families and professionals about referral to the NRM. A particularly complex and serious case involving two young people illustrates this vital support and the impact of the ongoing work with CLiC:

Background and issues involved

Hassan and Kareem aged 17 were friends from childhood. Their families are close and are strong members of the community, though they experience material deprivation, including cramped

accommodation in social housing, the poor health of elderly relatives living with them and there are some English language barriers. The boys had not been in trouble with the police prior to their recruitment and exploitation on county lines. However, during the course of Eva's support, it became clear that Hassan needed mental health support for anxiety and he disclosed historic sexual abuse. The plugging of drugs which formed part of the boys' exploitation and is a common feature of county lines activity had retraumatised Hassan.

The boys were arrested after being found in a car with an older male. Drugs, multiple mobile phones and excessive cash were seized from the car. Police requested St Giles to come and speak to one of the young men, Hassan, who was in custody, to see if there were any injuries, risks or disclosures that he felt unable to make to officers. Eva did this and also talked to him about safety, emotional support and help that she could give him. Hassan disclosed fear, coercion and control and so Eva advised him and the child exploitation officers about an NRM referral.

Kareem asked to be referred to St Giles after he was supported by Eva in court, and at the request of the solicitor acting for both young men. Eva explained the NRM process to both young people and got advice from the child exploitation officer who advised the boys to enter 'no plea' until further information was gathered. This was vital advice since the solicitor had advised both the boys to plead guilty to get maximum credit. The boys lost confidence in the solicitor but at least the solicitor was provided with expert information and guidance about the importance of the NRM and how to proceed in such cases. The NRM and 'no plea' approach was also discussed with the barrister, with Eva making it clear that she was not legally trained but was using her experience of the application of the NRM, along with the advice of the child exploitation officer. This approach was taken. Kareem turned 18 during the course of the court process which led to a delay in the NRM process. Eva worked closely to ensure that the NRM could still be used in his defence.

When the boys were due to appear in court, the perpetrator was present and had made death threats against the boys. At the insistence of Eva, a screen was put up for their protection. During the whole criminal justice process, Eva also provided support for the families, enabling them to understand what was happening in what was a frightening experience for everyone. Both boys requested ongoing support from Eva after the court appearance. Eva has also liaised with a solicitor and the child exploitation officer to discuss risks to the boys and working with probation when the perpetrator is released from prison, to ensure the boys' ongoing safety.

The outcome

With the support of Eva, both boys have exited county lines involvement and are leading positive lives.

Hassan is managing his mental health issues through medication, coping strategies and counselling. He had never previously disclosed his sexual abuse and it has taken a lot of work from him and Eva to begin to deal with it. He now feels less alone and has agreed to be referred for further support with a CSE specialist, as Hassan explained, *"I feel better for just getting it all out. I can move on now and know it's not my fault."*

Eva has drawn up a safety plan to help his anxiety and to help prevent further exploitation. He attends the gym daily, has completed a personal training course, and gained a paid role with contracted hours in a fast food outlet. He is completing an SIA course and will attend college in September. He has rediscovered his faith, helping with young people in his mosque and rebuilt relationships with his family. Hassan wants to get involved with helping his community including supporting child exploitation charities and local foodbank activity.

Hassan's father's view:

"She stood by us all throughout the court case. When my boy got into trouble I got called. I met Eva in court. She knew better than the solicitor who told us to plead guilty. He would be in jail if it wasn't for her. She's really easy to communicate with. She's brilliant and I can't thank the charity enough. She understood the culture, what to expect, what was happening.

My boy is really struggling still. She still meets up with him and the support has been fantastic. My boy's big headed but he listens to her when he won't listen to us. Eva's helped a bit with the relationship with him. Everything we've asked for has worked perfectly. She got the safety plan done which was really important. The times when she's been away on leave, we've struggled to communicate. She talks to the police, solicitors and all for us and relays what's happening and what we need to do. It's so helpful. I want to say a big thanks to her and to the charity."

Kareem has returned to education and employment, working part time and longer hours to build his savings whilst attending college to achieve his long term goal of qualifying as a mechanic. He has been able to drive again which helps his father who has a mobility disability. He has built his confidence and awareness, and also has a safety plan in place. His relationships with family have improved and he is attending mosque more regularly. He has been very supportive and loyal to Hassan who has needed his help to overcome the emotional distress and feelings of worthlessness that he was experiencing.

Kareem's view:

*"She came to our house and she's easy to talk to. If it wasn't for her I'd be in f***ing jail, I'd be gone. She's the person that sits with you and listens to you. She knows the law too. Her work was perfect, even in a situation where my friend was involved. She helped everything. She's an amazing person."*

Professionals' view:

"I was very impressed with you in the courts last week, and to see what you can do and what you did to help young people and would like to link in with you and your manager to look at working together in the future going forward. Let me know when is good to set up a meeting between Cardiff and Swansea"- Youth Justice, Swansea

"I don't like to think what would have happened if you hadn't been in the court to advocate for them, you literally saved their lives. They were so lucky you were there' Child Exploitation police officer

"Ruth and Eva advocate for the child's rights, they make sure that they are treated fairly. And they're not shy of making their views known when it's necessary. They are NRM champions, trying to educate everyone – young people, families, professionals. People see it as a lot of paperwork, they don't realise how vital it is." Social worker

'Plugging' (anal and/or vaginal) is a frequently used method of transporting and/or storing drugs to which many of the children referred to CLiC have been subjected. In various reports produced by JH Consulting for St Giles this subject has been discussed including making the point that:

“The plugging of drugs anally and/or vaginally is rarely recorded or subject to charges being made in criminal investigations, despite the very high risks it poses to young people from physical and emotional trauma. It is currently not regarded as sexual assault by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), although there is growing pressure from across statutory and voluntary sector services for this to change.”

It is highlighted again here because of the significant and long lasting damage inflicted through this form of abuse and exploitation, including the re-traumatisation of children such as Hassan as described earlier. Plugging tends to be regarded as ‘part of the deal’ not only by criminal exploiters, but also, and very worryingly, by the police. Of course the view of the CPS has much to do with this. Whilst in law sexual assault with an object is a criminal offence, the definition is that it needs to be ‘without the consent of the victim.’ A child may insert the drugs themselves and this seems to be regarded as consensual. However, if that child is being exploited and coerced (often with violent threats) and may have even been recognised as such through a referral to the NRM, it surely should be regarded as without consent.

The fact that children and young people are disclosing to CLiC caseworkers that they have been subject to plugging underlines the trust of these relationships. For a boy, or girl, to speak about such experiences means that they feel safe. The current injustice is that the perpetrators, if arrested, will face no consequences for this most distressing and degrading aspect of their criminal exploitation.

Sustainable impact

County lines exploitation is complex and it is often very difficult for children and young people to exit. It has strong parallels with the challenges and repeated attempts to leave of women (and some men) who are subject to domestic violence and/or coercive control, taking, on average seven attempts, as shown in Women’s Aid research (www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/women-leave/).

CLiC support is not time limited and this is an essential part of its success. This not only allows a child the time to build the relationship of trust vital to them successfully leaving exploitation, but also recognises that progress is rarely linear and there are often setbacks along the way. The continuity of support is all important in helping a child to make the final break away from exploitation.

The interim evaluation report included a case study of Adam, who was 17 at the time of referral to St Giles in 2018. His story illustrates the power of county lines exploiters and the effectiveness of the expert support provided by the CLiC caseworker that has enabled Adam to overcome a series of highly dangerous and difficult circumstances over the last 3 years to a point where he is working, in a stable relationship and has become a father. It shows how, even having moved away from the county lines exploitation successfully, he was violently coerced into drug running for a second time, and how the consistent support of CLiC has finally helped him establish a positive and stable life.

Summary from 2019 evaluation report:

Coming from a stable family background but with some family tensions as he became a teenager, Adam had a part time job and had saved money for driving lessons and towards buying a care. He was lured into drug dealing which quickly resulted in him being in debt bondage to the line elders, taking all his savings. He had been demanding money from his family and trying to steal family cars to pay his debt,

culminating in a fight with his father, damage to the family home and his arrest. He was referred to CLiC for support.

The police did not press charges but the family would not allow him home because of the danger to younger siblings so he was sofa surfing with friends. He disclosed to the CLiC caseworker that he was working for two county lines, spent periods of time in a trap house and carried around £3,000 worth of Class A drugs regularly. He had lost drugs whilst being chased by a rival line, resulting in the drug debt.

The caseworker helped him to get allocated a social worker and supportive youth housing. She continued to work with him to help him gain lifeskills, independent living and training for a job, enabling him to get his CSCS card. Adam stopped his involvement in county lines drug running and began to re-establish relationships with his family and positive friends.

Update:

Although Adam had got back on track and was leading a positive lifestyle, he was vulnerable because of his prior involvement in county lines. In May/June of 2019, Adam was forced back into drug running work by a much more violent county line. At knifepoint he was forced to take drugs (crack cocaine) to create debt bondage and dependency, and as a way of the elders checking the quality of the drugs. Violence and coercion continued, including the elders giving Adam packs of drugs with missing wraps so that they could then accuse him of theft incurring further debt. The elders called him around the clock meaning he got little sleep, adding to his vulnerability. In desperation he finally disposed of a pack of drugs, ignored calls from the line and contacted the CLiC caseworker for help.

Adam disclosed everything to the caseworker including full details of those involved in the line, and then disclosed the same to the police who, recognising his exploitation and the danger that these disclosures placed him in, completed a referral to the NRM (which was granted). On the same day, the person who had forcibly recruited Adam was murdered, putting Adam at even greater risk. The CLiC caseworker worked with the Salvation Army (the organisation responsible for finding safe accommodation for those referred to the NRM) who arranged for Adam to be taken by anonymous workers in an unmarked car to an undisclosed destination, an illustration of the huge risk to life. The CLiC caseworker provided Adam with a new 'clean' phone and made contact with him once he was safely relocated. She also contacted St Giles R&R service located in London and they were able to continue on the ground support for Adam. He lived in the hotel room for nearly a year, supported through the Covid lockdowns by St Giles.

As a result of the CLiC project, including the tireless efforts of the caseworker and effective partnership working with the police, Salvation Army and R&R project, Adam now is in stable housing, a long term relationship, is working and has recently become a father.

Endnote

Over the past six years, including a period where Wales and the rest of the UK experienced an unprecedented pandemic, CLiC has steadily delivered one of the most needed services for child criminal exploitation in Wales. Feedback from all stakeholders demonstrates the high value of the project and the need for it to continue. It is very welcome that CiN has chosen to continue its support of the project and it is very much hoped that other commissioners and funders will recognise and support the excellent work that CLiC is doing to protect the most vulnerable children and young people so that it can continue to deliver this vital specialist support.