**County Lines, Urban Street Gangs and Child Exploitation**

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0:01 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to our live webinar on County Lines. This is part of our Safeguarding Series, and I'm very pleased that we are able to welcome back Dr Rowena Christmas who has taken us through multiple aspects of safeguarding over the past year. So over to you again, Rowena. Thank you very much. Thank you.

0:27 **Speaker:** Thank you so much everyone for joining me for this. All aspects of safeguarding are important and to be honest a few years ago, I didn't really know what County Lines were. But the more I read about it, the more I appreciate that it's absolutely huge and of key importance to us in primary care, as one of our safeguarding issues. So I'm really, really grateful you've come along.

Over the next 40 minutes, we will hopefully gain a much better understanding of what County Lines means. County Lines is effectively a form of criminal exploitation where criminals befriend children or vulnerable people, either online or offline, and then they manipulate them into drug dealing. The lines refer to mobile phones that are used to control the young person who is delivering the drugs, often to towns outside their home country. So we will gain an understanding of the extraordinarily broad range of exploitation that this problem encompasses and look at how it affects all of us right across Wales. We will look at how we can look out for signs of involvement in victims and just what we should do if we're concerned about somebody.

1:48 **Speaker:** So an addiction specialist last year said that Wales is ‘drowning in street drugs’ due to the rise of County Lines gangs and the National Crime Agency said that there are more than 100 gangs operating in towns across Wales, with drug bosses who are pulling the strings mainly from London, Birmingham and Liverpool. But it's expanding all the time. It's quite horrendous.

2:19 **Speaker:** So the definition of County Lines from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services is that they are criminal networks or gangs which use a dedicated mobile phone line to distribute drugs, typically from an urban area to a smaller town or rural setting. And such is the advance and rapid development of this over the past five years is that it’s been declared a national threat by the National Crime Agency in 2019. The leaders of these gangs often exploit vulnerable adults and children to traffic, store and deal drugs. And increasingly, they're using violence, weapons and coercion to achieve this.

3:00 **Speaker:** Dame Carol Black did a review of drugs in the UK in 2020, and she tells us that the illicit drugs market in the UK is worth £9.4bn a year. So you understand why this is so important for us to get on top of, but also why the gangs work so hard to make it work for themselves. Right the way across the UK, young people are being manipulated, they're being sexually abused, forced to launder money and deal drugs. And the really tricky thing about this is that the exploitation isn't really very obvious. The kids often don't feel that they're victims. They don't believe they've been groomed. They think that they're gaining from it, but they're not. They are victims. And this is happening everywhere. The reality is, if we are aware of it, if we've got a better understanding of what's going on, we've got a better chance of doing something to stop it.

3:57 **Speaker:** So a typical County Line scenario is where you've got a gang that establishes a network between an urban hub and a county location into which drugs are supplied. Now the managers of these lines, they are making a lot of money and they're highly risk averse. So the way they mitigate that risk is that they use a steady supply of vulnerable people to store and supply the drugs to move the cash around. And they use vulnerable people's houses in the form of ‘cuckooing’ to keep themselves safe. So they are targeting these young people, we know, in all sorts of places. So fast food outlets, shopping centres, in car parks. And they force them to travel. You know, they travel on trains, on buses and coaches and stop at the service stations for rest stops. But as well as this, they're also doing this behind closed doors - in pubs, in hotels, in car washes and terrifyingly for us as parents, they're also doing it online through gaming platforms and social media. So the County Lines, the line is the branded mobile phone and all the numbers on those phone lines that go to drug users, are what it's all about. And those are very, very stealable. So the branded mobile phone line is established into the market and then orders are placed from customers that they introduce. So it's all about exploitation of young and vulnerable people, and increasingly they're using intimidation, violence and weapons to get their way.

5:38 **Speaker:** So urban street gangs are sort of at the basis of this. An urban street gang back in 2009 was defined as a relatively stable predominantly street based group of young people who see themselves as a discernible group who engage in a range of criminal activity and violence. They will lay claim over territory. They have a sort of usually a form of identifying structural features, so a set of graffiti icon that they use or grime video or music or, you know, I try and sound as if I know what’s going on, but you get the picture. And generally, there is conflict with other gangs. Now, these urban street gangs have been evolving really quickly since the millennium. They tend to originate in areas of poverty and deprivation. So you can imagine, austerity has just fuelled that growth and then problem since the pandemic has just exacerbated it even more. What we know is that reduced opportunities for work and socially, propel people towards these urban street gangs and then make it much harder for people to get out once they're sort of embedded in the gang. There are over 300,000 children who know someone who's a gang member. And of those, we've got 33,000 who've got a sibling in a gang and 34,000 who've been victims of violent gang crime. The Office of the Children's Commissioner identified 6,560 children as gang members. But the reality is it's probably far, far higher than that. British Crime Survey in 2018 thought that 27,000 children are identifying as gang members. This is absolutely huge numbers of vulnerable children.

7:32 **Speaker:** The gang is seen as a means of replying to vulnerable children's needs. You know their self-esteem to keep them safe, their physiological needs. Young people see the urban street gang as a logical response to their personal ambition, or sometimes the only logical response to their need for survival in great adversity. They join a gang, they generate respect, they get a reputation. And it used to be sort of older teenagers, young in their early twenties, people. But now the age range for urban street gangs is between 10 and 30 years. Much, much broader. And these bigger numbers in gangs means it's harder for the gang members to gain distinction, which leads to more competition and then the emergence, as we've seen on the news night after night, of ultraviolence.

8:28 **Speaker:** The Home Office defined child criminal exploitation as where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive the child or young person into criminal activity. But a young person that I was interviewing had a more pithy definition. He said: ‘Well, it's when someone you trust makes you commit crimes for their benefit’ which pretty much sums it all up. And this coercion encompasses sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, modern slavery and trafficking. And we know this is a really serious and growing public health threat. There are very close links with organised crime. There are more than 4,600 serious and organised crime groups in the UK. This is costing the UK more than £37bn a year, and it kills more UK citizens than any other national security threats, war or national disasters combined. I can't emphasise enough this problem is enormous, and it affects all of us. So the victim may have been criminally exploited, even if the activity appears consensual and often the child thinks they do want to be doing this. This is a crack. This is a laugh. This is making them some money. Child criminal exploitation, as we know, doesn't always involve physical contact, it can also occur through the use of technology.

10:10 **Speaker:** Austerity has made the available children to coerce much, much greater. It's deepened the pool of availability. And at the same time, making the street gang much more sticky, more adhesive, harder to get out of. They are, as we say, seen as a route to survival. And the more visible a street gang is, the more normal it is to join. They offer an available route to respect and reputation and make the children involved less vulnerable. So strangely, the children will often see as they grow up, that drug dealing itself is a is a means of getting out of the gang. If they can deal enough to get enough money to move away, then they see that as that is an escape route. Austerity really has impacted profoundly on our most marginal neighbourhoods, exacerbating poverty and deprivation. We know that the health gap has got bigger and so has the social gap between rich and poor. Widening social inequality creates more young people which are ripe for recruitment to urban street gangs, so it's a vicious circle all the time.

11:38 **Speaker:**

So who are the children who are most at risk?

* a key contributing factor to County Lines recruitment is the steady increase in children living in poverty.
* children who are excluded from school are highly vulnerable
* children who've got special needs or who've got mental health problems or who are being bullied
* children whose substance mis-use.

All of those are much more at risk.

And then at family level:

* families living in poverty
* families living with domestic abuse
* children being neglected
* children whose parents are abusing drugs or whose parents are associated with gangs.

Hugely more vulnerable.

And then at a community level:

* gangs in the neighbourhood massively increase the risk
* disenfranchised communities, you know, communities who've lost hope. This looks like the only way out for them.
* those with no opportunities
* children in care, especially those placed in care settings many miles from home, which is increasingly happening, are particularly at risk.
* and we know that there's more and more and more children aged between only 10 and 15 years old who are using drugs particularly vulnerable group because they haven't got money to get the drugs in any other way
* and of course, we know from our CAMHS referrals the increased number of children experiencing mental health problems. There we go again. That pool of availability is getting deeper all the time.

13:11 **Speaker:** So Ann Coffey, who chaired the Parliamentary Enquiry into ‘sent away’ children, said ‘it's a national scandal that local authorities are unwittingly becoming recruiting sergeants for County Lines drugs gangs by sending children so many miles away. It must stop now’. She said this in 2019. But three years later, I'm afraid it hasn't stopped. It's still getting progressively worse. And I just couldn't believe that care homes for older children who are aged 16 and over don't need to be regulated by Ofsted, so they were described by a committee in 2019 looking at runaway or missing children, as ‘the frightening twilight world of unregulated, semi-independent homes for older children’. Many police forces across the UK expressed concerns about increasing numbers of children who were going missing from such establishments, and many of those will have been coerced into going county.

14:15 **Speaker:** So what we need to accept is that County Lines is a very, very effective and successful business model. And what happens is the urban markets become saturated, so they move the drugs out into the rural areas, the rural towns. And we know that in provincial towns, drug use will increase when supply increases and when accessibility increases. So they maximise their profits by taking the drugs directly to the customer using a kind of 24-7 Deliveroo type model. And of course, you know, if you're nervous about buying drugs, but if you can just pick up the phone and get them delivered to your doorstep, you're much more likely to do it. This model creates a clearly defined role for our younger runners. They use cuckooing, which is where they take over accommodation belonging to a vulnerable user, and that way they can ensure their drug supply is managed and controlled locally. And they use supermarket style mass marketing techniques like buy one get one free or branding old loyalty schemes. And then the runners, the vulnerable children, are given lots of advice about how to avoid police or professional notice, how to behave so that they won't be picked up. And these exploitative business models amount to human trafficking and modern day slavery happening all the time all around this.

15:49 **Speaker:** Social media is absolutely key to the County Lines model. It expands street gangs, albeit in a social field. It means that the gangs rules become recognisable and quotable and better understood, and you no longer need to live on the gang turf in order to feel affiliated with it. They tend to talk about crews rather than gangs now, which sort of normalises it. It tries to make it sound less criminal, but it's all exactly the same thing. And the children often have no understanding, no appreciation of what they're getting into. They think it's a good way to make some money. They talk avidly of the buzz, the excitement of it. But you know, any individual County Line can be sold for tens of thousands of pounds. It's just the equivalent of a company selling a database of buyers. It’s big business.

16:45 **Speaker:** So our vulnerable children generally just do not have the capacity to assess their situation. They may dismiss the risk through a sense of invincibility, feeling that they can get away with anything. It's really, really common that they do it in order to make some money to help their family. You know, they can buy some groceries for their mum. They can buy some fancy new trainers. They absolutely do not see themselves as victims. They don't see this as grooming, which makes it much, much harder to help them.

17:20 **Speaker:** So the way a gang would sort of groom a child is they'd, first of all, be looking out for vulnerable children. Spotting them, then working to gain their trust. Sharing that information with other members of the group. Manipulating them into recruitment. And then after that, there generally will be some kind of test of loyalty. And after that, their offer protection and give them a sense of belonging, introduce them to the to the elders, the more established members. Then create some kind of dependency and start asking for favours and asking that vulnerable child to look out to recruit more. And there's lots of different ways that the children get trapped into this with physical or psychological or sexual violence, reinforced dependency, blackmail with, you know, films of them doing criminal or sexual activity, debt bondage. And they work very hard to isolate these kids from their friends and family estate. We know the state has lost track of tens of thousands of pupils who've gone off grid during the pandemic. We know there's been a 34% increase in gang related incidents since 2020, a 23% increase in drug misuse by children, and the government has made tackling County Lines a key priority due to the sheer scale of the children involved with this. National Police Chief Council spokesman said it's vital that the public look for signs of young people being exploited. So, you know, if there's a child with sudden, unexplained cash or new phone or new clothes, or they're suddenly they're missing for a period, or they've got taxi receipts in their pockets etc you need to need really, really to take note and do something about it.

19:25 **Speaker:** So grinding is the term used for the hard task, the daily chore of being a drug dealer. So wrapping drugs, bagging them, taking phone calls, delivering the drugs and the gangs use sophisticated models which evolve and respond to change very quickly. They use burner phones and robbery is a big, big issue. Robbery either by rival gangs or local users. The runners to try and overcome this and also detection by the police, are often instructed to plug the drugs, which you can imagine is insertion into their anal or vaginal cavities. The female runners are often assaulted by their County Line managers, to locate the drugs. That's very much normalised. And the managers will use social media to constantly track the runners. So they use ‘find my phone’ to sort of keep tabs on where they are. There's a constant expectation of them to be sending photographs through Snapchat to show where they are. It's completely not surprising that these kids’ physical and mental health can decline very quickly. You know, they've got terrible nutrition. They're surviving on fast food. They've got poor dental health. They're not able to sort of manage their personal hygiene. Girl runners talk eloquently about the difficulty of having their period when they've gone county. You know, it's really, really tough for these kids. And of course, they get no sleep. Their physical health deteriorates quite quickly.

21:03 **Speaker:** So control is absolutely fundamental in the County Lines business model. It's needed to maintain profit margins. So the victim will be gaining from the model; they gain money or status or safety, but they're then held by things such as hostage taking with incriminating evidence like, you know, photographs of them taking drugs or photographs of them doing something sexual, something that is a good hold over them. Debt bondage happens a lot. So their drugs are stolen from them in a sort of a set up that they're not aware of. And then they have to pay the money back because they're accused not of having it stolen, but of using the drugs themselves. There's a lot of intimidation. I know where your little sister goes to school. I know where your mum lives. Sexual exploitation, as I say, is just normalised. The kids are used to launder money. You know, if they got a savings account, the money's put in there and then taken out again, and violence is just absolutely endemic across this. What we need to be aware of is that young people involved in County Lines will frequently present to us, as you know, hard bitten, tough exterior street kids, and it makes it quite hard for us to see them as vulnerable or victims. But they are. They're so often victims of trauma, and they so often don't really recognise the extent of their exploitation. We need to recognise that. And the other really complicated thing is that they will often become abusers themselves. You know, they move a little bit up the ladder and then they're recruiting other kids and then they're exploiting them. So it's a complicated thing to pick these kids up and rescue them and see them for the victims that they are.

23:08 **Speaker:** So debt bondage, as I said, is often created through fake robbery. The kids are naive or inexperienced. They don't recognise what's going on. And what this does when they feel completely trapped by owing £500 to their County Lines manager because they had a load of drugs taken from them, is it increases their vulnerability while it diminishes their respect and trust, and it just pulls them deeper into this County Line activity. It makes the violence much more likely to happen. And it's another way that people accept people cuckooing in their properties. Of course, the other issue is debt bondage is done actively. But these kids, you know, they're often clueless teenagers. So they are likely to lose the drugs; they are likely to think they're going to get away with skimming money or drugs from the elders. They may well fail to honour loans or misread the weights, you know, on purpose or accidentally. So they're just vulnerable to being trapped. Once they're in, it's incredibly difficult for them to get out.

24:19 **Speaker:** Sexual exploitation, I'm afraid, is completely normalised, and shame is a very, very common means of exerting power and control over them. Sexual acts are a common initiation to recruit young people into gangs, and sexual assault is used as a weapon in conflict and as a punishment. Forced strip searching is absolutely commonplace. Filming so that you've got a hold over the children. Rape is very common as are gift girls to sort of pay off drug debts. It's commonplace and you can just imagine how dreadful this is for the for the victims.

25:16 **Speaker:** Cuckooing, we've talked about, is a tactic where a drug dealer or network takes over a vulnerable person's home to prepare, store and deal the drugs. And again, it's commonly associated with exploitation and violence. The term cuckooing isn't flagged in police systems, so we've got no quantifiable data about how much this is going on. It's got lots and lots of benefits for the County Line gang, you know, reduced financial overheads. They haven't got to pay for a Travelodge to stay in. It reduces the risk hugely, because it's a sort of safe, normal place to live. It gives them very good access to local user networks and to local intelligence, such as police activity or CCTV positions. Now again, it's a little bit like the young children who don't recognise that they're victims. Often the people whose home is being cuckooed, welcome it. You know, they can gain from cheap, readily available drugs. It will often elevate their status, improve their networking contacts. They may be very lonely, and they may feel that they've made a friend rather than being manipulated and used. So again, it's very difficult to help people who don't realise that they're being victimised.

26:36 **Speaker:** Violence is absolutely huge with County Lines, and as competition increases, the violence just reverberates and ripples throughout the social field. We know it is prolific, endemic, normalised and it's underreported hugely. Knife carrying is ubiquitous for these gangs because of the fierce competition. They need to control, and they need to defend their line and they're frightened of being robbed. So knife crime fatalities have reached a 70 year peak in England and Wales. And you know, we talk about everyone carries a knife. But now they've upped the ante to look at guns, people carrying machetes, they're throwing acid. All sorts of things are going on to sort of increase the competition. And this rise in youth violence in the UK stems from three things it stems from the evolution of urban street gangs, it stems from these profound changes that have happened to drug supply networks over the last 10 years, and most importantly of all, on the impact on both of these things by the increased prevalence of social media.

27:54 **Speaker:** So social media just amplifies feelings, you know, hostility is increased exponentially and erodes trust. It acts as an accelerant to the turbulence within the social field of the gang. You're live the fights, you've got personal posts, crime videos, which generates further involvement, incites more revenge attacks and retaliation.

28:24 **Speaker:** Now, County Lines, as we say, is basically a business model and any effective business will try and expand their business model. So they are now doing this to try and take control of the student drug trade. This increased hugely during lockdown, when confined students in halls of residence were seen as a captive market. The gangs organised lockdown parties to introduce recreational drugs to students. And they moved from what they were dealing. So historically they would be dealing in heroin and crack cocaine. But for this market they've moved to more recreational drugs such as MDMA, ketamine, cocaine. And of course, this has had an enormous impact on student mental health. Gangs have been using the security of campus accommodation to stash their drugs, and there are examples of gangs enrolling a clean skin to university. You know, to start a university course, specifically with the aim of selling drugs to their colleagues and their peers.

29:31 **Speaker:** So cocaine. This is no longer a middle class professionals’ drug. The typical picture that we might think of champagne and Charlie is outdated. Cocaine is absolutely everywhere now. It's in the pubs. You know, you go and do a few lines and have a few pints. And you can understand that. It's actually quite good value. Cocaine is £80 a gram, a pint is £6, a cocktail is £15. So you know, it works out cheaper. There are traces of cocaine found right across Parliament. They've been found on nappy changing facilities in Peppa Pig world. Cocaine is absolutely everywhere. And of course, the reason for this is it's more available. There was a 250% rise in production in Columbia. So it's cheap. It's good quality and it's readily available. And right on my doorstep, in 2018, Bristol had the highest cocaine use of any UK city with big student population, of course. There are more than a thousand gangs involved in distributing and selling cocaine and another 200 gangs just focussing on importing it from Columbia and other countries. And someone said, ‘You know, it's all done remotely’. It's very, very easy to access. Who needs the dark web, when you can just call an Uber and get the Uber to deliver your cocaine?

31:01 **Speaker:** So looking now at our vulnerable children, the sort of bottom players in the County Line gangs, you want to be thinking about who we should be looking for. Kids who go missing frequently or kids who are found in distant locations. Sudden change in behaviour at school or being excluded from school or bunking off. Kids smelling of drugs or carrying drugs or weapons. Suddenly having, you know, new trainers, a new jacket, you know, even able to go to the takeaway. Where's that money coming from? Sudden or extreme changes in behaviour at home is very key, as is a sort of new increased obsession with mobile phones. You know, they're in trouble and they're grounded so they can't go out or their phones taken away from them. Their fear of their County Line manager is far greater than their fear of their mum or dad, and they will just go completely bananas trying to get their phone back. So people need to be looking out for kids travelling alone, particularly in school hours or late at night. Kids looking lost or unfamiliar or frightened. Any other behaviour that you just think ‘what's going on with that kid?’ Just prick your ears up. Kids with more than one phone or with lots of cash on them. Potentially looking as though they're stoned or drunk. Kids being instructed or controlled by another individual or accompanied by individuals who are older than them that don't look typically like a family member. Kids begging in a public space. I think everyone in society has a duty to be just thinking a little bit more rather than thinking, ‘Oh, that looks a bit odd’ thinking ‘That looks a bit odd, what could we be doing?’

32:55 **Speaker:** For us, as GPs, there are health specific risk indicators. So expressions of despair. Unfortunately, we're seeing these all too often now. So kids self-harming and kids with difficult behaviours. Kids with mental health problems. Children presenting with sexually transmitted infections. You know, don't just assume that it's their same age girlfriend or boyfriend. Is something else going on here? Just like with domestic abuse, vague somatic complaints maybe a marker for trauma rather than actual organic illness. And obviously, physical illness including knife wounds. This is terribly tough for caring parents. So they'll often present at the doctors with mental health impacts of what's going on at home. Or they may come to us seeking diagnoses such as, you know, mental health diagnoses or worried he's got ADHD, or maybe he's on the autistic spectrum. Looking for answers for the changed behaviour of their adolescent. All of those things we should be thinking, could there be something else going on?

34:05 **Speaker:** How do we assess the risk? With all safeguarding, it's about communication and trying to give the young person the opportunity, that time, that sort of welcoming consultation where they can tell us what's going on. As always, we need to explain the limits of confidentiality and record the voice of the child. You know, don't say what you think they're saying. Get the actual words they use. It's got much more power. Very important - we should be using our professional judgement. The bottom line is if we think, ‘Oh, I do know that I've got a that feels a bit wrong. It's very, very, very likely that that is a bit wrong. You know, gut instinct isn't really gut instinct. It's years of experience and learning and, you know, discussions and coming to the meetings like this. We probably have a reason to be worried if we're worried. Use our professional curiosity. Make sure we know our local pathways, our specific risk exploitation toolkits and refer onwards to the appropriate place. We’ll talk about that a little bit more later.

35:22 **Speaker:** It's really, really important that these children are helped to understand the nature of the exploitation. What we want is to ensure this doesn't define their future. These kids are victims, not criminals, even though they appear as criminals, possibly. They need a place of safety so that they can regain trust. We want them to rebuild friendships, return to normal teenage activities. They need to be protected from being targeted by criminal groups again because they're very vulnerable and we need to be listening to their voice. And what that needs, above all else, is for the NHS and for schools, the police, local authorities, for us all, to work together towards that common goal.

36:10 **Speaker:** The Times wrote in December last year: ‘The Government is targeting 2,000 County Lines gangs in a big crime crackdown’. They are planning to drug test all criminals when they're arrested, they're going to use the data on dealers’ phones to identify and support addicts, they're investing an extra £145m for police to triple the number of County Lines shut down by 2024, two years’ time. There are public awareness campaigns going out on billboards through TV and radio. And anyone who's doing a community service sentence where the offending is related to drug use, will be regularly drug tested. And the aim of all this is to try and identify addicts and to support them towards useful interventions. They can't force them to be tested, but if they refuse to be tested for drugs, that can lead to tougher consequences. Three months in prison or a fine of £2,500. So hopefully that will be quite compelling. They are trying for a dual strategy of offering greater treatment and recovery services, coupled with a more hard-line approach to drug related crime. This has been piloted in Swansea. It's been successful and they're planning to scale it out right across the UK. One of the aims is to warn people that they're not anonymous when they're buying illegal drugs. So you are a professional who thinks it's OK to have it have a gram of cocaine for the weekend, the harm you're doing behind that campaign is absolutely enormous. While we now accept that drink driving isn't acceptable in any way at all, the aim is to is to make recreational drug use exactly the same unacceptable behaviour.

38.08 **Speaker:** So these are good support services that it's worth having written down somewhere so that we've got some way to turn to. If you're worried, talk to your practice safeguarding lead. Talk to the safeguarding services. Share your concerns. But don't dismiss your concerns. Don't think you're being silly. You almost certainly aren't.

38:31 **Speaker:** What we really want to do is look beyond the presenting issue because this is absolutely, absolutely huge. There are 27,000 vulnerable children in the UK. But in the past year, there have only been 22 prosecutions and only 7 convictions. So that means that the traffickers feel the reward to risk ratio is massively in their favour. They're making £100,000 in six months easily. The gains are too much for them to stop at the moment. The modern slave at the moment is too complicated. It's too difficult to secure convictions and it's permeating every aspect of our society. So we all need better understanding of the stories behind the victims because children as young as six years old are paying the price for this.

39:23 **Speaker:** Now, a lot of this webinar came from this book written by Simon Harding. It's a big, thick book with tons of information in it, but it's really good. It's using evidence based up-to-date details about exploitation and drug dealing amongst urban street gangs. And it's presenting two years of research into the evolution of the gangs and their involvement with changing drug markets. Then there's lots of other papers there that are useful. But please, if anyone's got any questions at all now, I'm happy to answer them. Or if it comes to you in the future, please don't hesitate to get in touch and I'll be glad to try and answer them or find someone who can.

Thank you very much.

40:04 **Chair**: Thank you very much, Rowena. I mean, it's just mind boggling, all that information that you've given us, and it is very frightening what's going on really under our noses. If anybody's got any questions for Rowena, please post something in the box there. I have a feeling they've probably all been stunned into silence by the scale of the problem and the lack of resolution of it despite best intentions. I always get worried by the car washing facilities that you see because there seem to be a lot of ethnic minorities doing it and you're sort of wondering, are those part of the modern day slavery gangs, these car washing facilities that seem to spring up all over the place?

41:10 **Speaker:** I think they almost certainly are, aren't they? And that's what I was alluding to in the talk, really. I think if we've got a suspicion, if we've got to worry, I think that there almost always is going to be something that is genuinely worrying. But what do we do? You know, that's the question, isn't it? You know, you take your car along to be washed, you feel uneasy, you feel guilty. And then you go on to the next bit of your life and move on. And that's tricky, really, isn't it?

41:41 **Chair**: Yes, very hard. And we had a question from Owen who's asked that are you able to give an example of a case that you've dealt with?

41:52 **Speaker:** Yes, and quite a shocking case, really. This was a young well, it felt young to me. He was probably 13 or 14, a young boy. Affluent, professional parents. Siblings thriving. Bright boy. And his behaviour fell off a cliff. You know, he stopped going to school regularly. He was absolutely horrible at home. He stopped eating. And you know, I recognise when I said earlier you take their phone off them and they go completely mad. Wealthy family. And they took his phone off him because they caught him with some cannabis, and he literally smashed the house to pieces. And at that point, we sort of thought, there's more to this going on. But it's very difficult, you know. They involved social services, the GP involved and the police in the end. But still, you know, quite hard to convince this child that he was a victim. He didn't feel like he was a victim unless you were calling his parents grounding him victimisation, you know?

43:06 **Chair**: Yes. It is a difficult situation that, isn't it? Janet’s asked: ‘Who would be the first point of contact if they if she was to suspect anything?’ Is it social services or is one of the helplines that you've put up?

43:21 **Speaker:** I think the helplines are good for us if we're unsure where we're going. If we think this is a case that is social services. I’d always encourage you, if you work in a practice with colleagues, I'd always encourage you to have a chat about any safeguarding case really with your colleagues, with your Safeguarding Lead. Just to sort of bounce the ideas around a bit because it is quite stressful. Social services are the first port of call. The police are very good, so they're worth discussing with, you know, not necessarily to report the child, but to ask for their advice. And again, just like with all safeguarding concerns, if you go to social services and it doesn't meet their threshold and you're still worried, the responsibility then sits with you, and you need to refer back. You know, make that case in a different way. It's harsh when we're so busy but put a bit more information in the referral; think what you can add to it to make it more compelling and talk to the Safeguarding Lead nurse or name doctor as well. They're very helpful.

44:27 **Chair**: Thank you for that. Another question: ‘I've seen some cases of children posting compromising photos of themselves online for easy money. Do you think this is also linked? By the time I see them, the police have actually been involved’.

44:47 **Speaker:** It's a good question. It might be. But equally, I've come across cases where I wouldn't have thought it was a County Lines issue. These girls are just quite vulnerable, and you know, money is useful for kids and these they see it as an opportunity for themselves rather than, you know, something that's likely to have really possibly catastrophic consequences for their life. There's an awful lot of boys who are requesting sexualised images of their girlfriends or girls that they're interested in. And there's an enormous pressure on those girls to comply. So I think that is part of County Lines. But equally, I think it's part of the sort of very, very challenging social media environment that our kids are living in today. And yes, that's a whole new, different question, I think.

45:50 **Chair**: Thank you, Daryl-Jo has said: ‘Could you put the helpline numbers up again, please? The PowerPoints will be sent out to you, so you'll be able to access them yourself and hopefully you can see that now.

46:22 **Speaker**: We'll send it all out to you. Often this this stuff happens in the middle of surgery when you're completely busy. If you just put into good old Google County Line support service my area, it comes up with a lot of useful information. So you know, that's always worth trying.

46:40 **Chair**: Yes, but as we said, the PowerPoint will be sent out so that it will be available for them to look at as well. Right. I don't think there are anymore questions. Just one comment. ‘Thank you for an excellent but very sobering presentation, Rowena’ and several ‘thankyous’ as well, but they don't appear to be any more questions. So I think you've set our minds thinking about what potentially we are missing and what more we can do. So thank you very much for that. Rowena.

47:13 **Speaker**: It's a pleasure. I'm sorry. It's so grim, but at least if we know something about it, we can try and do something.

47:20 **Chair**: Yes. Thank you very much, Rowena. Thanks, everyone.