

News story: New programme to protect children at risk of exploitation

Children most at risk of being targeted by gangs or violent crime will benefit from better support from specialists across education, health, social care, police and the voluntary sector in a programme launch today (Thursday 9 May) by Education Secretary Damian Hinds.

The new 'Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme' is designed to improve how different local areas respond to child exploitation – such as gang, 'county lines' drug dealing, online grooming, sexual exploitation, trafficking or modern slavery – backed by £2 million. It will help equip professionals involved in the protection of young people to identify those most at risk from dangers in their communities and online.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

Being safe at school and having a stable home life is the best form of protection for the children as they grow up – but we know that those who are the most vulnerable, are the most at risk of exploitation of those who want to take advantage of them.

We are all united in cracking down on those who try to lead vulnerable young people down a dangerous path, and the threats they face are multiple and complex. We must make sure that we work together and this new approach to better support teachers, police and health professionals will improve the expertise and guidance available to all those who care for and educate young people.

Exploitation can take a variety of forms, and often there is a link between the threats vulnerable young people are exposed to. The National Crime Agency (NCA) found that in 2017 more than a third (35 per cent) of police forces reported evidence of child sexual exploitation in relation to so-called 'county lines' activity – a practice used by criminals of using children and young people to traffic drugs from one region to another, often in rural areas.

National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, Chief Constable Simon Bailey, said:

The grooming techniques now being used by county lines gangs are similar to what we see in online sexual exploitation of children. Often young people don't see themselves as victims and are flattered by feeling part of a group and gifts, so they are less likely to speak to police.

That's why a joined up approach involving teachers, doctors,

parents and others is crucial and this new programme will bring all our efforts together to help keep our young people safe. Child protection is a key policing priority and we will continue to do all we can to pursue and prosecute criminals who exploit the vulnerable.

The new programme builds on the Government's work to take a united approach to solving the growing concern of serious violence among the most vulnerable young people. It follows the announcement of the Department for Education's 'Strengthening Families, Protecting Children' programme, backed by £84 million to implement three landmark projects that strengthen and support families in up to 20 new eligible council areas.

The launch of the 'Tackling Child Exploitation' programme comes the day after the first meeting of the Prime Minister's Serious Violence Taskforce (8 May), which focussed specifically on improving and better coordinating the response to knife crime across government departments, supporting work on the front line with communities, agencies and charities to stop youth violence.

The creation of the Ministerial taskforce was announced during a 'Serious Youth Violence Summit' in Downing Street, which took place between 1 and 4 April.

The Summit brought together over 100 attendees from a diverse range of backgrounds, including young people with experience living in communities impacted by serious violence, law enforcement, the voluntary sector and health and education experts, to explore what more we can do as a whole society to tackle knife crime.

Every council in England will be able to apply for bespoke support from the scheme to tackle specific threats in their area, bringing social workers, police forces, schools, health services and charities together to improve how they respond to cases of exploitation, and learn from what works.

The programme will be led by a team of academics and experts led by Research in Practice, together with The Children's Society and the University of Bedfordshire. They will consult widely with the sector to make sure the support available reflects local priorities and needs, building on the strong work already underway. Support available is likely to include:

- support from staff with expertise in tackling particular areas of exploitation;
- help for areas to assess their needs, strengths and weaknesses in responding to exploitation threats;
- online learning materials based on the best available evidence from research;
- support to create strategies and improving data collation so that councils and safeguarding partners can respond more effectively to concerns; and
- setting up research projects in local areas to build a better knowledge base about threats to children outside their family home.

Dez Holmes, Director of Research in Practice said:

It is increasingly clear that addressing different types of exploitation and harm requires local areas to break down siloes and work across geographical and professional boundaries. Children do not fit into neat categories; many of these issues, historically addressed separately, are often connected.

We are delighted to be playing a role in the sector's efforts to develop a more effective response to these complex harms, and warmly welcome the Government's investment. We are particularly proud to be working with colleagues across the sector to deliver this programme. By building on the considerable expertise that exists and by creating new knowledge together, we can help children, families and communities to be safer.