

Dear Parents / Carers

You cannot have failed to see the **news headlines lately expressing the concern about the increased availability of illegal drugs** in rural/semirural areas/coastal towns with the associated knife crime and exploitation of our children. It can come as a bit of a shock when we realise that our own children may be exposed to this. Last week in assembly we have been making students aware of the exploitation that exists around drug use, not because we believe there is a particular problem in our school, but to make it clear that they have a responsibility to keep themselves and their friends safe. It's not an easy message to deliver or hear but part of our role in keeping students safe means we sometimes have to talk about difficult issues; better that these messages come from home and school than children are left to find things out for themselves.

Current research suggests that 88% of police forces report evidence of **'county lines'** with a very conservative estimate of 720 lines operating across the county mainly from cities such as London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. Being in the middle of the country it would be naïve to believe we are not affected by this in some way.

How are the 'county lines' different from other types of drug dealing?

In 'county lines' a group or 'gang' establish a network between an urban hub and a county location into which drugs are supplied. The link usually secures some sort of base in the county often by targeting a vulnerable adult (sometimes a drug user) and securing their home for use (known as cuckooing). This 'nominal' stays for a while and then is replaced. A phone is introduced to which orders are placed by customers. The drugs are moved from the city into the county and the orders delivered, that is where the child exploitation comes in. Vulnerable children are targeted and used to deliver the drugs and collect the cash. Let's be clear about this; we are usually talking Class A drugs, typically heroin and crack cocaine. The runner may well be involved in selling some cannabis as a side line but that's not where the real money is.

Who do they target?

Typically they target vulnerable teens. Those who go missing from home, those who are isolated, in care, suffer from neglect and abuse, are already involved in drug use and criminal behaviour, children out of school...you will probably have seen the news headlines about such gangs targeting PRUs (pupil referral units) where they are sitting targets.

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It always scares me that these children are so easy to identify and find. That's where the 'grooming' comes in. It's sometimes called '**chicken shop grooming**' basically because these children are more likely to be found on their own in fast food restaurants or are likely to accept free food without realising they will be required at some stage to pay off the debt by passing on drugs and returning with the cash. When the children have accepted the food/gift/drugs then just like Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) they are expected to pay off their debt, in this case by carrying the drugs. Sexual exploitation is also sometimes involved. There are suspicions that in some areas some companies (fast food/taxis) are complicit in the exploitation and are serving the 'county lines'.

The exploited children travel about typically with relatively small amounts of drugs/cash which means if they are picked up it is less likely to arouse suspicion. It does mean they need lots of runners to deliver their drugs. If it looks as though the authorities are becoming suspicious the 'gang' will look for what is known as a clean skin i.e. a child with no previous criminal background. The latest police report says that the sale of the exploitation of children remains unknown. What we do know is that 85% of police forces mention the use of knives in relation to 'county lines' and 74% firearms, so we are talking about big time violent criminals here. In addition, the amount of money we are talking about is huge. There are reports that drug lines sell for up to £50,000 and are let out at a cost of £10,000 per month. The welfare of vulnerable children means less than nothing to them.

As with any other kind of exploitation it is very difficult to distinguish between the signs of exploitation and normal (stropky!) teenage behaviour.

The crime stoppers website lists the **warning signs** as being;

- Changes in behaviour
- Signs of assault
- Access to numerous phones
- Use of unusual terms e.g. Going county/clean skins
- Associating with gangs
- Unexplained train/bus tickets
- Gifts/money
- Carrying weapons

What can we do about it?

I'm afraid there is no magic wand here but **children who feel safe/secure and like they belong in a family or school are less likely to look for somewhere else to 'belong' i.e. a gang.** We need to keep the avenues of communication open and **talk to our children** and when it all goes wrong and they do the wrong thing we need to disapprove of their behaviour/choices not of them as a person.

I do realise I say this all the time but **our children are entitled to privacy but they are not entitled to secrecy.** Ask where they are going and who they are with. **Having a time by which they must be home is not mean or unreasonable** – it is being a protective parent. **Having phones in bedrooms at night is not a good idea**, the need to be instantly available should ring alarm bells. We need to do everything we can to keep them in school, being excluded from school in particular attending certain alternative provision puts them at a higher risk as these places are targeted. (We do not have any PRUs in Warwickshire although we use a variety of alternative provision). Finally **anywhere that is open in the middle of the night and has free Wi-Fi is a huge risk.** There is a time to eat burgers and chips and there is a time to be home in bed.

In case this is making you feel middle aged and out of your depth (I know the feeling) here are a few things to be aware of; having said that, the language and latest fad will change next week so its tough work keeping up!

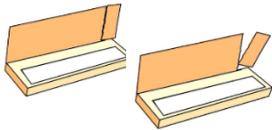
Class A Drugs

The category of drugs that is deemed most dangerous and carries the highest penalty if you are caught with it e.g. Heroin, cocaine, crack cocaine.



Cannabis

A class B drug, very popular for recreational use. Can be found in different forms. Usually smoked in a roll up cigarette.



Roach

A short tube usually made from a packet of roll up papers put in the end of a joint as a filter. Torn packets of roll up papers may be an indication of cannabis use.



Grinder

It is used to break cannabis into smaller bits.



Xanax

Often known as 'Xannies' it is very popular at the moment. It is a minor tranquilizer commonly used for anxiety disorders. Can be prescribed or bought on the internet. It is usually a white tablet.



MDMA

A synthetic drug that used to be known as ecstasy, sometimes called Molly. Often small brightly coloured tablets. Also very popular at the moment.



Nitrous oxide (N2O)

Is often inhaled through balloons and purchased in small silver canisters. It is also used in engines so the use may be totally legitimate.



Spice

Often known as 'fake weed' it is synthetic substance similar effect to cannabis. Usually smoked and has attracted news headlines as the 'Zombie' drug.

These seem to be the drugs of concern at the moment but by the time you get this letter it will probably be something else!

I need to be clear that whilst we will not tolerate students bringing illegal drugs into school and will take appropriate action, if a parent contacts us to say they are worried their child may be involved in drug use we will support them. The support usually takes the form of a referral to "Compass" who provide specialist drug and alcohol counselling. If we feel the drug use may be related to exploitation we will seek further advice and the students usually receives specialist support from an allocated CSE worker often provided by Barnardo's.

The exploitation of children by 'county lines' has been discussed with students in assembly this half term and the slides are now available on the website. If you have any further questions or concerns do not hesitate to contact me at school.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Berwick', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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