



Crisis

Cuckooing Toolkit

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Introduction

Cuckooing, also known as home takeover, is a form of exploitation where residential properties are taken over by individuals or criminal gangs for illicit activities, such as drug distribution or a place to stay. Over the past three years, reported cases of cuckooing have increased significantly, with more than a 300% rise in London in 2023.¹ In 2025, the Home Office allocated £42 million to the 'County Lines Programme'², aimed at disrupting exploitative gangs and protecting vulnerable people from cuckooing.

The Home Office defines cuckooing as: *'an offence to control a person's dwelling in connection with criminal activity without that person's consent. A person cannot consent to control of their dwelling if: they are under 18 years old; do not have capacity to give consent; have not been given sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision; have not given consent freely; or have withdrawn their consent. The consent of an occupant may not freely be given where it is obtained by coercion, deception or other forms of abusive behaviour. The offence makes it clear that control over a person's dwelling can be carried out via another person.'*³

Not all cuckooing involves direct criminality, cuckooing can start informally with a friend or partner staying over but

then escalate into serious exploitation or organised criminal activity. Spicer et al. (2020) identified four typologies of cuckooing, which will be examined in greater detail within the toolkit.

Rives (2024) argues we need a broader definition of cuckooing because some victims could be overlooked if their experiences do not fit within the current parameters of county lines activities.

We recognise the vulnerability of people who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness to be both victims and potential perpetrators of cuckooing and localised cuckooing. More awareness is needed so that all forms of cuckooing can be identified, and support put in place to recognise the harms that it can cause which put hard won tenancies at risk, and make it much harder for people to leave cuckooing behind.

A focus group with frontline practitioners at Crisis, who have experience of working with victims of cuckooing, have helped develop the content for this toolkit by sharing case studies, their expertise on different forms of cuckooing, what to look out for, what best practice looks like in terms of case management and what practitioners can do to help people sustain tenancies and prevent repeated cuckooing.

During our focus group work, practitioners working with victims of cuckooing reported that there was often mistrust and poor engagement from victims of cuckooing, alongside a lack of multi-agency working. This led to delayed responses or insufficient risk responses, resulting in systemic failures in safeguarding, housing and social care responses to support victims of cuckooing.

Successful interventions require patience, relationship building, and targeting perpetrators. We found that in some areas of the country there was also a 'victim blaming' culture, whereby the tenant was seen as a perpetrator rather a victim of cuckooing. These people were perceived as making unwise choices, such as consenting to allow a person to stay, rather than acknowledging the cohesion, control and violence perpetrators use to gain control over a property. This can result in missed opportunities for early interventions and confusion between housing and adult social care, as to which service should be responsible for leading the response.

A lack of professional curiosity and not using available legislation, such as either the:

- [Care Act 2014 in England \(Part1\)](#)
- [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014 \(Part 7\)](#) or
- [Adult Support and Protection \(Scotland\) Act 2007 \(Part1\)](#)

to establish if the potential victim has vulnerabilities, capacity and care and support needs can result in missed opportunities to provide support and a person losing their tenancy.

In some cases, people reported feeling compelled to sleep rough due to their property being taken over, and concerns for their safety or safety of their families.

Unfortunately, in such situations, this action can be interpreted as someone intentionally leaving their home and limits the housing options available to them when they make a homeless application with their local authority.

There are gaps in nationally available data and research regarding the issue of cuckooing, and the complexities associated with cuckooing make it challenging to determine the true extent of the problem. Since cuckooing is currently not classified as a legal offence, it is not formally recorded, and victims may not perceive themselves as victims or fear potential repercussions from reporting. Police and local authorities also have limited enforcement options available to them, which means that they primarily rely on civil measures, such as closure orders, to address cuckooing.

Until now, there has been no standalone offence of cuckooing. Prosecutors have relied on broader offences such as conspiracy to supply drugs, modern slavery legislation, or antisocial behaviour powers. In February 2025, the Home Office announced proposals to classify cuckooing as a criminal offence under the Crime and Police Bill. The Bill was enacted in April 2026, and is now the Crime and Police Act 2026. The Act makes it an offence to exercise control over another person's property without their consent, with the purpose of using their dwelling in connection with a criminal activity. The consent of an occupant may not be regarded as freely given if it is obtained by coercion, deception or forms of abusive behaviour. The Act also says that control of a person's property can be carried out via another person. It will also give housing providers additional powers to enforce civil orders, including partial closure orders.

1 Desai U, Cuckooing, MQT meeting with MPS to tackle Cuckooing in London, 18th May 2023, [Cuckooing](#)
2 Home Office, County Lines Programme Overview, Safe Streets Mission, 3rd June 2025, [County Lines Programme overview - GOV.UK](#)
3 Home Office Definition of Cuckooing, Crime and Policing Act: child criminal exploitation, cuckooing (home takeover) and coerced internal concealment factsheet, May 2026, [Crime and Policing Act: child criminal exploitation, cuckooing \(home takeover\) and coerced internal concealment factsheet - GOV.UK](#)

This resource is designed to help frontline workers and managers who may be supporting people who are at risk of, or currently experiencing, cuckooing.

The purpose of this toolkit is to:

- Raise awareness of the different forms cuckooing can take
- Help you spot the signs and recognise when cuckooing may be happening
- Explain the roles of different agencies and how to work together effectively to address cuckooing
- Share early intervention approaches and practical techniques to achieve the best possible outcomes for the people you support

Types of cuckooing

Cuckooing is complex and will vary on a case-by-case basis, making it important that services do not jump to conclusions about a person's or household's circumstances. Cuckooing can often involve overlapping issues, such as unmet needs, financial hardship, vulnerabilities and opportunism, and professionals may only see a fragment of the situation. It can begin subtly, such as a friend or partner overstaying out of need or sympathy. The initial relationship often masking the developing risk, but the situation can escalate into serious exploitation or organised criminal activity.

However, not all cuckooing involves direct criminality. In some cases, people simply overstay, exploit the tenant's kindness, and refuse to leave amounting to financial, emotional, or material exploitation.

All four cuckooing typologies as referred to by Spicer et al (2020), will often start with the perpetrator establishing a relationship of trust and offering incentives such as drugs, alcohol, gifts or informal care to gain access to the property. Once the perpetrator takes control of the property, the dynamics of the relationship can change rapidly using coercive and controlling behaviour against the victim.

Cuckooing covers a broad range of experiences and situations. One case can involve a number of different types of cuckooing. Through our work we found all the below as being forms of cuckooing, language can change depending on the geographical area and services spoken to.

Using a broad definition of cuckooing is important as it makes sure that people's vulnerability is not missed due to not fitting a particular idea or the different language used around what cuckooing is.

The range of language used to describe different forms of cuckooing:

- Organised cuckooing / county lines / home takeover – involving criminal networks, drug operations, and coercion, often aligning with more familiar media portrayals
- Parasitic nest invading cuckooing – perpetrator enters the victim's property with false pretence or force
- Quasi cuckooing – victim initially consents to the perpetrator entering the property
- Home takeover / localised cuckooing / opportunistic cuckooing – low-level, often based on relationships, need, or informal arrangements, but still exploitative
- Coupling – (gendered). Gendered cuckooing refers to a gendered form of exploitation in which perpetrators, often men, take over the homes or lives of vulnerable people, most commonly women, to control, abuse, or exploit them. When cuckooing occurs in a gendered context, it often reflects patterns of gender-based violence and coercive control.
- Reoccurring cuckooing - Recurring cuckooing is when criminals repeatedly take over a vulnerable person's home to use it for illegal activities, despite interventions or previous incidents.

Organised cuckooing - County lines

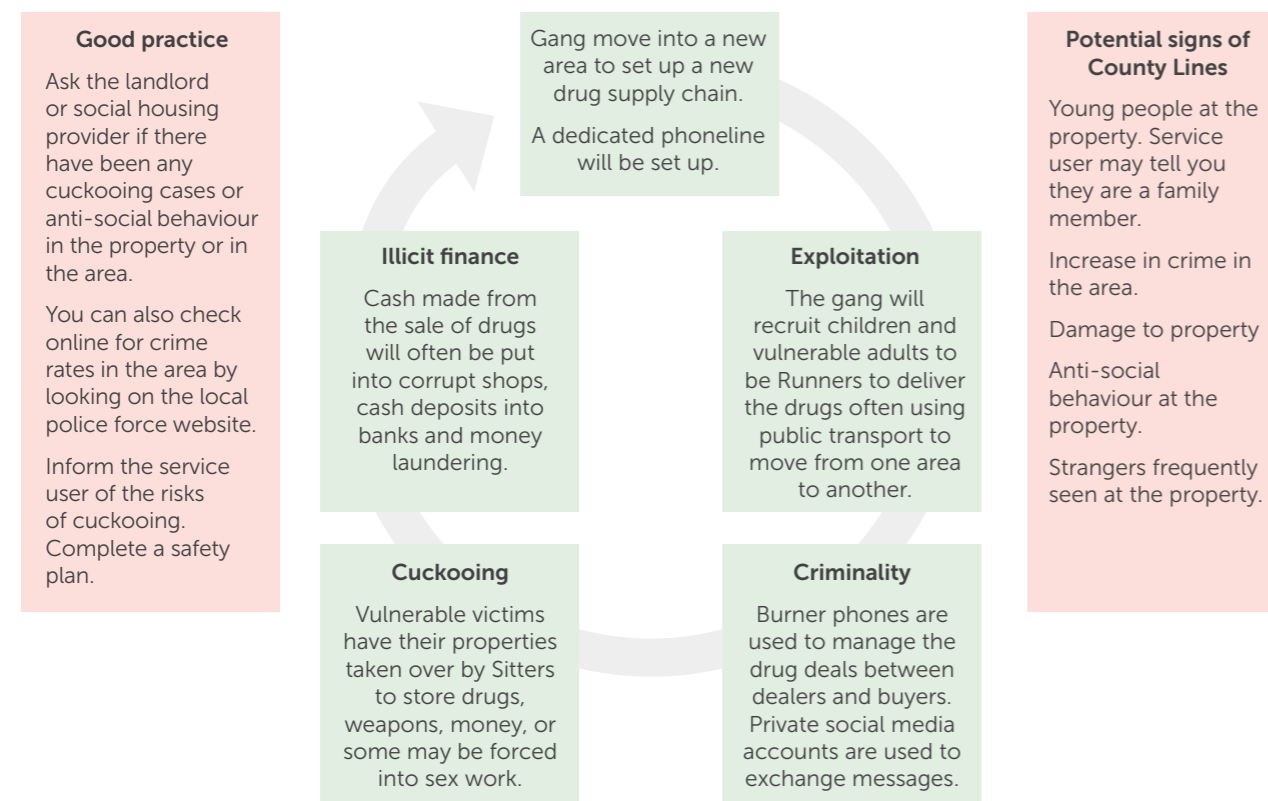
When discussing cuckooing, it is often associated with 'County Lines' operations, where organised criminal gangs (OCGs) take control of victim's properties for illegal activities. These gangs will recruit vulnerable people, including minors, to serve as 'Runners and Sitters.' The runners typically transport drugs between locations and sitters will be recruited to befriend the victims.

The National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) define "county lines as a term used to describe gangs and organised crime networks involved in exporting

*illegal drugs into one or more importing areas with the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of 'deal line.'*⁴

Although county lines are associated with gang members moving across the United Kingdom (UK) to set up drug supply chains, Spicer et al (2020) identified a form of cuckooing, 'Localised Cuckooing', where perpetrators recruit local drug dealers from their community to be part of their local operations. The perpetrators are often known to the victims through the homeless community or through local services, such as substance support services and homeless services.

County Lines 'Business' Model



Example of a county lines case - multi-agency response [This weblink will help you to access crime data for your area](#)

4 National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) [Disrupting County Lines Policing Strategy, 2024 – 2027](#)

Sam's story:

- Sam has just moved into his own property after a prolonged period living on the streets.
- Sam is on a methadone programme, has been diagnosed with COPD and has mobility issues.
- He befriends Callum at a soup kitchen.
- Callum tells Sam he has just moved into the area and is staying with his uncle, but the relationship has broken down and he has nowhere to go.
- Callum helps to support Sam by taking him to the shops, supplying him with free alcohol and paying for electric in exchange for staying over at the property.
- Callum stores and sells drugs at the property; Sam has asked Callum to leave but Callum refuses to leave and threatens to report Sam to the police for storing and dealing drugs.
- Callum and his friends now have control over the property and do not allow Sam access to his bedroom. He is forced to sleep on the floor.
- Sam has stopped engaging with his support worker and refuses entry to the property.
- Sam is frightened of the repercussions and has told you his friend Callum sometimes stays over with his consent in exchange for alcohol but invites other people to the property without his consent.

Lead worker Actions:

- Look for visible signs outside the property, rubbish, curtains closed. Are there other unknown people at the property?
- Arrange an appointment with Sam away from the property to check in and raise your concerns, complete the [cuckooing checklist](#) (Appendix 2), and if Sam is at immediate risk call 999.
- Inform Sam you are concerned about his safety and would like to arrange a [safety plan \(Groundswell\)](#) to keep himself safe.
- Ask Sam what he would like to do, explain the role of different agencies and what they can do to support Sam.
- Contact other agencies who work with Sam, this could include substance support services, GP, Probation etc to raise your concerns, share information and agree who would be the best person to lead on this and make a safeguarding referral.
- Establish a multi-agency meeting, and if Sam has capacity (Appendix 4), support Sam to attend the meeting. If Sam does not consent, you will need to advocate on his behalf.
- If you or any other agencies have any intelligence on any criminal activities taking place you will need to report this to the police. (See page 28).

Home takeover / localised cuckooing

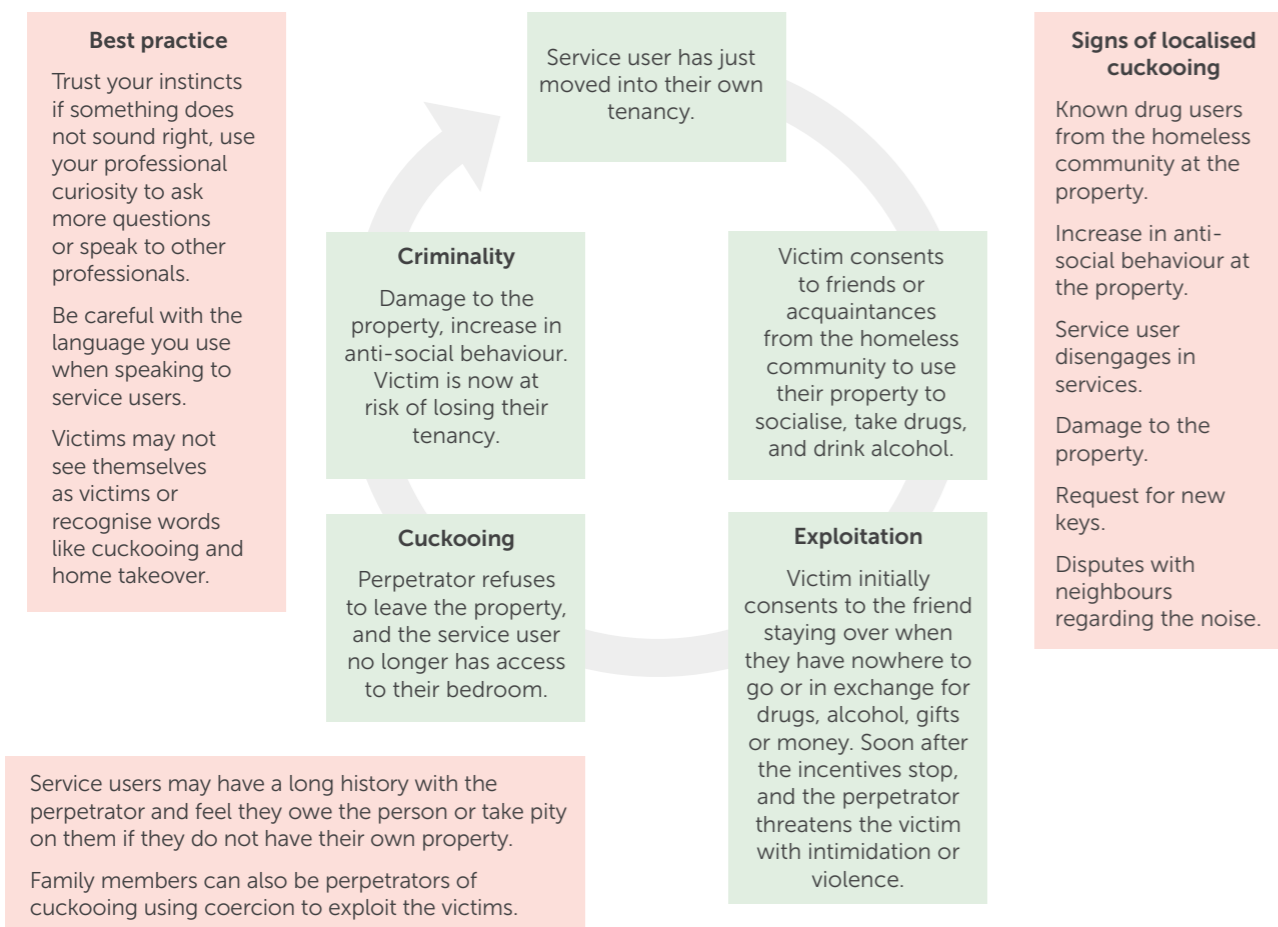
There is a perception that most cases involve organised criminal gangs, but when speaking to frontline staff, managers, academics and safeguarding managers they highlighted that they have seen a rise in instances where homes were being taken over by people known to the victim, alongside perpetrators being from within homeless communities who had their own vulnerabilities.

Home takeovers can occur informally as people try to stay connected to their social groups. These are sometimes seen as opportunistic rather than malicious but still have significant consequences. Spicer et al (2020) acknowledged that this form of cuckooing, 'localised cuckooing' does not necessarily involve organised criminal gangs (OCG), instead the perpetrator

may take over the property due to their own unmet personal needs or insufficient support. Even low-level or early-stage home takeovers can pose serious risks, including tenancy loss and vulnerability to exploitation. It doesn't require involvement from an organised gang to be harmful.

The ongoing housing crisis and high rental costs often result in vulnerable people who have experienced homelessness residing in the private rented sector or social housing that is located in localities of deprivation and may also have elevated crime rates. Feedback from cuckooing panels and focus groups also highlighted that support services can be withdrawn once the service user is housed. Both of these circumstances can leave people more vulnerable to home takeover or localised cuckooing, and lead to failed tenancies bringing people back into homelessness

Home takeover process



Example of home takeover / localised cuckooing – multi-agency response

Kelly's story:

- Kelly has recently moved into her first tenancy after living in a hostel for 18 months.
- Kelly was in care as a child and has spent many years sleeping rough and sofa surfing.
- Kelly is actively using crack cocaine and heroin.
- Kelly feels very isolated in her new property, so she consents for her friend Emma to stay over occasionally.
- Emma knows Kelly from the hostel and is having some issues with the other women in the hostel, so she feels it is safer to stay with Kelly.
- Emma invites her partner to stay over, and his friends turn up every evening to have parties and deal drugs.
- Kelly has asked Emma and her partner to leave but they refuse and threaten violence if Kelly speaks out.
- Kelly no longer feels safe and refuses to go back to the property.

Lead worker Actions:

- Kelly has confided in her lead worker that she no longer feels safe in her own home and does not want to return.
- Thank Kelly for disclosing this information and her concerns. Talk through the options available to her, for example would Kelly consent to having a safeguarding referral made. With consent, contact the police, and if Kelly is reluctant, you can suggest that you can [report concerns anonymously via Crimestoppers](#).
- Another option would be for the Lead Worker to share the intelligence with the police and local authority.
- You may also need to raise a safeguarding referral for Emma if you identify risks because she might also be a victim.

Multi-agency response:

- Local authority may place Kelly in temporary accommodation if it is unsafe for her to return home and the police are concerned about her safety.
- The police can support with a letter to housing if it is unsafe to return to the property.
- Police and local authority can obtain a partial closure order for the property if needed.
- Housing or the police might be able to install CCTV alarms and change the locks to make Kelly feel safe to return to the property.

Women experiencing cuckooing

Women often face more severe or sexualised forms of exploitation within cuckooing, such as control, coercion and sexual abuse. Spicer et al (2020) also identified this form of cuckooing known as 'Coupling' whereby gang members will recruit vulnerable young women and girls to groom into a sexual relationship. Work with our focus group illustrated that women are also more likely to be judged for "choosing" these situations, reflecting systemic gender blaming bias.

In 2018, The London Major's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) funded the 'Rescue and Response' county lines project' in London to better understand, target and respond to county lines by working with charities, local authorities and the police to support young vulnerable people known to have links to county lines. Only 17% of the referrals received were women, highlighting that women are underrepresented as victims or offenders of cuckooing.⁵ Women were targeted by perpetrators because they are less likely to draw suspicion and subsequent attention from authorities.

Signs to look out for:

- The service user enters a new relationship; the partner moves into the property very soon after they meet
- 'Love bombing'⁶ – a technique that can be used by the abusive partner to gain power and control by bombarding the victim with excessive affection, compliments, gifts. Initially the service user might enjoy the affection, but this may quickly become overwhelming, and they may begin to withdraw from

support services and disconnect from family or friends

- The service user may tell you the partner is the best thing that has ever happened to them, and they could not live without them
- The service user changes their telephone number or no longer has access to a mobile
- Their partner may call the service user during your appointment to ask where they are or how long they will be etc and the service user may become anxious or worried after the call
- Changes in the service user's physical health or emotional wellbeing and/or increased substance use
- Visible bruises and sign of domestic abuse [Recognising domestic abuse - Women's Aid](#)

Reoccurring cuckooing

There are examples of best practice where agencies have collaborated to achieve positive outcomes for victims, such as managed moves and supporting tenants to relocate from the property, including the local authority assigning a priority housing banding.

However, due to limited housing options and the necessity of moving to a new area away from perpetrators, if a property is offered and the victim declines the offer, the local authority may discharge their duty or revoke the priority banding. This situation may lead to the victim feeling pressured to accept a property in a new area with limited or no support networks, which can increase feelings of isolation and vulnerability, potentially elevating the risk of reoccurring cuckooing.

Frontline staff focus group - Case Study 1

A Trauma informed and multi-agency response

This case involves a woman with a long history of trauma, institutional involvement, and substance use. Having experienced the care system, multiple imprisonments, and serious sexual trauma, she faced significant barriers to engaging with services. Her mental health challenges, combined with ongoing crack cocaine and alcohol use, made temporary accommodation placements extremely difficult. After being placed in unsupported housing, she became pregnant but was found to be at risk due to sexual exploitation in her property. She was moved into accommodation for women experiencing domestic abuse, but her baby was removed at birth due to continued substance use. This led to a period of acute mental health crisis and hospitalisation.

Throughout her journey, she had a deeply mistrustful and difficult relationship with statutory services, shaped by her trauma and experiences of being let down or judged. Early interactions were marked by hostility and withdrawal, making engagement a significant challenge for support workers. She perceived many services, including the police and housing authorities, as punitive rather than protective, which contributed to her reluctance to disclose the home takeover or seek help.

Following discharge, a supported tenancy was arranged. While she initially managed, she re-established contact with individuals involved in criminal activity in a nearby property. Concerns were raised by neighbours about unknown men accessing her home, and suspicions of cuckooing emerged. Due to trauma and mistrust, it took time and sensitive engagement for her to disclose what was happening. Rather than penalising her or seeking a closure order on her home, local authority services and police took a coordinated, patient approach. They identified and targeted the perpetrators, issuing community protection notices and, when necessary, taking enforcement action.

This trauma-informed, person-centred response avoided further criminalising the tenant and built a foundation of trust. Over time, she became more open to engaging with services and began viewing statutory agencies as sources of support rather than punishment. Although her broader support needs remain significant, the coordinated response successfully ended the home takeover without forcing her to relocate. The case highlights the importance of directing enforcement at perpetrators rather than victims and demonstrates the value of persistent, respectful, and relationship-based intervention, especially when overcoming deep-seated mistrust.

⁵ Rescue and Response to Cuckooing County Lines Project, Page 21, 2nd October 2020, [PowerPoint Presentation](#)

⁶ Love Bombing Definition, Solace, [Love bombing: Affection today. Abuse tomorrow. - Solace Women's Aid](#)

Recurring cuckooing and systemic challenges in supporting a vulnerable tenant

This case involves a man who has been supported by Housing First since 2019 and is currently in his third social housing tenancy, all of which have been subject to cuckooing. Between these tenancies, he experienced several stays in temporary accommodation, some of which also showed early signs of takeover. Despite his own vulnerabilities, he is known to conduct outreach to support others in need. However, his situation is complicated by his nephew, who has played a significant role in orchestrating exploitative activities related to cuckooing, including elements of domestic abuse within the family. Untangling these overlapping forms of exploitation has been challenging for all involved.

A major difficulty in this case has been the consistently poor practice and lack of coordinated response from safeguarding and housing teams, coupled with unacknowledged care and support needs despite persistent advocacy. The tenant, who is a chronic user of crack cocaine and heroin, has no formal diagnoses, and his substance use is often simplistically viewed as the root cause of all his issues, leading to blame rather than support. Safeguarding

teams frequently dismissed his needs as housing problems, resulting in repeated "batting" of responsibility between agencies.

After extensive advocacy, his tenancies have been managed through transfers, though these processes have been slow and reluctant. A critical failure occurred when one borough accepted a reciprocal housing transfer but did not share vital risk information or history, placing him in a known cuckooing hotspot with a pre-existing drug-using population outside his property. This put him at elevated risk of tenancy failure and further exploitation.

Although the new borough has begun to recognise him more as a victim and has offered another transfer, this support comes with problematic conditions, including signing an Acceptable Behaviour Contract typically intended for perpetrators, which reinforces a message of fault despite his limited control over the situation. Throughout, there has been little focus on holistic care or addressing underlying support needs. The approach has largely been to move him on and expect abstinence from drug use, without adequate strategies to prevent repeat cuckooing or provide meaningful support to sustain tenancy and wellbeing.

Role of the practitioner

Spotting the signs of cuckooing

- Frequently request money for food, phone, gas and electric top ups
- Disclosing they have new friends staying over or visiting the property
- People entering or leaving the property throughout the day and night
- Reports of anti-social behaviour
- Damage to property, especially doors and locks
- Asking for replacement keys to the property
- Increase involvement in criminal activity
- Evidence of drugs paraphernalia
- Conflict with neighbours
- Withdrawing support from professionals
- Service user may have unexplained injuries
- Service user appearing anxious or worried
- Service user is staying away from the property
- Starting a relationship with new partner who moves into the property quickly

Understanding the causes of cuckooing

Loneliness and isolation after being housed

Tenants, especially those in Housing First tenancies, often experience deep loneliness and disconnection after being housed. Feelings of guilt about having a home while others remain homeless can lead them to invite others in.

Lack of community integration

Moving from street life to independent living can create a social vacuum. Services often struggle to provide meaningful, accessible, and realistic community engagement opportunities, leaving people isolated and vulnerable.

Emotional trauma and lack of trust in services

Past trauma, including child removal or other traumatic experiences, can severely impact trust in support systems. This leads to disengagement and a tendency to seek comfort and safety from familiar but harmful environments or people.

Avoidance of services and support

Some people feel punished rather than protected by the system and actively avoid engagement. This distance from formal support increases their risk of being exploited by others who appear more understanding or provide temporary relief (e.g. drugs or alcohol).

Vulnerability to exploitation through substance use and trauma bonds

People dealing with trauma may form bonds with others who supply substances or companionship, even when those relationships are exploitative. These connections can feel safer or more validating than professional services, despite leading to harm.

People with experiences of homelessness can be more at risk of cuckooing

People with experiences of homelessness are more at risk of cuckooing because their housing is often insecure, and they may have multiple or complex support needs, be socially isolated, economically vulnerable, or have histories of trauma. These factors make it easier for criminals to exploit them and take over their homes.

Person centred approach

Build a trusting non-judgemental relationship with the client, be honest and open about cuckooing risks. It is also helpful if there is continuity with the support workers and practitioners that are supporting a service user, as it helps to build more trusting relationships that enable service users to be more open.

Think about the ways in which concerns can be reported, including online methods or contacting the police by telephone (see section [The Police](#)). Discuss with the service user how they believe they can keep themselves safe. Possible additional safety measures could include changing the locks or installing CCTV, which may be able to be arranged via the police or housing provider.

It is important to remember that people also have the right to make their own decisions regarding action that can be taken around their tenancy. If you suspect cuckooing, have an open and honest conversation with the service user to express your concerns.

Raise awareness

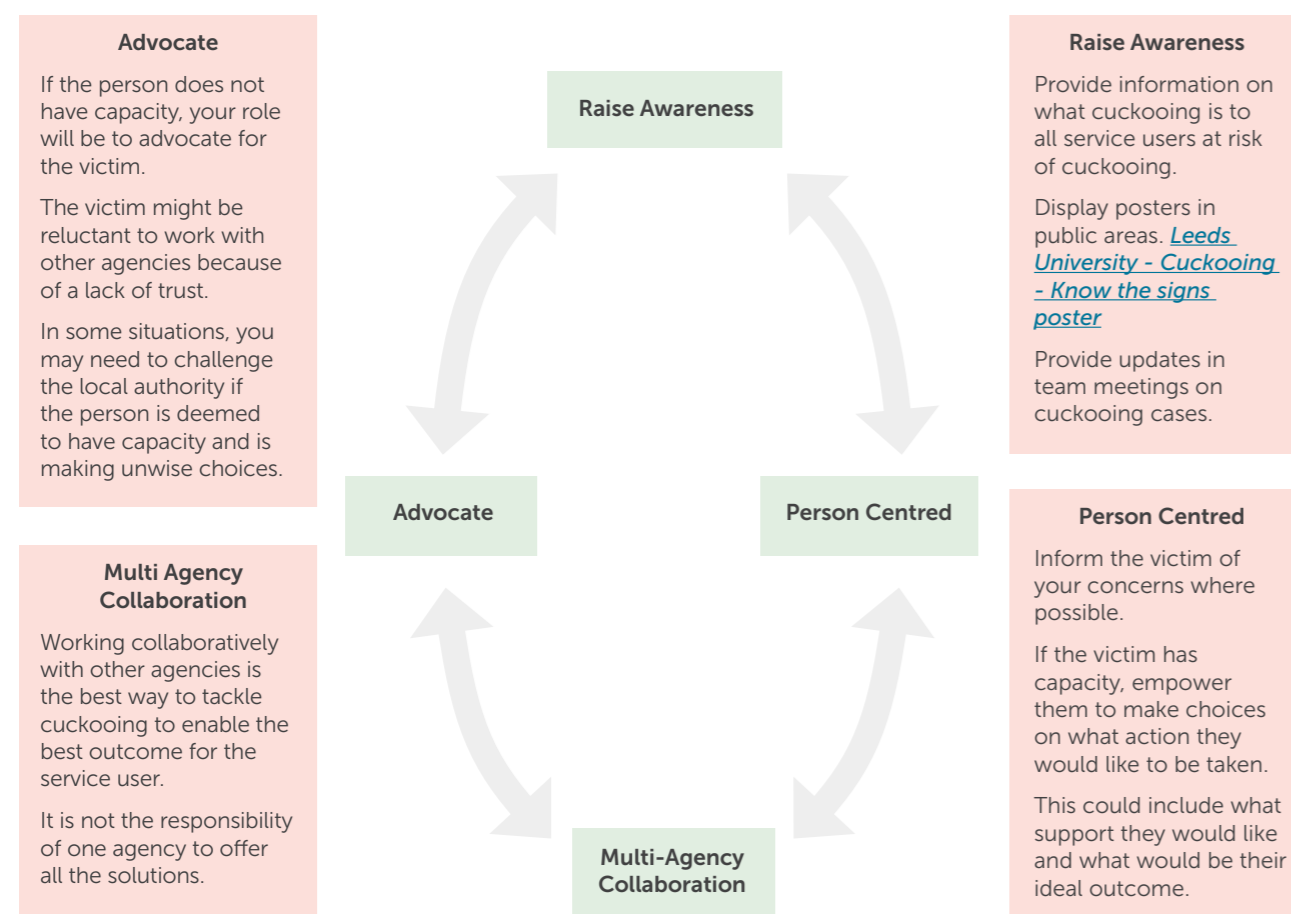
Perpetrators often target vulnerable people - this can include, people experiencing homelessness, older people and people who may be socially isolated. Many of us may know someone who could be at risk of cuckooing – for example a neighbour, friend, or family member. Gaining a clear understanding of what cuckooing is and how perpetrators operate can help us recognise the early warning signs. Engaging in open and honest conversations with family, friends and colleagues can raise awareness and encourage the reporting of suspicious activity. If you notice frequent visitors or unusual behaviours, it is important to trust your instincts and report these concerns. Everyone has a role to play in preventing and addressing cuckooing.

We need to consider a person’s individual capacity in the context of cuckooing. Individual capacity here refers to a person’s ability to understand, assess, and act in their own best interests. Vulnerabilities, alongside multiple and complex needs can reduce a person’s capacity to comprehend risks, appreciate consequences, consider options, and communicate informed decisions. This can make a person more susceptible to exploitation, as they may struggle to recognise coercion or feel unable to refuse people access to their home. Raising awareness of exploitation tactics can help protect people and reduce the risk of cuckooing.

The practitioner role is to support them in maintaining safety, and you can provide guidance on the support options available. If the service user has capacity, it is essential they feel empowered to make their own decisions. When raising concerns, it’s also helpful to be mindful of the environment in which conversation take place – consider whether there is a safe and comfortable location for you to meet a service user and safely discuss their concerns.

As practitioners, team meetings and reflective practice sessions can provide valuable opportunities to discuss cuckooing cases with colleagues, enable mutual support, share best practices, and identify training needs for staff members. These sessions can also facilitate the opportunity to share intelligence which will help to identify patterns of unusual behaviour, such as where victims and perpetrators are meeting, whether the perpetrator is known to services, and other relevant information that could support earlier intervention.

Support practitioners can provide



Advocate

Some of the most vulnerable people affected by cuckooing may not recognise that they are being exploited. Service users have experienced trauma and may have limited positive relationship experiences as adults, which can impact their ability to fully understand their situation. Additionally, people with complex physical and or mental health issues, and substance misuse issues may also find it difficult to identify themselves as victims.

As practitioners, our responsibility is to prioritise people's safety by being alert to the signs and reporting instances of cuckooing where a service user is at risk of harm and abuse. It is important to remember that a service users' capacity can fluctuate, so regular check-ins are essential. In the advocacy role, you can offer your professional opinions on what actions may be in the best interest of the service user. Some service users may request advocacy support because they feel overwhelmed, and your role will involve communicating with all relevant agencies to present the service users wishes.

Multi-agency response

One of the most effective strategies for addressing cuckooing is to collaborate with other agencies to identify and implement measures to disrupt cuckooing activities and safeguard victims. It is advisable to check online to see if your local adult and social care authority has a dedicated cuckooing panel into which you can make referrals.

Cuckooing panels are attended by relevant local statutory and voluntary agencies, including the neighbourhood police, housing, mental health, adult social care, NHS, mental health services, and voluntary sector services who come together to

discuss referrals and develop action plans. Attendees can share intelligence on the victim and perpetrator. Panels are often set up by adult social care which enables agencies to be responsive and swiftly develop action plans.

The police can carry out welfare checks with other agencies and safeguarding teams will contact the victim to carry out a care needs assessment. Housing teams can look at raising awareness of cuckooing in the area with posters and leaflets, so people in the community know what to look out for and how to report cuckooing concerns.

If you suspect a service user may be a victim of cuckooing and you do not have a dedicated cuckooing panel in your area, you should consider reaching out to all relevant partner agencies, preferably via email, to maintain a record of correspondence and to coordinate an appropriate lead for the case. All actions, including the potential need for a safeguarding referral, should be clearly articulated. The initial meeting will provide the opportunity for agencies to share concerns, exchange intelligence, and determine next steps as agreed by all parties.

Frontline staff focus group - Case Study 3

Complex Vulnerability, Cuckooing, and Systemic Challenges

This case concerns a woman with severe and enduring mental health issues, who experienced multiple hospitalisations and detentions under mental health legislation over several years. During this time, she remained largely disengaged from consistent care, often presenting as mentally unwell and transient, and using an alias for months. Her longstanding tenancy was compromised by an abusive relationship and subsequent cuckooing by a family friend, who gained access and control over her home, causing her significant distress and trauma. Despite numerous safeguarding concerns and a prolonged management transfer process, she faced repeated setbacks, including temporary accommodation marked by violence and trauma, assaults during police custody, and long periods without medical follow-up.

Her mental well-being is tightly linked to the safety of her environment; however, treatment was sporadic and insufficient, with a lack of allocated social workers and care coordinators for extended periods. The cuckooing perpetrator exhibited coercive and violent behaviour, including assault and theft of keys, eventually resulting in his detention. Multiple professionals became involved over time, but coordination was challenging, with delayed safeguarding inquiries and limited use of multi-agency risk assessments. The woman's vulnerability was compounded by a history of manic

episodes and mistrust, often perceiving threats where none existed, and rapidly escalating in crisis.

To support her, a safeguarding inquiry was opened and reopened when concerns persisted. A management transfer of her property was pursued to move her to a safer environment near family, although this process took over a year. Care coordinators and social workers were eventually allocated, and community mental health support was increased, albeit after significant delays. The police and safeguarding teams worked closely to manage the risks posed by the perpetrator, including securing a partial closure order on her property and facilitating his detention under mental health legislation. Outreach work was intensified, with workers actively locating and engaging her during periods of rough sleeping. Advocacy efforts included referrals to community care solicitors and independent mental health advocates to challenge inadequate professional responses and push for multi-agency collaboration.

Despite these efforts, systemic barriers and poor professional curiosity limited the effectiveness of interventions, highlighting the need for persistent, coordinated support and legal advocacy. The case illustrates the complexities of supporting highly vulnerable people experiencing cuckooing, where trauma, mental illness, and exploitation intersect with gaps in service provision.

Practitioner safety

It's important that practitioners remain safe when supporting a service user who may be a victim of cuckooing. Lone visits to a property should be avoided, visit with another practitioner or police officer, if appropriate. Dynamic risk assessments should be carried out and practitioners should trust their instincts when undertaking home visits and follow the lone working protocols of their organisation. Regular supervision sessions should take place to discuss the case and actions, managers should be available when needed. Teams can also implement reflective practice sessions so that situations can be analysed, to gain new knowledge, skills, and insights that may support the practitioner and service user.

Prevention

Identifying the signs of cuckooing can support early intervention. Multiple or repeated visitors and/or anti-social behaviour at a property may indicate a tenant is a victim of cuckooing. Victims can be mistakenly perceived as perpetrators and may be served with warnings or notices from the police or local authorities. When observing anti-social behaviour at the property, consider the possibility that the tenant may be experiencing cuckooing, and engage in a respectful discussion with the service user about their circumstances. If appropriate, arrange a visit to the property with a colleague or another professional familiar with the service user to observe potential indicators, such as litter outside the property, closed curtains, property damage, signs of others living at the property, anti-social behaviour reports or unfamiliar activities or people at the property.

Searching for a property

If you are supporting a service user with a property search, it would be good practice to attend viewings with them, when possible, to assess suitability.

- Enquire with the landlord if there have been any historical reports of cuckooing or anti-social behaviour at the property or within the surrounding area
- Is the property secure? Is there any CCTV in the street, or a doorbell camera on the front door, for example. If the service user would like to pursue the property, check with the landlord or relevant agencies if you can explore the options for to enhance security at the property
- Are there any tenancy support services available?
- Assess if there is any noise from neighbours, rubbish outside the property, gangs in the area etc
- If you are unfamiliar with the area, ask colleagues or other professionals who work in the area if there have been known cases of cuckooing, or whether there may be a risk of cuckooing in the locality

Moving into a new property

When a service user moves into a new property, support agencies responsibilities may include setting up direct debits, assisting with utilities, supporting funding applications, and similar tasks. It is also important to consider and acknowledge the emotional well-being of a service user during this transition, as this aspect can sometimes be overlooked. While some service users may feel excited about the move, others may find it overwhelming, and feel isolated, especially if relocating to a new area.

If possible, collaborate with the service user to complete a support network list ([Appendix 1](#)). This helps to identify their support system, which can inform where additional support may be necessary. It can also serve as a conversation starter about what qualities their friends and support network should possess. Additionally, conduct a risk assessment to evaluate whether the service user's friends or acquaintances might pose any potential risks or dependencies in the future.

If you are supporting a service user with complex needs to move into a property it would be good practice to raise awareness of cuckooing beforehand.

- Have an open and honest conversation about the risks of cuckooing
- Create a **safety plan** on keeping safe in the property – Groundswell provide a [template](#) for this
- Where possible, do a home visit if it is safe to do so, to look for signs of potential cuckooing. Please follow your organisation's policy on home visits and conduct a joint visit, where possible

Victims of cuckooing are more likely to have a reoccurrence of cuckooing. To reduce this risk work with the service user to seek support for any additional needs they may have such as mental health, substance use, physical health etc.

Isolation can be difficult for service users moving into their own property, look at support groups in the community to help build positive relationships. Intensive support at the beginning is crucial to reduce the risk of the service user becoming a victim of cuckooing.

An information sheet available in [Groundswell's Cuckooing Toolkit](#) is a useful resource.

If you are not able to provide ongoing support, consider other agencies who can provide ongoing support. This can include social prescribers who can provide emotional and practical support. More information on social prescribing can be found below:

[Social Prescribing England](#)

[Scottish Social Prescribing Network](#)

[Social Prescribing - Primary Care One Wales](#)

The service user may also be eligible for health or social care advocacy support, and you can check what support is available from [The Advocacy People](#). On their website they have information about what independent advocacy services are available in your locality.

Working with perpetrators of cuckooing

The vulnerabilities and experiences of those facing homelessness mean that services are likely to engage with both victims and perpetrators of cuckooing. Some perpetrators may be unaware that their actions constitute an offence by taking over and occupying other people's properties.

While cuckooing itself is not yet classified as a criminal offence, there are civil measures available to address cuckooing. The police can pursue action under laws relating to anti-social behaviour, drug offences and hate crime, which can include elements of mate crime, which is when someone makes friends with a person, usually a vulnerable person, and goes on to abuse or exploit that relationship (which can also include elements of hate crime⁷).

In 2022 Nottingham University carried out an exploratory study in Nottingham: Intersections Between Exploitation and Cognitive Impairment, and they found that 'Perpetrators of cuckooing are sometimes characteristically similar to their victims in terms of experiencing vulnerabilities'. A housing Officer who took part in their research noted some 'perpetrators as highly vulnerable people trying to navigate and manage their own vulnerabilities'.

Their involvement in cuckooing can be driven by vulnerabilities, such as criminal records, poverty, marginalisation, a lack of opportunities⁸.

Perpetrator focused support and housing interventions could also be developed, considering that some perpetrators have similar vulnerabilities to victims. Addressing their housing and support needs by working collaboratively with other agencies can also be a practical approach to reducing instances of cuckooing.

Criminal records and social stigma may make it difficult for perpetrators to access safe and stable housing, sometimes leaving them homeless or in insecure living conditions. Their involvement in cuckooing is frequently driven by these vulnerabilities, as well as by a lack of legitimate opportunities for accommodation or income. While their actions harm others, understanding their own housing insecurity and social marginalisation highlights that they, too, may require support and intervention alongside enforcement measures.

Past trauma can also contribute to desensitisation and potentially lead to aggressive or violent behaviours. Maintaining a non-judgemental approach

when working with the perpetrator is also important; understanding the reasons behind their actions enable us to support them effectively in addressing underlying issues.

Potential signs a person is a perpetrator of cuckooing:

- Accessing homeless services but often disengaging then returning to the service and advising they have been sofa surfing with various friends and family
- Seen at other services users' property
- Befriending other service users and attending appointments with them
- Access to more than one mobile phone
- New clothes, tech products and/or carrying large quantities of cash
- Travels throughout the area or to different town and cities

⁷ Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) Disability Hate Crime and other crimes against disabled people - prosecution guidance, 3rd March 2022, [Disability Hate Crime and other crimes against disabled people - prosecution guidance | The Crown Prosecution Service](#)

⁸ University of Nottingham – Rights Lab, [Intersections between exploitation and cognitive impairment: An exploratory study in Nottingham](#), UK March 2022

Safeguarding

If you suspect a service user is a victim of cuckooing, you should make a referral to your local authority safeguarding team. Local authorities may have different safeguarding leads and or processes, so it is important to check your local authority website to see what the referral process is for your local area. When making a safeguarding referral, you should also consider if the person has capacity to make decisions to keep themselves safe from abuse and neglect ([Appendix 4](#)).

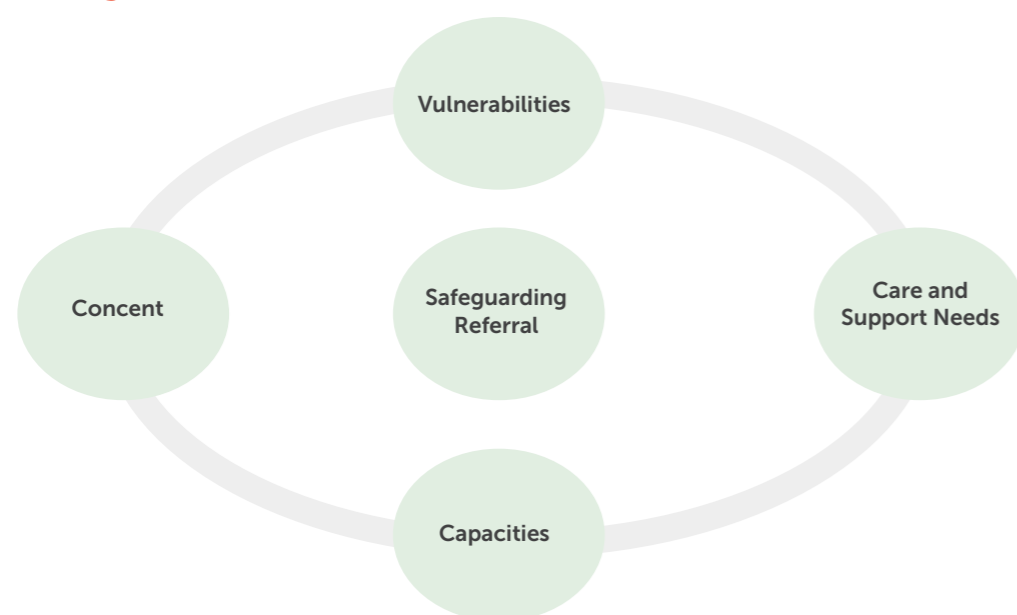
If you are unsure whether the circumstances will meet the threshold for a safeguarding alert, you could contact your local authority to speak to the duty safeguarding manager for information and advice.

There are some local authorities who operate a cuckooing panel that you can directly refer into. Best practice would be if cuckooing panels existed in every local authority, so it is important that you familiarise yourself with what the process is with your local authority. Early intervention and use of the Well-Being Principle under either the:

- [Care Act \(England\) 2014](#),
- [Social Services and Well-Being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#) or
- [Adult Support and Protection \(Scotland\) Act 2007](#)

to conduct investigations for suspected victims of cuckooing regardless of if a person has care and support needs, has been identified as good practice in the Newcastle Adult Safeguarding team ([Home takeover and exploitation - Newcastle Safeguarding](#)).

What to consider when making a safeguarding referral



Some London boroughs also have dedicated multi agency cuckooing panels set up to disrupt cuckooing and safeguard vulnerable victims from exploitation. To learn more about this visit:

[Cuckooing | Islington Council](#)

[Southwark Safeguarding Partnership - Adults Policies & Procedures](#)

Adult Health and Social Care receive a high volume of safeguarding referrals daily, many of whom do not fit the safeguarding criteria. Practitioners have reported referrals being declined because it is perceived to be a housing issue and not a social care case. To avoid referrals being declined, consider completing the checklist to identify vulnerabilities, capacity, care and support needs, if consent is not given by the service user, you should also state why consent was not given on the referral form ([Appendix 4](#)).

Professional perceptions

Some professionals may view service users as making unwise lifestyle choices, consenting to allow a perpetrator to access and use a property. Victim blaming, and stigmatisation can result to profound consequences in some cases, including death if preventative interventions do not take place to protect a victim. The victim blaming culture can result in a serious case review if professionals fail to take appropriate steps to protect a victim from abuse and neglect. [Newcastle City Council provide guidance](#) provides examples of appropriate language to use when making a safeguarding referral.

The police

Understanding national approaches and learning from police practice is essential for professionals across community agencies to identify, support, and safeguard victims.

To support the development of this toolkit, we attended Home Office meetings and engaged with experts involved in shaping national guidance to help forces better safeguard and protect victims of cuckooing.

We consulted Detective Inspector (DI) Anne Rannard, Protect Lead at the [National County Lines Co-ordination Centre](#) (NCLCC), whose work is featured in the University of Leeds publication [Tackling Cuckooing](#)⁹. DI Rannard was instrumental in developing national guidelines for police forces, focusing on safeguarding vulnerable victims and using all available legislation to prosecute offenders.

DI Rannard emphasised that victims of cuckooing are often fearful of approaching the police due to concerns about criminalisation, eviction, or potential repercussions from perpetrators. Highlighting the importance of sensitive, trauma-informed policing and the need for a multi-agency approach that builds trust and offers long-term support.

Police forces nationally have invested in training officers to identify potential

victims, respond with empathy, and collaborate closely with local authorities and community partners to ensure victims are effectively protected and supported.

A range of national resources have been developed to assist police officers in identifying, protecting, and supporting victims of cuckooing. The College of Policing has produced a [Cuckooing Toolkit](#)¹⁰, available on the policing intranet, described as “a toolkit for officers to utilise when identifying, disrupting and problem-solving cuckooing and protecting vulnerable people.” The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC), in its [Disrupting County Lines – Policing Strategy 2024–2027](#)¹¹, also includes sections on prevention and the protection of victims, highlighting the importance of proactive community engagement and partnership working.

Sharing information or intelligence

There are over forty police forces across the UK, which means that there is a range of ways in which you can share information with the police. It is important to understand how the police force operates in your locality. Below are some examples of how the information you share might be acted upon.

Intelligence - something you have seen or heard may seem insignificant, but your information could be the missing piece of a puzzle that the police need. It could help them to catch a criminal and to keep people safe. The police rely on the public and agencies to share information and want you to tell them about something you see or hear that does not seem right or causes you concern.

Concerns for welfare - if you have concerns for the welfare of a person you will need to consider the immediacy of the response, as this will direct how you report information to the police. If you are concerned for the immediate safety of a person, you should call 999 in an emergency or 101 for a non-emergency.

Online reporting - there are online options for you to report concerns to the police through your local police force website. There will be prompts to assist you in reporting concerns about cuckooing. If you make an assessment that the information you have is intelligence, and therefore does not require an immediate response, many police forces now have an online portal for partner agencies to share intelligence directly, through an online intelligence report form. It is advisable to familiarise yourself with your local police force processes and understand the reporting procedures for your locality.

Concerns about cuckooing -if you have concerns about potential cuckooing, be mindful that currently cuckooing is not in itself an offence. However, other offences may be being committed, therefore you will need to consider whether the information you have is intelligence or whether there is a risk to the immediate safety of the person as this will assist you in determining how to report it.

Cuckooing is not any single agencies responsibility to manage. Consider what other agencies may be required to help to manage the risk, or to build a bigger picture and better understanding of the problem. All local authorities operate both child and adult safeguarding processes, but adult safeguarding processes will differ significantly from one local authority to another, so it is important to familiarise yourself with local procedures.

Police responses to cuckooing

Cuckooing should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and there are numerous options available to report and protect those at risk. Safeguarding and risk management are priority concerns and will influence police decision making when it comes to deciding what action needs to be taken. Police action could include a visit to the address (single or multi-agency), crime prevention advice, referrals to other services or enforcement action – such as the servicing of notices or the execution of a warrant to make arrests for relevant offences. There may also be other approaches a police force may decide to take.

There is the possibility that victims of cuckooing may unfortunately be arrested during enforcement action, however, this does not necessarily mean that they will be prosecuted. Arrests must always be necessary, proportionate, and justified. Police generally make arrests to secure and preserve evidence and to manage public safety.

⁹ [Tackling Cuckooing, Anne Rannard, Protect Lead National County Lines Coordination Centre, University of Leeds publication](#)

¹⁰ [Cuckooing toolkit – protecting vulnerable people | College of Policing](#)

¹¹ [Disrupting County Lines - Policing Strategy 2024-2027](#)



In March 2025, Merseyside Police launched a campaign to tackle cuckooing through an awareness raising campaign. The campaign used digital messaging on screens in supermarkets and on buses and kiosks to encourage the public to report any suspicious or suspected cuckooing activity. [Merseyside Police public cuckooing campaign](#).

Every year over forty police forces participate in an intensification week dedicated to addressing cuckooing by conducting raids on suspected properties. The data below highlights the seriousness of cuckooing and underscores the need to establish it as a criminal offence to enhance law enforcement capabilities. The reported total of 1,660 arrests and 1,434 individuals safeguarded demonstrates that police are employing a victim led approach to support those affected¹².

The data collection methods and areas covered have changed over the years, but the data in the table demonstrates a positive shift in the number of arrests made and people safeguarded and protected from cuckooing and county lines activity.

¹² Results from National Police Intensification Week, NPCC, 4th July, 2025, [241 county lines shut down following national action](#)

Results from Police Intensification Week in June 2025

1965 arrests made (adults is 91.7% and children 8.3%)
 395 females safeguarded (214 adults, 181 under 18)
 784 males safeguarded (345 adults, 439 under 18)
 584 cuckooed addresses visited.
 241 deal lines seized.
 Cash totalling approx. £2.4 million seized.
 325 bladed weapons seized

Results from Police Intensification Week in Oct 2018

652 men and 91 women were arrested.
 389 vulnerable adults and 292 children were engaged for safeguarding purposes.
 655 cuckooed addresses were visited
 49 deal lines were seized.
 Cash totalling £183,976 seized
 169 weapons were seized

Frontline staff focus group - Case Study 4

Good practice by the neighbourhood policing team

This case involves a woman with a history of rough sleeping who had recently been housed in her own social tenancy following a leg amputation that left her a wheelchair user. She moved into supported dispersed accommodation with a care package from adult social care, which included assistance with daily tasks such as shopping and medication. Initially, the support appeared robust, but the situation quickly deteriorated as she began inviting friends—many from the homeless community she felt connected to—into her home due to feelings of loneliness and obligation. This informal hospitality escalated into an uncontrollable home takeover, where she was unable to get people to leave and even handed over her keys to others.

The property suffered significant neglect and became a site of anti-social behaviour, including physical injuries to the tenant, such as burns and a bite mark. Neighbour complaints increased, and the tenant experienced multiple lock changes and at one point was locked out, forcing her to rough sleep again. Adult social care and the police played a crucial role in this case; a dedicated

police officer conducted daily welfare checks and developed a supportive relationship with her, even offering to transport her to another area to apply as homeless when she decided to leave. Adult social care remained actively involved throughout.

Despite these efforts, the tenant's informal care arrangements suffered as she began cancelling professional care visits, indicating the extent of others' presence in the property. The police issued a partial closure order on the property, which initially the tenant saw as a relief because it removed the responsibility of eviction from her, although she was also served a Section 21 notice for anti-social behaviour, illustrating the tension between victimisation and blame. Ultimately, recognising her vulnerability and the risks she faced, she voluntarily moved into 24-hour supported accommodation where staff could monitor and prevent further exploitation. This case highlights the complexities of supporting disabled tenants facing cuckooing, the importance of multidisciplinary engagement, and the delicate balance between tenant autonomy and safeguarding.

Legislative remedies

Current legislation

Early signs of cuckooing could present as anti-social behaviour. There may also be complaints made about the property, such as multiple visitors, or suspicious activity reports, and currently the police and local authorities remain reliant on civil orders, such as Community Protection Warnings, Community Order Notices and Closure Orders to disrupt cuckooing.

The impact of a Community Notice Warning or Closure Order can be really upsetting for the victim, so it is important to explain the purpose of the order to the victim and communicate that the order is there to protect them and manage the risk of harm by minimising who can access the property.

Community Protection Warning

In the first instance the police or local authority may issue a Community Notice Warning to the tenant if there is any anti-social behaviour or suspicious criminal activity taking place at the property. An informal warning is given to the tenant highlighting that the anti-social behaviour must stop because it is having a detrimental effect on the community. The warning is an opportunity for the tenant to stop the anti-social behaviour before further action is taken. If there is continued disruption, a Community Order Notice may be issued.

Community Order Notice

If a Community Notice Warning is breached the local authority or the police may issue a Community Protection Notice which will provide details of what action must be taken to stop the anti-social behaviour. Failure to comply with the notice is a criminal offence and the tenant may be given a fixed penalty notice or a fine if prosecuted.

Partial Closure Order

The police or the local authority can apply to the Magistrate's court for a partial closure order to limit people accessing the property. If granted, a notice will be attached to the door of the property limiting access. The tenant will still have access to their own property and can allow access for their key or support workers, if relevant.

The benefits of a partial closure order are that it can deter perpetrators away from the property because they will not want to be detected. An order can be in place for up to three months, however it can also be extended for another three months if required, and if the perpetrators enter the property, they can face criminal proceedings.

Full Closure Order

If the police or local authority impose a full closure order the tenant will no longer have access to the property, and they would need to make a homeless application to the local authority. Closure orders are only issued as a last resort.

Modern Day Slavery Act 2015

Cuckooing is strongly linked to modern day slavery because victims are often forced into work by their perpetrators. At the end of 2024, the Home Office recorded 19,125 potential victims of modern-day slavery within the UK¹³. The most common form of modern-day slavery in the UK being **labour exploitation**, which is when victims of cuckooing are forced into work which can include selling drugs or storing or selling stolen items and sex work¹⁴. Under the Modern-Day Slavery Act 2015 the police have the powers to arrest and charge perpetrators.

If you suspect a service user is a victim of modern-day slavery, you should make a safeguarding referral to the local authority, as well as contacting the police and making a referral to [National Referral Mechanism \(NRM\)](#). In modern day slavery cases the prosecution can use an evidence-led approach to protect victims and prevent them from having to give evidence in court. This type of approach is often used in domestic abuse cases, and the NRM can provide additional support relating to housing.

Crime and Policing Act 2026

The Act will introduce a new criminal offence to respond to cuckooing, when criminals take control over the home of another person to use it for criminal activity.

The government is proposing to make it an 'offence to exercise **control** over another person's dwelling without their **consent** for the purpose of enabling the dwelling to be used in connection with the commission of specified **criminal offence**'.... 'To support implementation of the offence and strengthen the wider response to cuckooing, the government will publish guidance for police and other operational partners. The guidance will help improve identification of cuckooing and support professionals to take effective action against perpetrators and identify the best pathways to support and safeguard victims'¹⁵.

The Crime and Policing Act 2026 will require all cuckooing cases to be recorded; and the data gathered from police forces will help build a bigger picture of the true scale of cuckooing and help commissioners decide where resources and services may be needed. Although the Act is aimed at targeting organised criminal gangs, the home takeovers we are seeing in homeless communities can still be criminalised under drug offences, or civil orders for anti-social behaviour.

¹³ Home Office, *Modern slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2024, 6th March 2024*, [Modern slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁴ Anti Slavery Organisation, *what is modern slavery*, [What is modern slavery? | Anti-Slavery International](#)

¹⁵ [Crime and Policing Act: child criminal exploitation, cuckooing \(home takeover\) and coerced internal concealment factsheet - GOV.UK](#)

Table explaining meanings behind 'control', 'consent' and 'criminal behaviour', as referred to in the proposed amendments to the Home Office Crime and Policing Act.

'Control' includes:	'Consent' is only valid if:	'Criminal Offence' is only valid if:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who can leave, enter, occupy the dwelling • Delivery of things to and from the dwelling • Use of dwelling or part of dwelling • Control over another person's dwelling (Person B). • The person controlling the dwelling does not have to be in the dwelling – they can control from afar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person B is 18 or over • Person B has capacity • Person B has been given sufficient information • Freely given (i.e. no evidence of coercion, manipulation, deception etc.) • Not withdrawn at any point 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant criminal offences include drugs offences, sexual offences, firearms offences, theft etc. • Relevant offence(s) do/does not have to have been committed

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

Cuckooing is complex and there are many variations that do not always fit into the parameters of the county lines model. Perpetrators of cuckooing can sometimes be experiencing homeless themselves or have their own vulnerabilities and take over properties because of their own unmet needs rather than for financial or other gains.

Vulnerability and complex needs increase the risk of cuckooing, and often people may have multiple intersecting vulnerabilities—such as mental health issues, substance use, trauma histories, physical disabilities, neurodiversity and social isolation—that make them particularly susceptible to exploitation and tenancy takeover.

Cuckooing often involves coercion, exploitation, and abusive relationships with different forms of exploitation within cuckooing, such as control, coercion and sexual abuse, which is more prevalent with female victims of cuckooing.

Many cases involve not just casual overstaying guests but complex coercive or exploitative dynamics, including family members or acquaintances who manipulate or control the tenant and their property, sometimes escalating to criminal activity or domestic abuse.

Often, the manipulative tactics perpetrators use by befriending the victim makes it increasingly difficult for practitioners to identify and respond to cuckooing.

Difficult relationships with services and gaps in support are common. There is widespread mistrust, poor engagement, and systemic failures in safeguarding, housing, and social care services. This includes delayed or insufficient risk responses, poor communication between agencies, lack of professional curiosity, and inadequate acknowledgement of the person's broader care and support needs beyond housing.

Moving people without addressing root causes often fails. Repeated tenancy moves or "management transfers" without holistic, coordinated support do not resolve the underlying issues, often leading to repeat cuckooing and continued exploitation. Simply relocating someone without tackling their vulnerabilities and support needs leads to a cycle of instability.

We have seen a vast increase in the levels of cuckooing across the UK over recent years and the role of the police is crucial in disrupting exploitative gangs, alongside protecting vulnerable people from cuckooing. Police officers can play a crucial role in multi-agency responses and need to examine each instance on a case-by-case basis, responding sensitively to victims, and understanding

the damaging impact cuckooing can have on vulnerable tenants. To be effective the police must take into consideration the vulnerabilities of the victims who may not see themselves as victims of cuckooing.

The Home Office has invested significant funding into the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre to disrupt organised criminal gangs and protect vulnerable people. The new legislation will support the police to criminalise perpetrators and make all police forces record cuckooing cases. Data collection will enable the sector to see a truer picture regarding the scale of cuckooing and support the Home Office and local authorities to know where to focus resources.

Using evidence-led prosecution where evidence is gathered from other services like we see in domestic abuse cases would be more appropriate.

Recommendations

Successful interventions require patience, relationship building, and targeting perpetrators. Effective responses include persistent outreach, building trust with a person, focusing enforcement on perpetrators rather than victims or properties, and involving multiple services in a coordinated way. Innovative approaches, such as targeted community protection orders combined with intensive relationship-based support, can reduce harm and help people regain safety and trust in services.

There is no centrally held data on the number of cuckooed properties. The N8 Policing Research Partnership, in a 2024 policy briefing, 'Understanding and Preventing 'Cuckooing' Victimisation', recommended that; future co-produced

research should examine strategies that could be adopted to routinely capture cuckooing activity to target victims and addresses. They also highlighted that introducing cuckooing flags/markers on all police and safeguarding IT systems could improve intelligence sharing and enable cuckooing statistics and trends to be monitored over time.¹⁶

- Community and statutory agencies need to collect structured, consistent, and sensitive data. This will help with identifying patterns, safeguarding victims, and informing interventions. This could include, but is not limited to, victim demographics, incident details, perpetrator information, impact on victim, responses and interventions, referral and reporting pathways.
- This could be complemented by multi-agency agreed templates and forms, and a General Data Protection Regulation compliant framework for storing and sharing information.
- Robust data sharing agreements would enable agencies to work collaboratively with all relevant partners, such as voluntary sector services, the police, housing providers, safeguarding teams and social care teams, so that intelligence and victim support needs are fully understood, and people can be supported at the earliest opportunity.
- Use a multi-agency approach to support the victim to create action plans to reduce the risk and share intelligence and best practice on how to deal with cuckooing in your locality.
- Provide joint training to frontline staff from housing providers, local authority and voluntary sector services on what cuckooing is, how to spot the signs and how to support victims of cuckooing.

- Use the tools provided to assess service user vulnerability to cuckooing and provide ongoing tenancy support once an identified vulnerable person moves into a new tenancy.
- Add vulnerable markers on available properties where there have been cases of cuckooing or there is high risk of cuckooing in the area to prevent a vulnerable person bidding or moving into the property.
- Use all available legislation such as the Well-being Principle under the Care Act (England) 2014, Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014, and Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007, to make further enquires and to support a person who is at risk of or who is being exploited, regardless of whether a person has care or support needs.
- If there is not a cuckooing panel operating within your local authority area, consider setting up a panel to discuss and respond quickly to cuckooing cases in your locality. The panel may consist of the police, substance support services, mental health services, housing providers, the NHS, local authority safeguarding teams and other relevant voluntary sector services. Examples of cuckooing panels can be found here: [Southwark Safeguarding Partnership - Adults Policies & Procedures](#) and [Islington SAB - Cuckooing](#).

If you would like to let us know about any new initiatives or if you have any questions regarding the content of this toolkit, please contact us at:

Bestpractice@crisis.org.uk

¹⁶ Small Grant Policy Briefing - [Understanding and Preventing 'Cuckooing' Victimisation](#)

Resources

[Leeds University - Preventing and Disrupting Cuckooing Victimisation: Professional Toolkit](#)

[Groundswell - Working with clients and cuckooing](#)

[Homeless Link - Cuckooing and homelessness](#)

[Salford Safeguarding Adults Cuckooing Guidance](#)

Research

[Manchester University - Cuckooing: Beyond the Line: A Report for the North West Regional Organised Crime Unit](#)

[Jack Spicer, Leah Moyle & Ross Coomber - The variable and evolving nature of 'cuckooing' as a form of criminal exploitation in street level drug markets](#)

[Durham University - Becoming cuckooed: conceptualising the relationship between disability, home takeovers and criminal exploitation](#)

[University of Huddersfield - An Examination of the Insights and Experiences of Cuckooing Experts: Report For Kirklees Council](#)

[National Police Chief's Council - Disrupting County Lines: Policing Strategy 2024-2027](#)

Cuckooing victim stories

[Causeway Charity - Make cuckooing a modern slavery offence](#)

[BBC News - 'Cuckooing' criminals took woman's house and made it a drug den](#)

[You Tube - 'Cuckooing' victim reveals how drug dealers took over her flat](#)

[The Guardian - Mate crime: how friendship is being used as a weapon to steal and control](#)

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Template for identifying service users support network, and to help practitioners think about additional support needs.

Support Network

Research shows that isolation and no support networks can increase the person's risk of becoming a victim of cuckooing

A support network comprises of individuals involved in your life who can aid when needed, whether emotional or practical. Having a dedicated support network can help you maintain your tenancy effectively. If you feel that your support network is limited, your practitioner or key worker can collaborate with you to identify the support you may require.

Write down the names of your support network, this can include drug & alcohol workers, probation, GP, friends, and family.

Professionals

Friends / Partner

Acquaintances

Family

Appendix 2 - Template for frontline staff to identify suspected cuckooing

Everybody has the right to feel safe in their own home, sometimes there are people who make you feel like your home is not a safe place you stay. This is not uncommon, we have seen it happen a lot, you might have let your friends stay over for a few days because you feel sorry for them or because they have threatened to hurt you. We would like to help you feel safe again. I am going to ask you some questions to find out what has been happening so we can work on a plan together to help you feel safe.

Cuckooing Checklist

Cuckooing Checklist	Yes	No	Notes
Do you feel safe in the property?			
Do you have anyone staying with you at the property? For example, family, friends, acquaintances.			
Has the person refused to leave the property?			
Have you had any complaints from neighbours, police, housing about anti-social behaviour?			
Has the person asked you to do something you do not feel comfortable with? For example, storing weapons or drugs, sex work.			
Have you been offered drugs, alcohol or money for the person to stay in your home?			
Has the person made threats, abused you by calling you names or been physically violent towards you?			
Do you have your own keys to the property?			
Do you have full access to your property, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, lounge?			
Are you able to leave the property at any time?			
Has the person invited other people to stay over at the property without your permission?			
Do you owe the person money?			

Appendix 3 - Action plan on next steps to be completed with the service user

Working in a person-centred way involves collaborating with the service user to empower them to make choices on what they would like the next steps to be and if you feel the person has capacity to make their own decisions on what the next steps could be. The service user may be resistant to you contacting safeguarding or the police because of past experiences. Our role is to advocate and promote what these agencies can do to support the service user to stop or reduce the risk of harm.

What help and support do you feel you need to tell us about what happened?

This could be the service user deciding a safe place to meet, meet in person, telephone call, email.

What is important right now? How can we help you feel safe?

What will help you feel in control of what is happening? How involved do you want to be?

Do you give consent for me to ask for some support to help keep you safe?
This could be a safeguarding referral or contacting the police.

What would be the ideal outcome for you?

What would you not like to happen?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Appendix 4 - Checklist to identify any vulnerabilities the service user may have which may increase their risk of exploitation

Vulnerabilities	Yes	No	Unsure	Comments
Drug/Alcohol dependency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the victim accessing a drug/ alcohol service for support? Do you have consent to contact service providers to ask about the victim's engagement, change of behaviour, drug usage if you are unable to get the information from the service user? Are you seeing signs of increased drug usage, lack of engagement and change of behaviour? (All indicators the service user is being exploited and a victim of cuckooing.) Does the service user's capacity fluctuate when they are under the influence? Is the service user dependent on the perpetrator? 				
Mental health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the person have a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, neurodevelopmental? Does the person pose a risk to themselves or anybody else? Have you seen a deterioration in the persons mental health, have they stopped engaging in support or stopped taking their medication? All this information is important to highlight when making a safeguarding referral. 				

Vulnerabilities	Yes	No	Unsure	Comments
Brain injury, cognitive problems, dementia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you able to have a conversation with the service user about your concerns? Does the service user get confused or show drowsiness? (If you do not think the person has capacity to understand what you are asking with consent, you could ask to speak to their GP to see if there is a diagnosis or any history you need to be aware of to support a safeguarding referral.) Can the person retain the information you share if you ask the person a question about what information you have provided? (Long term alcohol or substance misuse can cause cognitive problems. If the service user is being exploited, they may not understand they are a victim.) 				
Physical health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Including conditions such as diabetes, epilepsy, heart problems, COPD. Does the person's physical health impact their ability to leave the property? (Some perpetrators may offer informal care such as offering to take the person shopping, go to the bank. 				

If you have identified the person has vulnerabilities, you will need to add them to the safeguarding referral form and consider how the persons vulnerabilities impact their wellbeing and ability to keep themselves safe. Consider when and what methods would be the best way for adult social care to contact the service user. Add any recommendations to the referral form/email.

Appendix 5 - Care and support needs checklist to help you identify if the person requires any additional support from adult social care

Care and support needs	Yes	No	Unsure	Comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can the person manage and maintain a nutritious diet? Has the service user lost weight recently? Does the person have access to food? (Increased use of food banks could be a sign of financial exploitation. Check to see if the person is receiving benefits.) Manage toilet needs – does the person have access to their bathroom at home? Can the person go to the toilet unaided? Personal hygiene – have you seen a decline in the person’s hygiene? Do they have access to toiletries? Is the person able to make use of the home safely for example, use electrical items such as making a cup of tea and using the stairs. Maintaining a habitual home environment. Is the property maintained in a consistent manner for that person or have you seen deterioration or changes in the environment that could cause concern? 				

If the person answers no to any of the above, they may have care and support needs, and the local authority should accept the referral and make further enquiries under either the:

- [Care Act 2014 in England \(Part1\)](#),
- [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014 \(Part 7\)](#) or
- [Adult Support and Protection \(Scotland\) Act 2007 \(Part1\)](#)

If the person is unable to communicate, retain information, understand the information available to them, then you will need to also request a Mental Health Assessment under the Care Act (England) 2014, Social Service and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014, and Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 to establish if the person has capacity

Appendix 6 - Checklist to see if you need to ask for a Mental Health Assessment Under either the Care Act (England) 2014, Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014, or Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007.

Abuse/Neglect	Yes	No	Unsure	Comments
<p>Finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the victim have access to their own bank account and money? Are there are signs of financial exploitation? Have you seen an increase in the victim asking you or other services for financial support for food, utilities, or travel? Are you aware of any debts the person may have? (Perpetrators will often provide incentives such as drugs/alcohol then tell the victim they owe them the money.) 				
<p>Neglect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you know if the property is in a habitable, safe condition? Have any support or care services been excluded from the property? Does the person have access to food, water, clothing, heating, hygiene, and care? Personal hygiene – Have you seen a decline in the person’s hygiene? Do they have access to toiletries? 				

Abuse/Neglect	Yes	No	Unsure	Comments
Sexual health and wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the person started a new relationship? Has a new partner moved into the property soon after the relationship has started? Has a new partner given the service user gifts, money, drugs, or alcohol? (Coupling is a form of cuckooing where the perpetrator enters a sexual relationship with the victim. This form of cuckooing may result in domestic abuse and will often not get recognised as cuckooing. Some victims may be forced into sex work in their own home or perpetrators may take over the home to use the property as a brothel.) Has the person disclosed they have had any sexual transmitted diseases? 				
Emotional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the service user become more withdrawn, or have you seen any unusual behaviour such as angry outbursts which might be out of character? Is the service user able to meet friends and access services such as GP appointments? Have you seen a decline in the service user's mental health? 				
Self-Neglect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you seen a decline in self-care, poor nutrition related recent weight loss, personal hygiene and appearance changes, not taking medication, or attending appointments, social withdrawal? 				

Abuse/Neglect	Yes	No	Unsure	Comments
Physical <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have you seen any unexplained bruises on the service user or any other physical injuries? 				
Human Trafficking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vulnerable people are trafficked from one area to another to deal in drugs or sex work. 				
Domestic abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the person become more withdrawn? 				
Modern Day Slavery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the service user been forced into selling drugs or stolen items? Do they have limited freedom for movement? Do they have limited access to food or shelter? Have they experienced removal of ID documents, such as their passport? Have they moved around on a regular basis? 				

If the safeguarding referral is declined on the grounds that the person has been assessed as having capacity, you may challenge the local authority under the well-being principle in the Care Act (England) 2014, Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014, and Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007. The principle states the general duty of a local authority is exercising functions around:

- Promoting a person's wellbeing. This can include.
- Suitability of accommodation – living in a place that is right for you.
- Protection from abuse and neglect

The principle can be applied if a person is deemed to have capacity, no care and support needs but the person is at risk of being exploited, applying the principle could prevent the service user from serious harm.

Appendix 7 - Template Letter for Safeguarding Referral

Your Address

Dear Sir or Madam,

Safeguarding Referral on behalf of (Name of Member & Date of Birth, Address)

We are currently writing on behalf of the above person who is currently receiving support from Crisis on their current housing situation. (attach consent to share)

We would like to request (member name) to be assessed under the (DELETE AS NECESSARY) Care Act (England) 2014, (S 42) / Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 (S 126) / Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 (S 4) to complete an enquiry to establish care and support needs. I am very concerned (Service user name) is a victim of cuckooing and is being exploited and abused in their own home.

(Service user name) is a vulnerable adult with (provide details on what are the vulnerabilities alcohol/drug dependency/mental health, elderly, physical disability, brain injury, learning disability).

Provide details about what you know about the situation, potential harm, and details on the perpetrator if you have them.

(Delete if not applicable) Due to the complexities of cuckooing and the relationship with to the perpetrator, (service user name) may not identify themselves as a victim. I trust you will carry out a full investigation and if you deem the (service user name) has capacity/no care and support needs you will use the Wellbeing Principle under the (DELETE AS NECESSARY) Care Act (England) 2014 (S 1) / Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 (S 5) / Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 (S 4) as good practice to promote the wellbeing and prevent further exploitation.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be grateful if you can inform me as to what action you will be taking in response to the concerns I have outlined above.

Yours Faithfully

(Your Name and Role)

(Contact number)

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