

How much of a threat are 'county lines' gangs?

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The gangs operate by moving drugs, such as heroin and crack cocaine, from cities into rural areas and small towns with the help of vulnerable recruits who are often exploited mentally, physically and sexually. [...]while no one seems to doubt that this is a serious national problem, is it more of a concern in Kent than elsewhere? A report by the Independent Children's Homes Association (ICHA) says at least 30 police forces across the country have reported county-lines activity; and four-fifths of them say children are being exploited by gangs. [...]Sally Kelly, chair of the National Association of Virtual School Heads, which represents those who oversee the education of looked-after children, points out that many of the London boroughs from which children are removed also have gang and drug problems. [...]the report also looks at the number of "gang injunctions", which youth courts have been able to impose on 14- to 17-year-olds since June 2015 to help these young people leave gangs or protect them from gang-related violence.

FULL TEXT

The government has issued guidance and police have been moved to warn schools about the danger, but Kent's headteachers have been accused of 'scaremongering'

Warnings about "county lines" gangs have generated plenty of column inches lately.

The gangs operate by moving drugs, such as heroin and crack cocaine, from cities into rural areas and small towns with the help of vulnerable recruits who are often exploited mentally, physically and sexually.

Police in Liverpool have written to every head in Halton, to the east of the city, warning about the number of pupils involved in county-lines activity. The risks were also recognised by the Department for Education in May when statutory safeguarding guidance was updated to include a section on county lines.

The Thanet headteachers cite the existence of these gangs as a major reason for their area being an unsuitable destination for looked-after children moving from elsewhere.

But while no one seems to doubt that this is a serious national problem, is it more of a concern in Kent than elsewhere?

A report by the Independent Children's Homes Association (ICHA) says at least 30 police forces across the country have reported county-lines activity; and four-fifths of them say children are being exploited by gangs. The report also notes that Kent is placed about halfway down the table of crime statistics covering drugs and antisocial behaviour.

The headteachers in Thanet also warned that looked-after children moving to their area would be at risk of sexual exploitation.

The ICHA report says that there are fewer known sex offenders in Kent than in 25 out of 42 police force areas across the country.

This would seem to contradict claims made by Kent heads in national media that their area could become "the next Rochdale or Rotherham" - referring to the high-profile abuse scandals in those towns.

'Completely unhelpful' comments

Certainly children's minister Nadhim Zahawi (pictured, inset) seems to think that the fears are far-fetched, telling a BBC TV presenter last month: "This scaremongering is completely unhelpful."

And Sally Kelly, chair of the National Association of Virtual School Heads, which represents those who oversee the

education of looked-after children, points out that many of the London boroughs from which children are removed also have gang and drug problems.

"Most of the children who go to Kent have a good life and do well at school," she says. "A lot of the children are much younger - they're at primary school - and they're in the country doing horse riding and having a completely different life."

But Kent is a large county with many affluent areas as well as more disadvantaged pockets, such as Thanet. For Paul Luxmoore, executive head at Coastal Academies Trust in Thanet, this is a major flaw in the ICHA's analysis. He says: "I strongly suggest that the [ICHA] focuses on Thanet alone if it is to refute what we are saying about the safety of looked-after children."

However, the report also looks at the number of "gang injunctions", which youth courts have been able to impose on 14- to 17-year-olds since June 2015 to help these young people leave gangs or protect them from gang-related violence. The ICHA says no injunctions had been issued anywhere in Kent, including Thanet.

And Matt Dunkley, children's services director at Kent County Council, told Kent Online last month that there had been no referrals concerning child-protection issues from Luxmoore's academy chain in the past 12 months. But Luxmoore says his trust has been referring concerns to the local authorities that place children in his area, rather than to Kent.

'I want it to be clear that politicians were involved in this scandal'

A multi-academy trust that initially refused to comply with a Department for Education direction to accept a looked-after child has now taken the pupil on roll, it has emerged.

As Tes revealed in February, Coastal Academies Trust in Kent told the DfE that it would accept more looked-after children only if the education secretary took personal responsibility for their wellbeing ("I won't accept looked-after children unless Damian Hinds oversees their safety, says academy chief", bit.ly/HindsSafe).

This was despite the DfE's Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) writing to the MAT, warning that its refusal risked breaking the terms of its funding agreement.

Headteachers from the trust argued that the areas covered by their schools were unsafe, and that social workers from other areas - mainly London boroughs - should stop placing vulnerable children there.

Now Tes understands that a government minister has indeed put his name to an official demand, and that the MAT has subsequently accepted the child. However, the order was signed by academies minister Lord Agnew, rather than by Hinds.

Paul Luxmoore, the MAT's executive head, concedes that the letter does not spell out that Agnew is taking personal responsibility for the child concerned.

But he says: "The fact that he wrote and signed the letter was good enough to link him personally to the practice of sending looked-after children to Thanet.

"I know that, one day, this practice will be viewed as a scandal - and I want it to be clear that politicians knew about it and were directly and personally involved, not just civil servants."

If a maintained school refuses to accept a looked-after child, it can be ordered to do so by the local authority. But in the case of academies, the local authority has to refer the case to the ESFA, which can then issue a direction to the academy to accept the child.

For Sally Kelly, chair of the National Association of Virtual School Heads, which represents those who oversee the education of looked-after children, the Coastal Academies Trust case raises serious questions about the balance of power in the academies system.

"Essentially, you've got a headteacher demanding his own special treatment, and he's getting it," she says.

With power comes - or ought to come - accountability. Kelly says that it is extraordinary that an academy has pushed the limits of its powers at the same time as seemingly deferring responsibility for its pupils upwards to ministers.

"He's the headteacher of that school and he needs to take accountability for the children who are in his school," she says. "What it comes down to is academies have got a lot of power and very few accountabilities."

The DfE declined to state how many times ministers had put their names to orders of this kind, or to confirm whether the Coastal Academies Trust case was the first such example.

But it is highly unusual for rows such as this to escalate up to ESFA level, let alone ministerial level. A parliamentary question from Labour shadow education minister Emma Lewell-Buck in May revealed that the ESFA had received 28 referrals from local authorities since March 2017. However, only four of these resulted in a formal direction.

Responding to Lewell-Buck's question, schools minister Nick Gibb put a positive spin on the low number, saying it was because the ESFA had "successfully worked with local authorities and academies".

Informally, local authorities say that they often do not bother making referrals in the first place, because of the length of time it takes for the ESFA to respond - up to 99 days, according to Tes findings published earlier this year.

In the meantime, children are often left without a full-time education, and foster placements can break down.

This means that referrals are sometimes withdrawn by local authorities before the ESFA has reached a decision: there were five withdrawals in the year to October 2017, the period covered by Tes' February investigation.

DETAILS

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