

WORKING WITH CUCKOOING



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Aims

- Provide a clear understanding of what cuckooing is.
- Identify risk factors and early warning signs.
- Outline perpetrator tactics to help staff and professionals recognise exploitation.
- Equip professionals with strategies to reduce cuckooing risks.
- Offer safeguarding guidance and legal considerations for multi-agency responses.
- Include real-life case studies to illustrate the impact of cuckooing and intervention strategies.

¹ <https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/250/preventing-and-disrupting-cuckooing-victimisation-professional-toolkit>

Introduction

Cuckooing is a form of criminal exploitation where offenders manipulate or coerce vulnerable individuals into letting them use their home for illegal activities. While cuckooing is commonly linked to County Lines drug trafficking, it can also occur in other forms of exploitation. Victims are often left feeling powerless, trapped, and at risk of eviction, legal consequences, or violence.

Perpetrators often pose as carers or friends to exploit the resident, gaining their trust before taking control of their home. They may claim to offer protection, insist on staying under false pretences, or provide free or discounted substances in exchange for using the property as a base for dealing. What may seem manageable at first can quickly become overwhelming, leaving the resident feeling trapped and powerless. In addition, perpetrators frequently target 'functioning addicts' who are not monitored by police, housing, or adult social care, as they are less likely to exhibit chaotic behaviour or be under safeguarding measures

In April 2026, the UK Government introduced new legislation making it illegal to take over another person's home for criminal activity without genuine consent, recognising that consent obtained through coercion, intimidation, deception, or exploitation is not valid.

This [video](#) shares the firsthand experience of someone who has been cuckooed. They describe how they were targeted, how the perpetrator's behaviour changed over time, and how they gradually lost control of their own home. They also explain how support from the police and a worker helped them escape the situation.

Cuckooing is a complex issue, making it challenging to know how to respond. This toolkit is designed to help staff effectively identify and support individuals affected by cuckooing.

Understanding cuckooing and county lines

Cuckooing is frequently linked to County Lines operations, though not in every case. County Lines involves organised crime groups from major cities establishing drug distribution networks in smaller towns and rural areas, often operating across police and local authority boundaries. These networks rely on dedicated mobile phone lines ('deal lines') and frequently involve the exploitation of vulnerable people, coercion, and violence.

Perpetrators may use a victim's home to:

- store or distribute drugs
- use the property for sex work
- house criminal associates
- financially exploit the victim.

Risk factors

Those experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to cuckooing, especially if the individual is a drug user or a recovering addict. It has been argued that the absence of legitimate opportunities for drug dependent populations to fund drug dependency, drug-related activities - including involvement in street-level dealing – cuckooing may represent one of the ‘best’ and least harmful perceived ways to ‘earn a score’ (Moyle and Coomber, [2015²](#)).

Victims of cuckooing are often targeted due to:

- substance use dependency or being in recovery
- mental health conditions, learning disabilities, and physical disabilities
- social isolation, loneliness, or lack of support networks
- housing insecurity, experiencing homelessness, or financial difficulties
- history of trauma, abuse, or care system involvement
- involvement in sex work
- prior connections to gangs or street-based lifestyles
- living alone for the first time or a recent care leaver
- connections to those who are vulnerable (e.g., those experiencing homelessness, substance users) and/or those involved in street gangs or county lines activity
- tenancy location (e.g., close to known risky community/relationships) and accessibility
- systemic issues, such as poverty, are positively associated with many of the above factors due to the impact of lower educational provisions, increased stress, and self-limiting beliefs. In addition, stigma and underfunding of services for homelessness and substance use leads to under-resourced services and feelings of blame and shame.

Why victims can be reluctant to speak out.

The reasons victims of cuckooing will probably be reluctant to inform others or contact the police include:

- fear or distrust of police
- drug charges
- repercussions from criminal justice or other state agencies
- withdrawal from drugs, not having access to drugs
- eviction
- intimidation from the perpetrators
- being seen to be a ‘grass’ may also contribute
- shame may be present - shame that someone has taken over their home without knowing it was happening.

² <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12117-019-09368-5#ref-CR77>

Perpetrator's strategies

Perpetrators will find out what the individual needs and try and provide that need. For instance, if the individual is lonely - they will be a friend, if they are addicted to a substance - they will provide the substance. They may use the following strategies to try and lure a client into cuckooing.

- Visiting locations where drug users frequently gather, such as abandoned buildings, and engaging them in conversations about their housing situation or that of their friends, family, or acquaintances.
- Creating false debts, for example, claiming, "We bought you alcohol last week, so you owe us - let us stay at your flat."
- Spending time in deprived areas to identify individuals with mental health issues.
- Loitering near drug and alcohol treatment centres to approach service users.
- Pretending to need a place to stay - sending text or social media messages stating, "We need a place to stay."
- Persistently calling drug users to request access to their home.
- Exploiting existing knowledge of vulnerable individuals within their community, known as 'local' cuckooing.
- Lurking in hospital emergency departments to identify individuals exhibiting drug-seeking behaviour, such as those requesting opiates, benzodiazepines, or antipsychotics.
- Positioning themselves outside pharmacies to target individuals collecting methadone prescriptions.
- Engaging with people as they visit food banks, Jobcentres, or places of worship.
- Initiating conversations with individuals who appear lonely, such as those sitting alone for extended periods with a single drink.
- Using 'honey trapping' tactics to manipulate and exploit single men.

Warning signs

Note that this list is not exhaustive, and not all these issues will be a sign of cuckooing but indicate other support needs. Be vigilant to the warning signs so the possibility of cuckooing can be investigated further.

Possible warning signs	Yes	No
Client not living at property, or they are not there when staff visit		
Increase in the number of vehicles around property		
Other people at the property while the client is out		
Increase in use of dependency (e.g., drug use / falling off script or abusive relationship)		
Sudden new relationships that are suspicious		
Reluctance to return to property and more time begging, rough sleeping or staying at friends/ family		
Locked doors within the property to prevent entry to a room		
Curtains closed during the day		
Financial problems e.g., rent arrears, reduction in income and increase in debt		

Possible warning signs	Yes	No
Increase in money/ possessions		
Increase in report of ASB from neighbours/ local police or damage to property		
Client not letting support worker come to the home (meeting elsewhere or refusing to meet)		
Client not in regular contact with support worker		
Client regularly has issues with their keys e.g., doesn't have keys to property or is regularly losing keys/ fobs		
Client is suddenly around a lot of new people who don't seem to have their best interests at heart		
Report of an illegal sublet of property		
Increase in people entering and leaving the property / concerns from neighbours		
People coming and going at strange times		
Damage to door/ the door propped open		
Unknown people pressing buzzers to gain access to the building		
Drug use / increase of paraphernalia (needles, foils, pipes) around the property		
Change in appearance/ behaviour of the client: Reduced engagement, avoidance of discussions and quick to end meetings, increase in their stress/ anxiety/ fear, not allowing access to property		
Excessive amount of texts/ phone calls/ having multiple handsets		
Carrying weapons		
Gang association or isolation from peers or social networks		
Does the client seem scared?		
Client is ambivalent, says the visitors are friends		
Are they in a relationship with or hanging out with someone / people that are older and controlling?		
Do they have unexplained injuries?		
Do they seem very reserved or seem like they have something to hide?		

What can you do to reduce the chances of cuckooing?

Fortunately, things can be put in place to reduce the chances of cuckooing. Examples are listed and divided into **five** sections; **1. what workers can do, 2. building client resilience, 3. network resilience, 4. accommodation, and 5. systemic resilience.**

1. What workers can do:

- Build a trusting relationship with the client, being open and non-judgmental about cuckooing risks. Continuity of workers may also help with developing a trusting relationship if this is possible.
- If concerned, speak to the client away from their property and outline available support.

- Understand that perpetrators have greater access to victims; staff should offer alternatives to the 'benefits' perpetrators provide (e.g., companionship, substances).
- Assess whether clients in supported housing are ready to live independently, especially if they show signs of drug involvement (e.g., frequent visitors, constant phone use, or connections with street populations – shouting their name outside their accommodation a lot).

2. Building client resilience:

- Educate clients about cuckooing, how it develops, its risks, and emotional impacts using resources like safety plans. Give them the Cuckooing information leaflet or Cuckooing safety plan to read and run through potential scenarios (these documents are available here).
- Discuss cuckooing risks in resident meetings and during housing transitions.
- Promote awareness of healthy relationships, particularly for those with a history of abuse.
- Connect clients with substance use, mental health, and social support services.
- Strengthen self-esteem and assertiveness, teaching them to say “no” effectively. This is a video that gives tips on saying ‘no’.
- Encourage the client to meet neighbours and positive friends to build a community. This will help them to gain a wider perspective and compassion surrounding how their actions could impact neighbours.

3. Building network resilience - Linking in with support and services:

- Develop a supportive network (e.g., housing officers, mental health services, community police, peer support groups).
- Have a good understanding of client’s vulnerabilities and support needs and a shared plan for supporting these (e.g., safety plan).

4. Building accommodation resilience:

- Avoid clustering vulnerable tenants together, reducing the risk of widespread cuckooing.
- Ensure tenancy plans consider safety, accessibility, and security measures e.g., ‘sensitive let’, supported accommodation, independent), location, accessibility, and security (locks, alarms).
- The quality of the accommodation can make a difference. When it’s good quality and well maintained, the client may feel more invested.
- Implement ‘target hardening’ measures like CCTV and neighbourhood watch programs.

5. Building systemic resilience:

- Advocate for services to recognise and address clients’ complex needs.
- Educate stakeholders on systemic issues like the links between poverty, drug use, and homelessness.
- Expand meaningful opportunities for clients, such as employment or training.
- Support for perpetrators where appropriate can reduce risk of peer cuckooing (e.g., housing provision for homeless couples).

Cuckooing and new legislation (2026): What this means in practice

In April 2026, the UK Government introduced new legislation through the Crime and Policing Act, which making it illegal for someone to take control of another person's home without their consent to carry out criminal activity (such as drug dealing, sexual exploitation, or weapons-related offences). Importantly, the law recognises that "consent" is not valid if it has been obtained through coercion, intimidation, deception, or exploitation.

What this means for staff

Clients who are being cuckooed can now be more clearly recognised in law as victims of exploitation, not offenders. It strengthens your ability to advocate for safeguarding responses, rather than purely enforcement or tenancy action.

You can use this legislation to:

- Support referrals to Adult Social Care and safeguarding pathways
- Evidence risk and exploitation in multi-agency meetings
- Challenge situations where a client is being treated as responsible for criminal activity in their home
- It reinforces the importance of taking disclosures seriously, even where the client appears to have "allowed" people into their home.

What powers this gives police and housing services

Police now have a stronger basis to:

- Investigate and charge perpetrators specifically for controlling a person's home
- Recognise occupants as victims, including where drugs or criminal activity are present

Housing providers and local authorities can:

- Work more confidently with police to secure evidence of exploitation
- Use legal tools (e.g. Closure Orders, injunctions) alongside this offence
- Justify protective moves (e.g. emergency relocation) based on exploitation risk
- It supports a more coordinated multi-agency safeguarding approach, rather than relying on isolated enforcement actions.

Does this apply retrospectively?

It can only be used for incidents occurring after the legislation came into force. However, ongoing situations of cuckooing can still fall under the law, even if they began before this date.

What professionals should do differently now

- **Identify and record exploitation more clearly**
Use language such as "control", "coercion", and "exploitation" in case notes and referrals.
- **Escalate safeguarding earlier**
Do not wait for clear criminal evidence - risk of exploitation is enough to act.
- **Strengthen multi-agency working**
Share information with police, housing, and social care to build a full picture of risk.

- **Advocate for the client as a victim**
Challenge responses that focus only on enforcement (e.g. eviction, ASB action).

Safety planning and management

Here are some **top tips from experts by experience** that are important to take into consideration when supporting a client around cuckooing.

- Talking to police or social workers can be scary and must be done carefully.
- Sometimes it might be safer for the client to report anonymously to police, call: Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.
- Get to know your local Safer Neighbourhood Police team.
<https://www.met.police.uk/search?q=safener+neighbourhoods+teams>
- Cuckooing is complex (e.g., relationships involved, addiction, risk) meaning it can be hard to know what to do and support may often need to be put in long-term.
- Know what not to say to clients (e.g., don't give unrealistic offers/expectations)
- Consider the impact of breaching confidentiality on the relationship with the client if raising a safeguarding alert without the client's consent.
- It is helpful to have a member of staff who can make tough calls and someone else who can be more supportive.

The following table provides a comprehensive list of actions on how you can support a client if you suspect they are being cuckooed, listing tasks to complete asap, soon and ongoing tasks.

TASKS TO COMPLETE ASAP	Completed?	
	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alert your manager and team 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lead agency will have a duty to raise safeguarding alert, via Adult Social care 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there is an immediate risk to the individual it may be necessary to support a transfer to a new area to safeguard them (e.g., out of borough/ emergency accommodation). If a client has been coerced into dealing drugs, then they may qualify as a victim or modern slavery and can therefore access these services (they could potentially be housed out of the area via these services). For advice call Salvation Army 24/7 Helpline (0800 808 3733) or the 24/7 Modern Slavery Helpline (08000 121 700) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise a multi-agency meeting. A multi-agency forum is <u>crucial</u> to work with cuckooing. A multi-agency approach will help share information to safeguard, and to access advice from all agencies even if they are not involved in the case. For instance, social service teams can provide support around what other services can do to help if a client doesn't make the threshold for care support. 		

TASKS TO COMPLETE ASAP	Completed?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If there are doubts raised about the individual's capacity, then a mental capacity assessment should be undertaken. A mental capacity assessment for staff is available here. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve the Safer Neighbourhood Police team/ the Police, but ensure understanding of individual's vulnerability and status as victim 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrange a safety word for the client to give to staff if Police need to attend ASAP 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have the locks changed to prevent anyone with keys from coming / going 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If children are living in the property a Multi-Agency Referral form (MARF) needs to be completed here 		
TO COMPLETE SOON, AND ONGOING	Completed?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build up a supportive network and get agencies involved. Community police (e.g., Safer Neighbourhood Team) can have more understanding and resources than Police. Support with meetings with police in discrete locations to discuss personal safety 	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular visits & welfare checks 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep partner agencies updated (housing officer, local police, ASB team, Local authority housing allocations team, social services) for wrap-around support 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase support for dependency (e.g., substance use services or mental health services) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Go through the cuckooing safety plan with client (<u>this document is available here</u>), and discuss positive and harmful relationships 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore what the individual wants from the situation and if there is an alternative way of providing this (e.g., support, relationships, ways of coping) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer realistic reassurance about the support you can give them 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is a good idea to explain what will happen if the Police/Local Authority initiate a closure order on the cuckooed property. A closure order is available for up to 3 months. This will mean the client needs to move out to temporary accommodation / supported housing. Explain that breaking a closure order is a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment, meaning police can immediately arrest unwanted people found in a home with a closure order on it 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An injunction order could be issued via an application to HMCT. This is usually to prohibit someone from doing certain behaviour, or it could stop someone entering an area or returning to their home. An injunction will be for a specified period, and can lead to mandatory evictions, they can also carry power of arrest for anyone that doesn't adhere to the injunction. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide the individual with Shelter's helpline for legal advice. Call 0344 515 1540 Monday to Friday 9.30am-6pm 		

Minimising risk to workers

Minimising the risk to staff is a vital part of cuckooing support and needs to be overseen by service managers. This section details what staff can do to protect themselves and what they should avoid.

Protect yourself:

1. Arrange to meet the victim away from their property where possible.
2. Avoid lone visits to the property.
3. Visit the property with a police officer where appropriate.
4. Establish safe words with the victim, team members and the police.
5. Increase the amount of supervision and support that is offered to staff (e.g. line-managers should arrange regular meetings).
6. Move the tenant away from property / area where necessary.
7. Utilise dynamic risk assessments e.g., surveying area and using your gut feeling at the time.
8. Read your service's lone worker protocol and implement any recommendations required.
9. Use lone working alarms e.g., Sky guard app.

Avoid, or only consider with extreme caution:

1. Entering the property when the victim is out to check who is there.
2. Knocking on the door when you know that the victim is out to see who answers.
3. Confronting, or attempting to forcefully remove, any visitors to the property.
4. Using the threat of eviction to secure disclosure and/or compliance from the victim.
5. Enforcing visitor restrictions or locality rules without consulting the victim.

Challenges and solutions

Victims may be hesitant to disclose their situation due to fear or distrust.

To encourage disclosure:

- Engage a professional the victim trusts to approach them.
- Carefully consider the impact of breaching confidentiality and trust when raising a safeguarding alert without the victim's consent.
- Be mindful that mentioning the police or social services may cause anxiety—introduce these options sensitively.
- If the victim agrees to share information, arrange meetings in private and discreet locations.
- In some cases, encouraging the victim to submit an anonymous report to the police may be a safer option.

Identifying Victimhood

Victims may not recognise they are being exploited. To help them understand their situation:

- Avoid "why" questions and instead ask open-ended ones like, "What would happen if you asked them to leave?" or "Have you ever felt unsafe?"
- Do not rely on the victim identifying themselves as such—support may still be necessary.

Professional Perception of Victims

Some professionals may struggle to see the individual as a victim. To address this:

- Advocate for the victim's best interests, particularly when policies or procedures create barriers to support.
- Provide colleagues and partner organisations with cuckooing awareness materials to enhance understanding.

Challenges in Finding Exit Strategies

A victim's circumstances may limit their housing options (e.g., safe houses may not accept individuals with complex needs). Possible solutions include:

- Setting realistic expectations—offer reassurance but avoid false promises.
- Exploring alternative housing options, such as private rentals or house exchanges.
- Contacting the local police and Community Safety Partnership to discuss enhancing the security of the victim's property.

Law Enforcement Considerations

For police intervention, criminal activity must be identified and evidenced. To support this:

- Work closely with the police and follow their guidance.
- Ensure law enforcement understands the victim's vulnerabilities and recognises their status as an exploited individual.

Support services

Organisation	Contact
24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline, 10am-10pm	0808 2000 247
24-hour Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Line	0808 500 2222
Catch 22 Support and rescue service for young people and their families who are criminally exploited through county lines	https://www.catch-22.org.uk/
Crimestoppers To report intelligence anonymously.	https://crimestoppers-uk.org/
FRANK For advice on drugs, their effects and the law	https://www.talktofrank.com/
Modern Slavery Helpline Support for potential victims.	08000 121 700
IvisonTrust Work with carers of children who are at risk of being exploited by perpetrators, and offer guidance and training to professionals	https://ivisontrust.org.uk/
NSPCC To discuss concerns about a child	https://www.nspcc.org.uk/
SafeCall Free, confidential helpline for young people and family members that are affected by county lines and criminal exploitation. The service also provides confidential support and advice for professionals in relation to their work with an exploited young person or family.	Webpage
Shelter Legal housing advice for individuals at risk.	0344 515 1540
Victim Support Provides support to victims and witnesses of crime.	08081689111

Further reading and resources

[Escape plan for move on can be used to help prepare clients for living alone.](#)

[Leicester Safeguarding Adults Board's advice for working with adults at risk of cuckooing.](#)

[Groundswell HHCP Resources – Additional toolkits on working with vulnerable individuals.](#)

[Cuckooing Research & Prevention Network – Comprehensive tools and guidance.](#)

[#LookCloser - national campaign encouraging everyone to learn the signs of child exploitation and how to report it.](#)

Appendix 1 I - Interview with an expert by experience 'How to keep yourself safe from cuckooing'

When did you first realise that something was wrong?

"People started pestering me, calling me up and saying they wanted to see me and come over."

What tactics do you think they used?

"Drugs. They knew I wanted to use and that they could use that against me. They would get me high and then be in and out of my flat using it to make money."

How did you get yourself out of the situation?

"I realised they didn't care about me. They were using me. All they care about is making money. I realised that I was going to lose my flat or that I would end up in prison. I realised these people are not my friends. Finally, I just said no more."

"I have blocked their numbers so they cannot call my phone anymore. I do not answer the door unless I am expecting someone. I avoid places I think they will be."

If you were giving advice to someone in a similar situation, what would you say to them?

"Do not let people you cannot trust into your flat"

"Do not answer their phone calls"

"You need to take a step back and realise these people are not your friends. They are drug dealers and just use you for money. They are taking advantage".

"If you need to use drugs then use them on your own. If you are lonely then use on the streets with people. Do not invite people back to your flat".

"Never give your keys to anyone and do not let them cut themselves a spare pair."

"Do not leave your flat with anyone inside. They will try and get you to leave so they can take over. Do not leave them alone inside".

"Blank them. Do not engage. Engaging them gives them the opportunity to start breaking you down. It is an invitation to open temptation. I just do not engage with them at all anymore".

Do you think there are any warning signs that people should look out for to avoid it happening to them?

"As soon as they find out you have your own flat they start wanting to be your friend. They start calling you, suggesting you hang out at your flat together. They start being really nice to you and offering you the drugs they know you are addicted to. "

"They keep calling asking if they can come around"

"They bring round people you do not know and invite other people when they are at your flat".

"They are in and out. Saying they need to go to the shop but really they are using your place as a base to sell drugs from".

"People overstaying their welcome, often saying they are helping me or caring for me"

How will you stop it from happening again?

"I don't engage with these people at all anymore. I can't. I do not answer the door. I do not pick up the phone. You must realise that if you even hear these people's voices then it is a trigger – you will want to use, you will want to say yes to coming around and you will make yourself vulnerable".


"I remind myself of the risks. I could lose my flat and will not be given another one. I could end up in prison if I got caught with these people selling drugs from my flat. I can't let that happen".

Do you think there is anything else that people should know?

"Be careful. Be mindful. Work out how to handle your addiction so that you don't let people take advantage of you."

"In this game you cannot win. You can only win by leaving the game".



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