

Cuckooing – and how we’re tackling it

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Vulnerable people in Avon and Somerset are being targeted by County Lines criminals who take over their homes and use their properties as bases for drug dealing.

County Lines is a form of UK drug trafficking. Organised crime groups (OCGs) based in major cities establish networks in smaller towns, cities and villages, to supply and sell illegal drugs, using a dedicated mobile phone line (often a 'burner' phone) or other form of 'deal line.' County Lines is different from traditional drug trafficking as it is associated with a higher level of harm and many different forms of exploitation. These include forcing or coercing children to store or run drugs and 'cuckooing'.

Cuckooing is when individuals or gangs manipulate people to gain access to their properties; often specifically targeting people because of their vulnerability, for example those with drug and alcohol addictions, financial problems, mental or physical health conditions or learning difficulties.

Perpetrators often befriend their victims by offering free gifts, protection, or drugs. However, these later come at a high price as more and more people connected to the perpetrator move into the victim's home and use it to facilitate crime and exploitation, including storing, converting, or dealing drugs.

Cuckooing has a devastating impact on victims, potentially escalating their addiction and causing declines in their mental and physical health. They are likely to find themselves trapped, threatened by those now in control, and unable to see a way out. In some cases, victims have abandoned their homes entirely and ended up living on the streets.

Communities also suffer due to the linked anti-social behaviour, increased rubbish, vandalism, and general sense of insecurity that surround the property.

Cuckooing in Avon and Somerset will not be tolerated.

https://media.aspolice.net/uploads/production/20241028164058/Op-Trespass_In-AS_web.mp4

What does cuckooing look like?

There are likely to be signs when organised crime groups have taken over a home:

- The victim not being seen by neighbours for a while
- People remaining in the property while the victim is out
- Unfamiliar people driving the victim's car, or being driven by the victim
- Curtains or blinds being closed during the day
- Gardens becoming overgrown
- Children and young people with no known connection to the victim are seen entering the property

Other signs might include:

- An increase in the number of visitors to the property through the day and night, often visiting for only short periods of time
- An increase in bikes, mopeds and vehicles (including taxis and hire cars) arriving at the property or parking close by
- People arriving in expensive cars
- The usual occupier of the property having new associates staying and bags of clothing and / or extra bedding in the property
- The usual occupier moving out or staying away from the property whilst an unknown person remains
- Groups of people congregating in front gardens or at the back of a property
- An increase in litter outside of the property, including takeaway boxes and discarded drugs paraphernalia (e.g. foil, syringes, cling film) or evidence of drug dealing (e.g. scales, deal bags)
- Individuals with substantial amounts of cash or multiple mobile phones.
- External doors being propped open

- Damage to doors and windows
- Unknown people pressing buzzers to gain access to buildings
- An increase in local crime including theft and anti-social behaviour
- Victims of cuckooing may disengage with support services and be unwilling to discuss what is happening at their property when the subject is raised with them.

How you can help

Spotting the signs that cuckooing is taking place is one way that we can look out for our neighbours and some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Reporting will help us stop this criminal activity.

We are regularly patrolling areas where cuckooing is suspected. If you have any information or have seen anything suspicious, please tell our officers, report to us on 101 (always 999 in an emergency) or via our website, or contact the independent charity Crimestoppers, where you can report anonymously.

If you are experiencing or seeing cuckooing, it's important you talk to us so we can help to stop it happening. We work with partners to protect and support victims of cuckooing as well as identifying the criminals responsible and bringing them to justice.