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# Tackling child criminal exploitation (CCE): an arts-based approach

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the efficacy of a freely available arts-based intervention used to tackle Child Criminal Exploitation. A digital, interactive story (*Cold Chips & Money*) was used in school and youth settings in Hampshire, England with 1,451 young people aged 11–13 in 2021 as part of a project of the same name. Its use has continued since. I was and continue to be the Project Lead and oversaw the development of the story, the supporting resources and the evaluation framework. I worked with a project facilitator and evaluator throughout. *Cold Chips & Money* was designed to help students understand, recognise and manage external influence and pressure. The story and supporting resources which included a lesson plan and access to the project evaluation lead, enable professionals to have conversations with young people about how they can keep themselves safe, as well as how they can support one another to resist unwanted attention that might lead to exploitation. The resources relate directly to the PSHE Association Key Stage 3 Core Theme Relationships: Social Influence section R42–47. The development and use of the resources was planned to complement multi-agency work on Child Criminal Exploitation and County Lines and had input from multiple professionals. Project evaluation evidenced a significant increase in awareness of county lines, and the issues surrounding it. Teachers stated that the interactive storytelling format was effective at and provided the opportunity to facilitate in-depth dialogue around the cause and effect of the decisions we make.

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Child criminal exploitation;  
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digital storytelling

## Introduction

This article highlights the ways that using a digital interactive story enabled thinking, reflection and learning about Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). The article centres around a project that began in 2020 in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. I was and continue to be the Project Lead and oversaw the development of the story, the supporting resources which include a lesson plan and the

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evaluation framework. I worked with a project facilitator and evaluator throughout, who supported the professionals to use the story and resources with the young people they worked with and to engage with the project evaluation activities. Together, we produced an evaluation report (McNamara & Russell, 2021).

This article aims to make a contribution to developing discourses on CCE in the UK and discusses the development and implementation of an early intervention tool (the story and lesson) to engage young people in thinking about and being aware of CCE. There are suggestions for future research into arts-based work in this area.

The digital interactive story *Cold Chips and Money* is an arts-based intervention used in five school settings and with a Youth Offending team with young people aged 11–13 years (n.d.). Thirty-six professionals used the story with a total of 1,415 young people between April and July 2021 and discussed various aspects of the story together. This activity was most often carried out as part of a Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) lesson and connects to the PSHE Association Key Stage 3 Core Theme Relationships: Social Influence section R42–47. The aim is to help professionals in their work supporting young people to understand, recognise and manage external influence and pressure. Evaluation was carried out as part of the *Cold Chips and Money* project and involved baseline questionnaire and interviews and repeat questionnaires and interviews after the use of the resources.

The protagonist in the story is a young person who begins to be caught up in criminal behaviour. They are befriended by some older people and the story explores issues of manipulation and potential exploitation. The response from the professionals who facilitated the sessions, and the young people they worked with was clear and positive. Teacher A comments:

I think it helped them to relate to situations in real life, and how one thing can lead to another. I think the students now have a better understanding of CCE/county lines, and we will be building on this in other PHSE lessons to help solidify it for them. I think they now know where to get help if they are in a situation that they're worried about, as well as how to help a friend in trouble. (comment 10, p 12, McNamara & Russell, 2021)

For more evaluation responses, see 'Cold Chips and Money: an evaluation report of a county lines interactive story' (McNamara & Russell, 2021).

As young people navigate through the story, they make decisions about what the protagonist will do in each situation they face. These decisions directly influence the outcome of the story. Young people take an active role as they explore the complexity of CCE through the narrative of the story.

In 2019, I was invited by Active Communities Network (a community-based organisation about which more will follow) to create a piece of theatre for use in education settings which would act as a catalyst for workshop discussions on the topic of CCE. In March 2020, when the

global pandemic began, it was clear that going into schools in the UK was likely to be difficult, but the issue of County Lines and CCE more broadly was not going away. 'Just as legitimate workplaces made changes to enable their employees to work from home, the illicit drugs trade also made alternative arrangements, adapting its supply models to ensure continuity of operations' (Brewster et al., 2021). Rather than postpone the project, we adapted the form and created the digital interactive story and a resource pack that would enable professionals to use the resources in their own settings.

### ***Child criminal exploitation***

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is the grooming and exploitation of children to force them into criminal activity. The Home Office uses this definition in the Serious Violence Strategy 2018:

Child Criminal Exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. (p. 48)

Recently, CCE has become strongly associated with one specific model known as 'county lines', but it can also include children being forced to work in cannabis factories, move drugs or money across the country, forced to commit financial fraud, or to shoplift or steal from people. County Lines is the term used to describe activities organised by criminal gangs that exploit and use young and highly vulnerable children as couriers. This can involve children being trafficked away from their home area and put in accommodation in order to selling or manufacture drugs. Referring again to the Serious Violence Strategy 2018:

County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of 'deal line'. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. (p. 48)

This treatment of young people can also be described as a form of grooming. Children are enticed or threatened into illegal activities by criminal gangs. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the UK define grooming as when someone 'builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them' (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2022).

This form of exploitation had been growing over recent years. The term 'County Lines' has been in use since 2015 (National Crime Agency, 2015) and become a national priority in the United Kingdom in 2018 (Serious Violence Strategy, HM Government, 2018). On the involvement of young people in Country Lines, or CCE, children who are coerced into criminal activity are often treated as criminals by statutory agencies rather than as victims of exploitation. A child might be given money, clothes, drugs and other items they couldn't otherwise afford and they can appear to be benefitting from their involvement, and even choosing to earn money this way. However,

Some young peoples' appearance as consensual participants in the illegal drug supply contributes to inconsistencies in current criminal justice responses to child criminal exploitation, and official rhetoric about treating children that are identified as involved as victims often does not translate into practice. (Wedlock & Molina, 2020 p. 66).

In *The Criminalisation and Exploitation of Children in Care*: Shaw and Greenhow (2021), Julie Shaw and Sarah Greenhow explore what they call the 'denial of victimhood' of young people involved in CCE, particularly children in care. They describe a context where there are 'differing approaches and priorities of the agencies represented within multi-agency teams and that there is still a long way to go in terms of focusing on the exploitation and consequent vulnerability of children in care who offend' (Shaw & Greenhow, 2019, p. 1561). Multi-agency work and the development of it as an approach has sought to connect the various professionals and wider community members who will have knowledge about children's lives. This connected multi-agency approach is something the *Cold Chips and Money* project aimed to participate in when developing the resources in order to draw on multiple viewpoints about what the most effective tool would be. Using the project materials with professionals engaged in pastoral care and personal, social, health and economic education provides them with tools to meet their statutory and non-statutory obligations and to better support young people as they learn about respectful relationships and some of the challenges and complexities they may face, including criminal, controlling or violent behaviour.

The arts can be used as a tool, to not only help young people open up and express themselves but also to help others to better understand their situation. In a review of medical literature exploring the relationship between health, the arts and humanities, Staricoff (2006) identifies a number of ways that the arts can have an impact on individuals experiencing physical and mental health problems. The reported benefits included: enabling individuals to understand and gain control over their 'inner worlds'; providing service-users with new ways to express and communicate with others; and helping professionals who are working with service-users to understand their circumstances." (p. 119). In participatory work that engages people in creative activity, it is common for people to feel that they engaged more deeply with the subject matter and with

other participants because of the creative aspect to what they were doing. This can arise because people are involved in and focussed on an activity together and the pressure to look at each other while talking, is not there for example, in the way that conversing while walking or driving may feel. Evaluation from an intergenerational project with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer people identified that the arts practices were critical to the success of the work, with an older participant stating: 'I think that the art focus is fantastically important [. . . it] avoids some of the self-consciousness about what we are here for and some of the feelings of slight artificiality you can get in getting people together just to discuss, although that in itself it can be valuable, but I think it was particularly good that it had the art focus.' (Gendered Intelligence, <https://interartsproject.wordpress.com/the-research-dimension/findings/>, n.d.)

### **Developing Cold Chips and Money**

From the outset, the project was planned to complement the counties of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight's ongoing multi-agency work on CCE, County Lines, gangs and youth violence. The project was funded by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (n.d.). The funding was awarded to Active Communities Network Hampshire (ACN) (<https://www.activecommunities.org.uk/>), who approached the University of Portsmouth in order to engage an arts specialist. ACN is a charity working in Belfast, Manchester and London and at the time of this project, Hampshire, to tackle inequalities facing socio-economically disadvantaged young people and create opportunities for them (<https://www.activecommunities.org.uk/>). I became Project Co-ordinator and engaged a lead artist, a game developer, illustrator and an evaluator-facilitator.

The development of the story and the resource pack had input from the Portsmouth Safeguarding Children Partnership, Portsmouth Youth Offending Team, the Missing, Exploited & Trafficked Operational Service and the Edge of Care Team (both Portsmouth City Council) and Portsmouth Police (Hampshire Constabulary). There was structured engagement with the aforementioned professionals and teams. Together, myself and the lead artist consulted this group on what the target age group should be, the ideal characters, narrative and activities, and levels of criminality the story should engage with. These professionals were asked to trial the story and feedback to the lead artist and myself, which provided useful suggestions for adapting elements of the resource to best-serve young people.

The story was created using the platform Twine (<https://twinery.org/>) Twine is a free open-source tool for making interactive fiction in the form of web pages. Twine is aimed at people with little to no coding knowledge, programming or game-making experience. Twine stories tend to include branching narratives where users have choices about how the

story evolves, which was a key benefit for the CCE project. Twine publishes to HTML files which can be uploaded on any web hosting service or shared privately. This means that people can play the stories without installing any extra software which again, had benefits for the *Cold Chips and Money* project in that the story can be easily used in multiple settings.

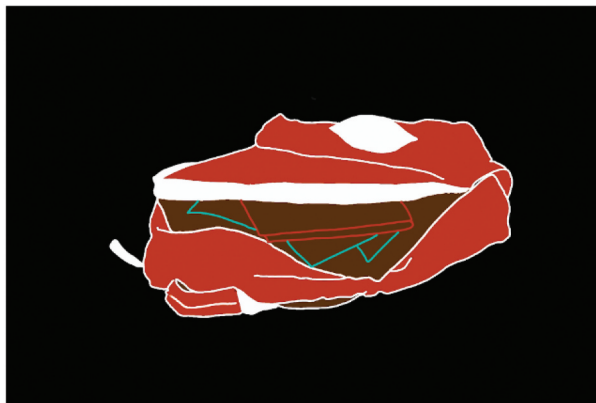
*Cold Chips and Money* is aimed at young people aged 11–13 (Years 7 & 8 in the English school system). This was the age group that the team of professionals felt most appropriate for an early intervention used (on the whole) in mainstream school settings. The Turner et al state:

14 to 17 year olds are the most likely age group to be exploited by criminal gangs. We uncover alarming evidence of primary school children as young as seven or eight being targeted and exploited. But children of all ages are at risk, and the number of 10 to 17 year olds arrested for intent to supply drugs has gone up by almost 50% outside London. (2019, p. 3).

The team agreed that targeting young people before they moved into the 14–18 age group was a pragmatic decision and secondary schools would be more likely to take up the resources than primary schools.

There are three parts to the story and a young person is the protagonist. The story builds from an ordinary morning leaving the house and saying goodbye to their mum, to first encounters with older people who are themselves involved in CCE through to scenes where the main character is feeling very pressured to carry out actions that would constitute criminal offences.

The first screen begins to set a scene and establish the precept that participants will click specific text (blue in colour) to move through the story. Simple graphics accompany text throughout such as a school bag, a school building, a tray of chips, money, a street light etc.:



**Figure 1.** An image of an open school bag with school work inside.

The text that appears alongside this image in [Figure 1](#) reads:

Autumn term.

Monday.

Your phone alarm goes off. You are still kinda asleep as you get out of bed. Out of the window, the sky is grey and cloudy. It is the first day of the new school year. This year you will be a Year 8.

As *Cold Chips and Money* users make their way through the story, the protagonist encounters various scenarios where they are subtly manipulated and then later, exploited by people who seem initially to be friendly. The narrative echoes the stages of exploitation as outlined by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2023) such as targeting, testing and trapping. Criminals will focus on a young person and test them in various ways to ascertain how suitable they might be to carry out the criminal activity. Once a young person has been drawn in and has carried out criminal acts, they are trapped and can be further manipulated and exploited. At multiple points during the story, the person or people playing the game need to make a decision about what the protagonist will do. In the early part of the story, this is about whether to eat breakfast or not, whether to say 'alright sir' to a teacher at the school gates or ignore the teacher and how they feel being back at school after the summer holidays ('Nervous. Excited. Who cares, it's school.').

We get further into a school day as the story and this decision-making action is established. As each decision is made, the plot is moving along differing pathways. The interactive story format highlights how small decisions can result in consequences, some minor and some major as well as how difficult it can be to see the manipulation as it builds. The story places reader/player/young person at the centre of the action, giving them autonomy over the main character. *Cold Chips and Money* utilises storytelling as a tool to engage students to meaningfully explore the issues surrounding exploitation and how children can be manipulated and coerced into committing crime.

Later, the decisions relate to the more difficult situations the protagonist is in, once they are involved with people who are manipulative and seeking to coerce them into certain behaviours and actions such as stealing a bike, drinking alcohol and shoplifting. As the story reaches a climax, the protagonist is in a position of being pressured to transport a bag containing drugs. There are three ways to respond to being told to take the bag to an address:

Ask Ryan what's in the bag

Look to Leigh for help

Say yes and do the job

The three options at this point lead towards different final outcomes to the story. By way of example, one route involves trying to take a way out by speaking to Mr Dale the football coach, the mum or by going into the Police station to ask for help. This route demonstrates the ways that trusted adults and



professionals might respond to a young person in need of support and understanding. This outcome was informed by our conversations with the police and safeguarding professionals and one that they wanted young people to be specifically made aware of. Another route is to go ahead and deliver the bag in the hope that our protagonist can repay his debts to Ryan and Leigh, while realising that this is getting him further into a pressured situation that he feels extremely uncomfortable about. Taking this route leads to the protagonist being set upon by two people who take the bag from him and the story ends without a resolution, which is then a provocation for discussion with the young people in the session.

Through participating in the story and the associated lesson, students increase their understanding of external influence and pressure. In pairs or groups, with the support and facilitation from a teacher or youth worker, they talk about how they could keep themselves safe, as well as how they might support one another to resist unwanted attention that might lead to exploitation. The resources aim to challenge misconceptions students may have about how criminal gangs seek to exploit young people or which types of young people are most likely to be targeted as well as the ideas they may have about getting help. The story and the lesson is intended to fit directly with the *Programme of Study for PSHE education (KS1–5)* Key Stage 3 Core Theme Relationships: Social Influence section R42–47 (PSHE Association, 2020, p. 29) and enhance work on personal safety and risk management and on forming and maintaining respectful relationships.

### **Methods: the research and the practice**

The project utilised a qualitative approach. The lesson, using the digital interactive story as the main stimulus was carried out in education and youth service settings by teachers and youth work professionals. From this point, I will use ‘professionals’ to include teachers and the Youth Offending team workers involved. The project facilitator and evaluator arranged meetings and/or video calls to discuss the resources (the lesson plan and the digital story), the various ways that activities could be carried out in the lesson and arranged the evaluation activities.

Pre and post-lesson evaluation surveys and interviews were carried out with the professionals. As the project lead, I worked with the evaluator to construct the survey and interview questions. Before using the digital story and lesson plan, professionals were asked questions about their first impressions of the resources, how they would rate their own current knowledge of CCE, how they expected students to engage with the lesson, and whether they anticipated that the digital story would be a useful tool for helping to raise awareness of county lines and CCE.

Following the lesson, professionals were asked the following questions:

- (1) How would you describe the purpose of this resource?
- (2) How much do you now know about CCE (0-10 score)?
- (3) Did the resource meet, reach or exceed your expectations?

– Please provide a few examples.

- (1) What aspect of the resource was most engaging/challenging for students?
- (2) Would you recommend this resource to other schools and community groups?

- If yes, please provide a quote you would be happy to be used within an evaluation of the resource.

- (1) Would you welcome further training in CCE for teachers/students?
- (2) Is there anything else you would like to feed back?

The evaluator managed the distribution of the surveys and conducted the interviews. Informed consent was gained from the professionals for their participation in all aspects of the evaluation method. As stated previously, the evaluation is reported on elsewhere (McNamara & Russell, 2021).

The professionals gathered reflections and responses from their students as part of the lesson activities. We provided a short survey-style tool for them to use as well as including small-group and class discussions and teacher observations as the students worked. A baseline assessment task explored the level of knowledge of exploitation and CCE for example. The lesson included a reflective activity after students experienced the story and participated in the class discussions associated with each section of the story. Professionals referred to the student responses during the evaluation interview they did with us.

The lesson is structured according to the lesson plan provided in the *Cold Chips and Money* resource pack. There are suggestions and prompts linked to each stage of the lesson including for example, encouragement to facilitate participant discussion of 'decision-making'. Exploitation often involves physical or emotional coercion that may leave young people feeling they have no choices. The suggestion that they may be making a choice to become involved in criminal activity would be misplaced and counter to a trauma-informed approach (Hickle, 2020). Under the heading 'climate for learning', professionals are guided to acknowledge this point before beginning the story, while at the same time, exploring the idea of a young person having to make decisions about how to respond to the pressures they experience. This guidance to discuss decision-making when under pressure is re-visited later in the lesson.

There are a series of activities leading from this groundwork. The first is to ask students to consider what we mean by exploitation and how some people might exploit others. Prompt questions in the lesson plan include 'What factors or feelings might lead to someone needing a sense of peer approval that may make someone more vulnerable to exploitation?'

Young people would begin to play through [section 1](#) of the digital story and professionals are guided (again, via the lesson plan) to encourage them to respond to the situations presented, letting them know there is no 'right' path through the story. At the end of the first section when the relationship between the protagonist and the older people is established, professionals are guided to ask students to create a mind map of all the factors that could make young people more easily influenced or susceptible to social pressures that may make them more vulnerable to being exploited. The lesson plan provides some common responses to these exercises which include:

- Being isolated from friends or family
- Not doing well at school
- Being bullied
- A lack of self confidence
- Coming from an unsupportive background

Through discussion and feedback, students have an opportunity to hear these commonly expressed reasons and to discuss the ways in which those reasons can be challenged and extended, either by their peers or by the professional facilitating the session. Coral J. Dando, Thomas C. Ormerod and Sally Atkinson-Sheppard talk about the need to 'raise awareness of the threat of CL to children from all socio-economic groups in all areas of the country' (2023). A key aim of the lesson is for young people to move beyond their initial ideas and understand that although some of these factors may contribute to a person being more vulnerable, it is not the case that only people who are isolated, bullied or from an unsupportive background are drawn into CCE.

The lesson continues in this way, exploring for example, the emotions and feelings that the protagonist might have felt during various sections of the story. The focus on feelings and emotions, both negative and positive stems from the discussions we had with the multi-agency professionals during the development of the story and the premise that CCE hones in on emotions and feelings of belonging, happiness, connectedness and pleasure in order to draw a young person in. The lesson plan guides professionals to explore how experiencing these emotions/feelings might make a young person more at risk of unwanted social influence or pressure and how exploiters might use these emotions to exploit young people.

The professionals were asked to review their school or setting's safeguarding policy prior to delivery. Prior notice of the sessions was given to inclusion

leads. Ground rules were established prior to delivery that emphasised students should not disclose personal stories or make assumptions about others. Time was built in to the lesson for discussion to reflect on perceptions, feelings, and thoughts around county lines. Students were signposted to internal and external support sources. This included Safe4Me, a website that 'provides educators, service providers and parents with information and resources to help educate, guide and support children and young people to keeping safe' (n.d.). The signposting is given on the screen at the end of the story and verbally by a professional towards the end of the lesson.

## Findings

Participating schools used the story in two different ways. One approach was in a whole class setting with input from all students on which option to take when given a choice. This resulted in one outcome or ending to the story that was reached by the whole class. The other way saw the story used in small cluster groups. This approach required collective decision making in the small groups that generated numerous outcomes across a whole class setting depending on which branching narrative each group had taken. With both of these formats, discussion was woven through the lesson as described above, allowing students the opportunity to analyse their decision-making processes, the feelings they experienced and the ways they perceived the protagonist in relation to the choices they made throughout the story. The Youth Offending team used the resources with one individual young person over several shorter sessions. The young person's youth worker as well as their Drugs Worker worked together to go through the story, pausing to discuss key points as guided by the lesson plan.

What follows is a presentation of the findings from the delivery of the lesson by identifying key themes from the data.

### *The benefits of the interactive format*

During the post-lesson interview, a teacher stated 'I think choosing your own adventure style really appeals to the students because it is something different. It is not something we do in most lessons. Most lessons are about students being given the facts and asked to make a note of them, but this was more free flowing and allowed for discussion' (comment 3, p. 11, McNamara & Russell, 2021). This kind of response was common with professionals remarking that that topic, coupled with the interactive story as a form, led to higher levels of engagement than they usually see. A Youth Offending Team professional stated 'I think it is a good format, there definitely are benefits to it being an interactive story telling resource because you are not having to chat at them, you are doing

something with them, its interactive so they can take control' (comment 1, p. 10, McNamara & Russell, 2021).

### ***Discussion and decision-making***

Professionals told us that their discussions with young people pre and post-delivery elicited a range of perspectives, some of which were unexpected. Teachers and professionals built questions into the session which were designed to determine levels of understanding of County Lines and CCE before using the resources. Most teachers used a written task sheet in the form of a short survey to assess this baseline understanding. Levels of understanding were mixed with some young people having an idea that it involves being made to do things you don't want to do, or feeling pressured to do things for money if a person is experiencing poverty for example.

The questions used after the young people experienced the story elicited more nuanced responses, with students using the narrative of the CCM story to help make sense of issues of manipulation and coercion. They were using the lens of the character to meaningfully explore how children can suffer exploitation from older peers and adults. One teacher shared this response from a young person in their lesson:

I think there could be many reasons they feel they HAVE to do what they've been asked. Whether they are being threatened, feel protected by the bad people or maybe the friend who's manipulating them is popular and they want to keep that social status of being their friend. (comment 17, p. 8, McNamara & Russell, 2021)

The range of responses to the discussion prompts and the plot of the story afforded the professionals the opportunity to facilitate in depth dialogue around the cause and effect of the choices we make, and how easily young people can be manipulated into illegal activity through peer pressure and grooming. One Youth Work professional reflected that 'the resource allowed us to ask the questions we wanted to ask, without them just coming out of the blue. Mum had already flagged up that an older boy had been glamourizing drug taking to her son. The resource enabled us to approach that scenario one step removed' (comment 1, p. 11, McNamara & Russell, 2021).

Evaluation was designed to determine the extent to which young people's understanding of social pressure has increased, and whether they had an increased awareness of the ways they could stay safe from being drawn into difficult situations and relationships. The following reflections from teachers in school settings are taken the Evaluation Report (McNamara & Russell, 2021):

I think the resource helped them to learn that making different decisions can make a difference. I think some of them really enjoyed being able to go back and see how they could change the story. (comment 3, p. 11)

I don't think they realised how different their outcomes would be based on the choices they made as the character in the story. That worked really nicely because they were shocked to hear that some students had different experiences than they had had in the story. (comment 9, p. 12)

I liked that young people could make their own decisions independently using different scenarios, rather than a teacher over influencing what they should decide to do and make their own decisions and have their own consequences to those decisions. (comment 2, p. 10)

### ***Young people's perceptions of child as victim or perpetrator***

Feedback suggests that CCM is a useful tool in helping to inform students of their legal status in relation to county lines involvement, as well as helping them to understand how to safeguard themselves if they were in the vulnerable position of being exploited. One of the teachers comments that they were keen to use the resources specifically to get the point across that a young person won't necessarily get in trouble if they find themselves in a difficult situation and seek help (comment 4, pp. 10-11, McNamara & Russell, 2021). The interplay of a young person's status as victim and perpetrator is complex. The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10 years old. This means that children under 10 can't be arrested or charged with a crime though there are other punishments that can be given to children under 10 who break the law. For children over 10 years of age who may carry out criminal activity after having been coerced and manipulated to do so, there are complex ethical and moral challenges. Criminalising children can impact their sense of self and identity and have long term negative implications on their chances to go on to live meaningful and purposeful lives.

During the development phase of this project, Hampshire-based police contributors were clear about their desire to tell young people that victims of CCE would be treated with understanding and would be able to access support from police. Shaw and Greenhow (2021) talk about the ways that their research participants viewed the role of the police in relation to CCE and Child Sexual Exploitation. They explained one perspective: 'their [police] actions have often been centrally driven by successive governments and that the pressure to "crime" everything and take "positive" action when presented with certain behaviour has not always been to the benefit of the child' (p. 74). Shaw & Greenhow provide some context to this assertion and go on to make reference to the Offences Brought to Justice Target (OBTJ) which was introduced prior to 2006/7 when a substantial increase in first time entrants into the youth justice system. OBTJ targets stopped being used from 2010 and since then, 'many forces are developing innovative practice to reduce youth justice contact and demand on police resources' (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2017).

After having experienced the *Cold Chips & Money* story, as noted in the evaluation report some of the young people commented specifically on this idea of the child as victim and/or perpetrator:

Children would be treated as a victim if they became involved in county lines due to pressure. (comment 3, p. 7)

I don't think kids would get in trouble with the police because they are being forced and pressured into committing those crimes. (comment 15, p. 8)

The message was communicated and children understood this aspect of the story but the idea that a child who carries out criminal behaviour should be or would be treated as a victim of exploitation is a complex one. The widely-held view is that most agencies do ascribe to this idea, though there is still a long way to go and better coordination is required between the various agencies to embed the idea in practice and for young people to trust that the commitment will be upheld:

We need earlier help for children at risk, responses that see children as victims and not criminalised, and joined-up national and local responses. Through coordinated, concerted efforts across statutory and voluntary sectors, and by working with local communities and families, we can reach vulnerable young people earlier and begin to disrupt the criminal exploitation of children. (Turner et al., 2019, p. 4).

### ***Researchers supporting professionals/professionals supporting researchers***

The lesson was delivered most successfully by experienced PHSE leads, with a good general knowledge of county lines. Some of the professionals already had this knowledge before being involved with the project and some were learning about the subject as they prepared to deliver the lesson.

The project's evaluator and facilitator was a highly effective role for supporting professionals through preparation and delivery when using this resource for the first time. This source of support in the form of video calls as required, helped the professionals to feel equipped and prepared. Reflecting with the evaluator supported people's thinking about how the lesson had worked and further supported confidence in teaching the subject of County Lines/CCE. These conversations directly inform our ongoing thinking about the ways that an arts-based resource can contribute to tackling CCE at an early intervention stage, and to think about how research and further practice could evolve.

This model of mutually beneficial support and guidance provides the opportunity for sustainable knowledge exchange that embedded practice and expertise within school and youth work settings, as opposed to relying on external facilitators to visit the setting to deliver the work. This guided support model also means that professionals had the delivery experience to continue to deliver the CCM resource with future students.

## Discussion

Mohatt et al. (2013) write about suicide prevention work that incorporates arts projects. They describe how the use of the arts is one way to engage the community and address social issues in a number of different ways including raising awareness and reducing stigma. They highlight that the first step to preventing a problem is by tackling the social barriers that stop people from talking about it, seeking help and accessing support (p. 201). There is stigma associated with CCE as well as a lack of awareness, both of which are barriers to understanding the nuances and complex challenges that face young people and professionals. It is my contention that talking about the problem of CCE and raising awareness of the early stages of being drawn in will not lead young people into CCE but will form part of a preventative strategy and help young people understand coercion, control and manipulation. Moreover, using the arts as a vehicle through which to talk, think and reflect on some of the complexities, eases the conversations and provides a framework or structure within which to exchange thoughts and ideas.

A professional within the Portsmouth Safeguarding Children Partnership comments on the use of arts-based tools being used alongside methods that may be more sport focussed or engage young people in other ways, that:

they are all mechanisms for a child to be able to recognise themselves and then be able to have that conversation with an adult. So having that broad range of whether it's theatre or computer based or sports based, I strongly advocate for anything that can be used in a variety of settings - anything that they can then maybe share with their parents and have a conversation with them or they can share with a youth worker and say 'Oh I saw this' and they can have a look at together. Anything that can open up that conversation in a variety of settings. (Professional, City Council, interview with author 26/07/2023)

### ***Future need, future potential***

In July 2023, I returned to speak with some of the Children's Services professionals who were involved in the development stage of the resource. I asked whether the issue of Country Lines has got better or worse since the 2020/2021 work we did together, and whether the professionals thought this resource and others like it, would still be relevant and useful. A professional in the adolescent service talked about there being a greater awareness of CL and CCE among professionals, coupled with an increase in the numbers of children being drawn into CL and CCE. She felt that 'the situation that we're in now is probably worse in terms of the level of risk and the number of children it touches, but better in that our responses and the professional network offer like social care, police, all of the health professionals, everyone involved is better at responding.' (Interview with author, 21/07/2023).



Throughout the project, we reflected on how this resource could be better, if we were to create something new. The story as it stands, is built using the platform Twine, which is open-source and is relatively simplistic to use and to experience as a 'user'. Some schools initially shared concerns about whether students would like the illustrations, and felt that young people are so familiar with high-end, sophisticated (and high-budget) computer games with action and moving images, this format could be too simplistic. Schools also suggested it would be good for young people to choose a 'player' or main character. The story has one protagonist and though we discussed the identity of this character at length during development in terms of what gender it should be for example, teachers told us they think more young people would be more engaged if they could choose a character type. A story or game with a customisable character or multi-player function would be interesting for a future resource.

A professional with the Portsmouth Safeguarding Children Partnership talked about the ways the resources could be developed to reach a wider range of young people, focussing for example, on children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). She stated that they do not currently have resources that are 'visually based' and advocated for a similar interactive tool with an adaptive function.

One further point that the same professional made was related to the idea of making this resource, or similar arts-based resources available to younger children. The story has multiple plot pathways, which depend on the choices that people make along the way. These plot pathways lead to different endings to the story. The point she made was that all of these variations are linked to the protagonist having been drawn in to problematic situations, with varying degrees of seriousness, illegality and so on. Her suggestion was that younger children would benefit from seeing the best-case scenario, and the results of good decisions at the earliest point. She said:

the only thing that was missing for me was that option of, 'OK, so if I had done this, I wouldn't have ended up in in that situation'. So I can learn that at the earliest point. This is my out . . . I think there's some scope, particularly with the younger children, to let them see how they avoid it [being drawn in to anything] in the first place. (Interview with the author, 21/07/2023)

In the preparatory conversations with the project facilitator and evaluator before delivering the CCM lesson, professionals are invited to prepare these kinds of conversations as part of their session, but the point that story could have additional plot pathways of this nature is valuable for future projects.

## Conclusion

The model for this work began with a multi-partner collaboration. A representative from a university, a community-based youth organisation,

four departments from the local city council, a team from the county council and the county police force joined together to think about creating a resource to tackle CCE. Considering this range of perspectives and drawing on the knowledge, experience, ideas and expertise of the non-academic community was a critical foundation for the work. The dialogue that took place in the developmental stages, and over time has crossed the boundary between academia and communities. The dialogue has been experimental, fluid and affected by the practical challenges that all individuals face in their day-to-day work. The dialogue has been key to the success of the project.

As discussed, the evaluation found that young people had gained greater awareness and understanding of exploitation in relation to County Lines and CCE after engaging in the CCM resource. The interactive storytelling format with branching narratives allowed students autonomy over the character's journey. The inclusion of decision-making helped students to meaningfully engage with the subject matter, using critical thinking to examine the incremental steps that can ultimately result in complex and harmful consequences. Whether using these specific resources, or others that afford young people similar experiences, these aspects are recommended for future practice.

A key outcome of the project evaluation is the testimony from professionals reporting that CCM is an effective tool to raise awareness and safeguard students from potential manipulation and coercion. The evaluation findings have enabled us to draw conclusions about the reach and impact of this arts-based intervention tool, though we cannot say yet, whether experiencing this story and the associated discussions results in actual behavioural change over time. Further longitudinal research to identify evidence of impact would be needed.

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