



St Helens Safeguarding Adult Board Cuckooing Guidance

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Aim of this guidance

- This guidance will help you to contribute to tackling cuckooing within the Borough whilst supporting people who may be at risk or are experiencing cuckooing.
- It helps you **recognise** some potential warning signs that indicate cuckooing might be taking place and offers guidance on steps to take in **responding** appropriately.
- It also signposts to the local services, as well as wider support services available in St Helens.
- This guidance aims to support making a **referral** for support.
- It also explains what steps to take in **recording** what you have seen and done.

What is Cuckooing?

Cuckooing' is a form of criminal exploitation and the term is used when criminals use or take over a person's home for criminal purposes. It is named after the nest-stealing practice of wild cuckoos; there are different types of cuckooing.

- The most common form is where drug dealers take over a person's home and use it to store, prepare, deal or take drugs.
- Store firearms and money relating to drugs.
- Using the property for sex work/exploitation
- Taking over the property as a place for them to live
- Taking over the property to financially abuse the tenant

Criminals will often target and exploit adults who have vulnerabilities and care and support needs. Key vulnerabilities/risk factors can include.

- Older adults living alone in the community.
- A person with a mental or physical health condition
- A person with a learning disability, neurodiversity or brain injury/disorder
- A person with drug or alcohol problems or being in recovery.

- 'Functioning addicts' that are not subject to police, housing or adult social care attention.
- Housing issues and homelessness
- Single parents, particularly lone single parents experiencing emotional or financial difficulties.
- Young person living alone for the first time or a recent care leaver.
- Social isolation or lack of support networks
- Experiencing poverty/financial difficulties
- Involvement in sex work
- Present or prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse
- Also, they can sometimes be involved in criminal activity themselves.

Initially perpetrators may approach the vulnerable person and establish relationships with the person to access their home. The person is often groomed (including via social media) and deceived into trusting that the criminal is a friend, romantic partner or support network. They may also offer free drugs/alcohol or other things they may need. Once they gain control over the person - whether through substance dependency, debt or as part of their relationship – larger groups may sometimes move into the property too. In addition, intimidation, threats, physical or sexual violence and debt bondage may be used to control the person. Such as being made to repay the cost of drug debts (which the person thought they were getting for free) through use of their home and/or to assist in drug dealing. The perpetrators can take full control of the home, and the person may be prevented from freely using rooms such as their kitchen/living room. They can also be made to leave the property by force or make the decision to leave becoming homeless. They are usually intimidated and left with little choice but to cooperate.

Cuckooing victims often live in deprived areas and reside alone in either a block of flats or a house that has back alleyway access. Such properties are typically managed by social or private landlords. Criminals particularly drug networks/gangs may also target several people who live close by to each other in discreet locations so they can quickly move between the different properties to conduct their criminal activity and avoid getting caught by the police.

At present, cuckooing is not a specific criminal offence. If cuckooing occurs, perpetrators may be prosecuted using a range of drugs, modern slavery, and serious crime legislation, or disrupted using civil remedies such as Premises Closure Orders and injunctions.

What is it you're concerned about?

Many of the signs of cuckooing look like anti-social behaviour; however, being aware and recognising the indicators of cuckooing, and by raising your concerns about what may appear to be anti-social behaviour to the Council, or the housing provider, will also help tackle both issues. As each cuckooed address is likely to accompany localised increases in anti-social behaviour, crime, and fear of crime.

There are certain signs which may indicate cuckooing is taking place or that may raise concerns.

- More people, new 'friends' or unfamiliar faces seen visiting the property then previously done so before.
- High number of vehicles attending the property.
- Complaints of noise
- Anti-social behaviours/crimes or frequent gatherings/parties
- Young people frequenting coming to the property.
- The person/victim may begin to disengage with services.
- They may become withdrawn.
- Unexplained injuries - bruising, cuts or appear in discomfort due to injury.
- Changes in appearance – could appear unkempt or have new expensive items of clothing.
- Damage to property/doors being left open or unlocked.
- Lost/replacing keys/fobs.
- Changes in financial circumstances
- Security safe in the property
- Person no longer staying at the property.

Potential warning signs and risk Indicators

The University of Leeds in conjunction with partners produced a preventing and Disrupting Cuckooing Victimisation: Professional Toolkit. The toolkit contains the following resources which aim to support your decision making and safeguarding of the person,

Information booklet for professionals containing warning signs -

<https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/download/downloads/id/981/2-information-booklet-for-professionals.pdf>

Cuckooing risk identification tool -

<https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/download/downloads/id/982/3-cuckooing-risk-identification-tool.pdf>

The Board advise that the toolkit and resources above are utilised to aid your decision making when considering cuckooing to be factor. However please note this is not a definitive assessment of risk and you should seek advice and support/supervision. In addition, **please note this is also not a substitute for professional curiosity.**

Key points to consider.

Mental Capacity

If there is concern or reason to doubt the person's ability to make informed choices (principles of the [Mental Capacity Act 2005 Resource and Practice Toolkit](#) should be explored)

Also consider, is there a better time of day and/or place for the discussion to take place/ revisit the discussion? Is there a time when the person is more likely to have capacity? Also, when speaking to the person, your exploration of the situation may need to vary dependant on how advanced their condition is - opening conversations could lead to the individual being further endangered or distressed. Please note only open a conversation up with the person if it is safe to do so, always try to speak to the person on their own where possible.

Disclosures

It is important to note victims may struggle to identify themselves as a victim.

- Avoid 'why' questions where possible. Instead, ask open questions: 'What would happen if you were to ask them to leave?' 'Have you ever felt unsafe?' 'Do you know all the people coming into your property, or are some of them friends of friends?' You do not need someone to tell you they are victim to know they need support.
- Professionals may not view the individual as a victim. Be aware of/and challenge unconscious bias. Which is defined as a prejudice or stereotype individuals hold about certain groups of people that they aren't consciously aware of having.

They may also be reluctant to disclose information, therefore you should.

- Identify the most appropriate professional to approach the victim. Ideally, this should be someone who the victim trusts.
- The victim may want you to keep this information confidential and not want you to raise a safeguarding alert. This may need to be done without the victim's consent.
- Any discussion of the police and/or social services may cause anxiety and fear – raise the issue of contacting these agencies carefully.

Validate their experience.

If someone does feel able to disclose to you, it is important to believe and respond. After someone discloses, take a moment to recognise how difficult it may have been for them to trust you and let you in on what they have been experiencing. It may be the first time they have told anyone about the abuse. For this reason, it is important to validate their experience and reassure them that you believe them, preventing unconscious bias.

Also, it is important to manage the victim's expectations – provide reassurance but do not overpromise.

What is Safeguarding?

The Care Act 2014 states Safeguarding adults is 'protecting an adult's right to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect. It is about people and organisations working together to prevent and stop both the risks and experience of abuse or neglect, while at the same time making sure that the adult's wellbeing is promoted including, where appropriate, having regard to their views, wishes, feelings and beliefs in deciding any action.'

For further information, please visit: [Six Principles of Adult Safeguarding - ACT \(anncrafttrust.org\)](http://anncrafttrust.org)

Safeguarding people who have been victims of cuckooing

Raising a Safeguarding concern can have a positive impact on the well-being of the person experiencing cuckooing as it could result in appropriate support.

To learn how to report a safeguarding concern in St Helens please visit:
[Protecting vulnerable adults - St Helens Borough Council](#)

If you suspect that an individual is being cuckooed, you will need to consider what you should do to support them and also report it.

Report Cuckooing

Oxford City Council have developed a simple, informative and memorable guide to help people identify and assist victims of Cuckooing using the acronym NEST.

- **Notice the signs** - Look out for your neighbours especially if there has been a change in behaviour. Spot the signs listed above in this document.
- **Evidence your concerns** - Make a note of your concerns, times, dates, what has happened and identity or names of people coming in and out. If there is lots of noise, report to St Helens Borough Council who will provide access to a noise app [What we can investigate - St Helens Borough Council](#)
- **Stay Safe** - It is important you are safe, so do not approach any of the people you believe may be cuckooing a person you know or take photographs.
- **Tell the Police and Local Authority** - you're concerned cuckooing crime in your area or think someone may be a victim of cuckooing, please call 101. You can also report it online, [Report a crime | Merseyside Police](#) or contact Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or via crimestoppers-uk.org. Call **999** if there is an immediate risk to the persons safety, or a crime is happening now. Merseyside Police have a guidance document "Response to Cuckooing - Operation Trespass". To gain a greater understanding of the

polices response please refer to [Help protect people from cuckooing in Merseyside | Merseyside Police](#)

If the person has care and support needs, you must make a Safeguarding Referral to the Local Authority by calling 01744 676767 (9.00am to 5.00pm - Monday to Friday) or Emergency Duty Team (EDT) - 0845 0500 148 outside of those hours. Ensure that the police and the Local Authority understand your client's vulnerabilities, and status as a victim.

Also consider the risk posed to others as a result of the person being cuckooed/exploited. Such as family, friends, formal or informal carers and neighbours and refer to appropriate agencies as above. Also consider referring for a carers assessment [1500202_carers_leaflet-1.pdf](#)

Making safeguarding personal

It is important that any approach with the person is carried out in a person-centred and the person should be consulted throughout the safeguarding process, and their views should be reflected in any actions taken as much as is practicable. More information in regard to Making Safeguarding Personal can be found here [Making Safeguarding Personal - 7 Minute Briefing](#)

Staff Safety

Working with individuals who have or are being exploited via cuckooing may also pose a risk to professional/staff working with them, which may also increase the risk to the victim. Therefore, professionals should consider,

- Arranging to meet the person away from their property where possible
- Avoid lone visits to the property, (follow your organisations lone working procedures)
- Visit the property with a police officer where/if appropriate.
- Establish safe words with the person, team members and the police if appropriate.
- Increase the amount of supervision and support that is offered to staff (e.g. line-managers should arrange regular meetings), including risk management/safety planning.

Key Contacts

Remember if a person is in immediate danger, call the appropriate emergency service on **999**.

Adult Social Care (Safeguarding) - Contact St Helens Contact Cares on 01744 676767 (9.00am to 5.00pm - Monday to Friday) or Emergency Duty Team (EDT) - 0845 0500 148 outside of those hours.

Children's Social Care - Contact Cares on 01744 676767 (9.00am to 5.00pm - Monday to Friday) or Emergency Duty Team (EDT) - 0845 0500 148 from 5pm

Drug and alcohol Support (CGL) - call 01744 410752

Domestic Abuse Support (Safe2Speak) – IDVA & Outreach services call 01744 743200. 24hour helpline call 01925 220541.

Housing Options and Advice Service - St Helens - Call 01744 675150 or email Housingadviceoptions@sthelens.gov.uk. If a person is rough sleeping contact 01744 675150. Alternatively, report via [Street Link](#).

National Benefit Fraud Hotline - call 0800854440

Urgent mental health crisis support. For people who no longer feel able to cope or be in control of their situation. Call the NHS 111 and option 2 for mental health.

References & Additional resources

Bainbridge L, et al (2024) Cuckooing Victimisation. An Information Booklet for Professionals Cuckooing Research & Prevention Network

Cuckooing Research & Prevention Network (2025) Preventing and Disrupting Cuckooing Victimisation [Who Is At Risk? – Preventing and Disrupting Cuckooing Victimisation](#)

Merseyside Police (2025) Merseyside Police Response to Cuckooing - Operation Trespass. [Operation Trespass - Merseyside Police](#)

National Crime Agency (NCA) – County Lines. [County Lines - National Crime Agency](#)

Oxford City Council – Cuckooing. [Cuckooing | Oxford City Council](#)

Salford Safeguarding Adult Board – Cuckooing Guidance [Cuckooing Guidance | Salford Safeguarding Adults Board](#)

Sefton Safeguarding Adults Partnership Board - Types of Abuse Cuckooing. [Sefton Safeguarding Adults Partnership Board \(SSAPB\) - Cuckooing](#)

University of Leeds - Preventing and Disrupting Cuckooing Victimisation: Professional Toolkit. [Preventing and Disrupting Cuckooing Victimisation: Professional Toolkit | School of Law | University of Leeds](#)