



SAB
MANAGER
NETWORK



National Network for Chairs
of Safeguarding Adults Boards

Thematic Analysis

Cuckooing & Exploitation Safeguarding Adults Reviews

May 2025

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1. Introduction

This analysis has been produced by the Safeguarding Adults Board Managers national network. The need for a rapid analysis is rooted in growing awareness of adult exploitation and cuckooing as a safeguarding adults concern, with SABs across the country undertaking Safeguarding Adults Reviews to learn from the circumstances of adults with care and support needs who have been seriously harmed, or died, in consequence of exploitation and cuckooing.

The network acknowledges that there is some reticence about the use of the term 'cuckooing' to refer to a type of abuse that causes such serious harm to victims, with some individual Safeguarding Adults Boards adopting alternative terms including:

- Home Invasion
- Home Takeover

In 2024 Mathew Rive produced a helpful exploration of the genesis of the term cuckooing in 'Cuckooing: Beyond the Line', therefore this discourse is not repeated here. The network is mindful of work being led by the Home Office, and the proposal that cuckooing becomes a specific criminal offence. For this reason, throughout this analysis the term 'cuckooing' will be used, with the following definition: *'any instance where a person's home is taken over by another person (or group of people), irrespective of whether the motive relates to county lines or organised crime'*.

The primary aim was to identify themes in the learning identified within mandatory and discretionary safeguarding adults reviews and non- statutory learning reviews. The network identified relevant reviews through the direct knowledge of board managers, whilst unscientific this approach facilitated the inclusion of those reviews that have not been published. Subsequently the search term 'cuckooing' was entered in the SAR Repository. This returned 33 results, some of which duplicated those already identified, and some where the term 'cuckooing' is mentioned but this was not the trigger for the Review.

This summary report is based on the thematic analysis of learning from the circumstances of 22 adults who were seriously harmed, or died, where cuckooing and/or exploitation was a core feature of the abuse suffered.

2. About the Adults

Where a review is within the public domain a link, and brief precis is provided below:

2.1. [Adult AU](#)

Adult AU was a 77-year-old, white British female who had several long-term conditions that significantly impacted her life, with communication being a particular challenge. She had been deaf from the age of 3 and was mute, relying on British Sign Language and the written word to communicate, though she could also lip read. Several people were identified by professionals as either living with her or providing some form of support, yet there was significant confusion and inconsistency in how these individuals were documented. Over time, these people were referred to in various, often conflicting, ways—such as carers, next of kin, friends, sons, neighbours, or relatives. This inconsistency suggests that professionals made assumptions about these individuals' roles without fully understanding their relationship with AU.

2.2. [Adult AW](#)

Adult AW was a 49-year-old white British male. Adult AW experienced repeat homelessness and had diabetes, with anxiety and depression. In 2023 Adult AW was found deceased at home, he had died from natural causes. The learning review considered concerns of exploitation, potential cuckooing, and an allegation of his ex-partner attempting to forcibly give him controlled drugs.

2.3. [Anna](#)

Anna was in her late 50's, she had a diagnosis of delusional disorder, alcohol misuse and associated brain damage, mobility problems, cirrhosis of the liver, inflamed pancreas, swollen abdomen, and incontinence issues.

2.4. [Chris](#)

Chris died in 2022 at the age of 53, in consequence of a fall from height. Chris had complex health needs including diabetes, drug and alcohol use and schizophrenia, he was believed to have been a victim of cuckooing.

2.5. [Katie, James and Luke](#)

An independent thematic Safeguarding Adults Review (SAR) into the circumstances surrounding three individuals who have sadly died in separate instances, where each experienced cuckooing and exploitation.

Katie was a White British female and was 53 at the time of her death. Katie had a number of physical health conditions and reduced mobility, as well as a history of drug and alcohol use. Multiple agencies were aware of and responding to concerns of cuckooing. Katie's neighbour shared that Katie had not used drugs for a significant period prior to the exploitation happening, when she started to use drugs again. Those exploiting Katie were known acquaintances of Katie's, from what she referred to as her 'heroin world.' Drug use was a key factor in Katie's death, the coroner's inquests verdict was 'open conclusion.'

James was a White British 56 year old man at the time of his death. James had an adult child who he had a very close relationship with and they shared that he 'lived in fear, scared of the people who were controlling his life.' James was diagnosed with Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder and used drugs and alcohol. Cuckooing risks were identified for the 2 years leading to James death. Those exploiting James were considered part of a local drug network.

Luke was a man of mixed heritage with both parents being from Jamaica. He was 48 years old at the time of his death. Luke used alcohol and drugs and experienced mental ill health, with a diagnosed antisocial personality disorder. Luke had been a victim of cuckooing by a serious organised crime group in an area outside of Hampshire. When Luke moved to Hampshire he continued to live in fear of those who had harmed him. Luke sadly died by overdose.

2.6. Matthew

Matthew was a White British male and was 47 years old at the time of his death in 2020. The last professional contact with him took place six days earlier. During 2018 concerns arose that Matthew may be a victim of 'cuckooing' and a Closure Order was obtained in 2019 which prohibited access to his flat for three months. Application was made to extend the Closure Order but this was unsuccessful. Matthew had been supported to relocate to a hostel in the London Borough of Hackney and returned to his flat once the Closure Order expired. After Matthew's return to the flat there were further incidents of anti-social behaviour and possible drug dealing which may have been indications of cuckooing and a further Closure Order was being progressed in the period prior to Matthew's sudden death.

2.7. Max

Max was an 18-year-old White British man who had been adopted in infancy, he was described as a mischievous, 'smashing young man', a free spirit who could be very kind. The description of Max as having 'high functioning' autism may have been misleading to practitioners working with him. Although Max was not learning disabled, his full-scale IQ had been assessed 73, which placed him on the borderline of learning needs. Max lacked insight into the intentions and motivations of others,

which made it difficult for him to make or sustain friendships, but his desperate longing to belong meant that he was very vulnerable to those who could exploit him. This was likely exacerbated by the lengthy period he was out of mainstream education from the age of 16, placed by himself in a residential unit under 2-1 supervision, without the opportunity to develop his social skills.

2.8. [Michael](#)

Michael was found deceased at his home in January 2020. His death was the result of a homicide, having been the victim of criminal exploitation by a County Lines criminal drugs network. Michael was known to several services and was being supported at the time of his death.

2.9. [Molly](#)

Molly was a 25-year-old female of White British origin who was found deceased at a property of a person not well known to her. Molly had been known to multiple services in the years prior to her death. Molly was open to safeguarding for two years and was discussed within the Team Around the Individual (TATI) process for over a year. The referral for a Safeguarding Adults Review indicated concerns regarding Molly related to sexual exploitation from multiple perpetrators, sexual violence, historical abuse, self-harm, domestic abuse, self-neglect, homelessness, and drug use.

2.10. [Mr Z](#)

Mr Z was 48 years old and was a resident in York. He had a close relationship with his parents who provided a lot of support to him on an almost daily basis, and he also had two older brothers. The SAR had limited information about Mr Z's early life. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia as a young man and suffered with anxiety and at times psychosis which was considered to be secondary to his use of cannabis. Mr Z was well-known to mental health services and drug and alcohol services and had received care and treatment from both for many years. He was on Methadone to help manage his drug addiction. Mr Z was also well-known to local police and was involved in criminal activity often through the groups of people he was associated with.

2.11. [Ms Stitch](#)

Ms Stitch is a woman in her 30s, she has a diagnosis of an uncommon neurodegenerative condition that impacts across all areas of functioning. Due to the complexity of her needs Ms Stitch received support from health and social care services, and from specialist voluntary sector organisations. In 2023 Ms Stitch suffered serious physical harm due to abuse perpetrated by two adults who were

known to her. This abuse took place in a context of cuckooing and adult exploitation. The perpetrators have subsequently been convicted and are serving custodial sentences. Ms Stitch is recovering.

2.12. Person D

Person D had a background of trauma, suffering a serious road traffic accident in his teens requiring hospitalisation and developed an addiction to opiate medication. He was bullied at school and his girlfriend was murdered. Over his adulthood he developed addiction to prescribed opiates, street drugs and alcohol. Person D lived with Person E who slept on the sofa, and he also had substance and alcohol addiction. Person E and Person D had been friends all their adult lives. They had a complex relationship and considered themselves to be carers to each other

2.13. Peter

Peter was a single white British man, aged 55 when he died in 2018. He had been dependent on alcohol since early adulthood. He had six psychiatric admissions since 2006 thought to be related to alcohol misuse, the latest being in April 2017, and he had been given a historic diagnosis of schizophrenia. The diagnosis of schizophrenia was later revised, as the psychotic illnesses were thought to be secondary to alcohol use. In May 2010 neuropsychological assessment showed cognitive difficulties thought to be related to alcohol misuse which affected his ability to retain verbal information and to make some decisions.

2.14. Peter

At the time of his death Peter was 66 years of age, he had held a tenancy since 2016, when it was handed to him on the death of his father. There was evidence dating back some time that Peter misused substances and as a result that he associated with other persons who did the same. Part of the role of this review will be to consider Peter's own vulnerabilities and to see whether his vulnerability was exploited by others. Over a long period of time there was a particular person, Mark, who was at times described by both he and Peter as Peter's carer. Mark had a significant history of criminal convictions, including drug related offences. Concerns were raised that Mark was exploiting Peter, as were others who frequented Peter's address.

2.15. Sam

Sam was a 51-year-old white-British male, Sam faced multiple risks. He was at risk from self-neglect and from his dependent use of alcohol, poor health, and risk from exploitation. Sam had been targeted by people seeking to control his home in connection with drugs.

2.16. Sally

Sally was a white, British woman aged 48 when her body was discovered in her home. The home environment had high levels of clutter and signs of serious self-neglect. For many years prior to her death Sally was known to be at risk of exploitation, including cuckooing.

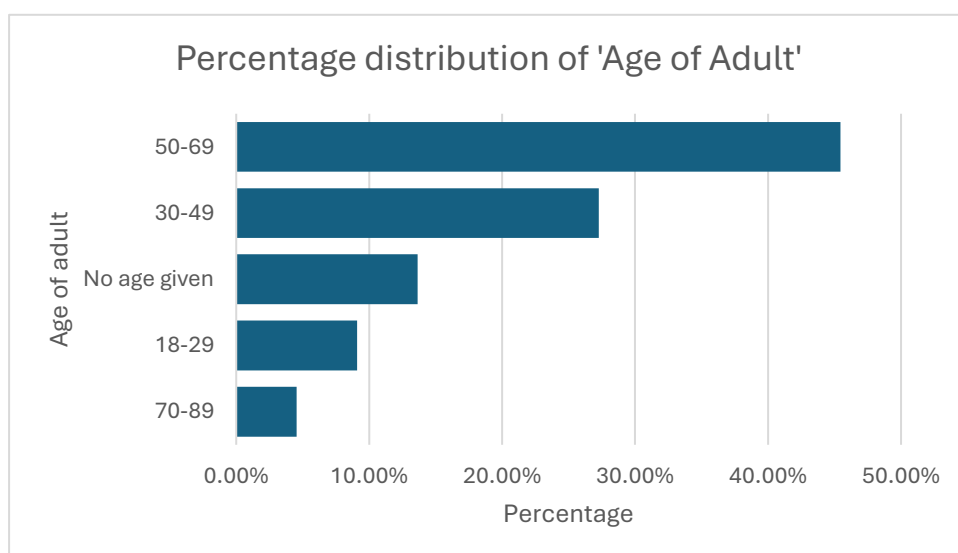
2.17. Self-Neglect Thematic SAR

Karl was a 53-year-old man with epilepsy, he had an enduring and severe alcohol dependency with physical complications of this. Karl lived alone in rented accommodation. There was a longstanding and significant safety issue in that Karl could not keep himself safe in his property as others would enter and at times harm him. This involved a range of people including other drinkers who he sometimes let in and then other individuals who entered the property against Karl's wishes and it would appear he was placed under duress at times to let people enter at will. There was also evidence that he was being exploited for money and that his possessions including his cash card stolen.

3. Findings

3.1. Basic Information

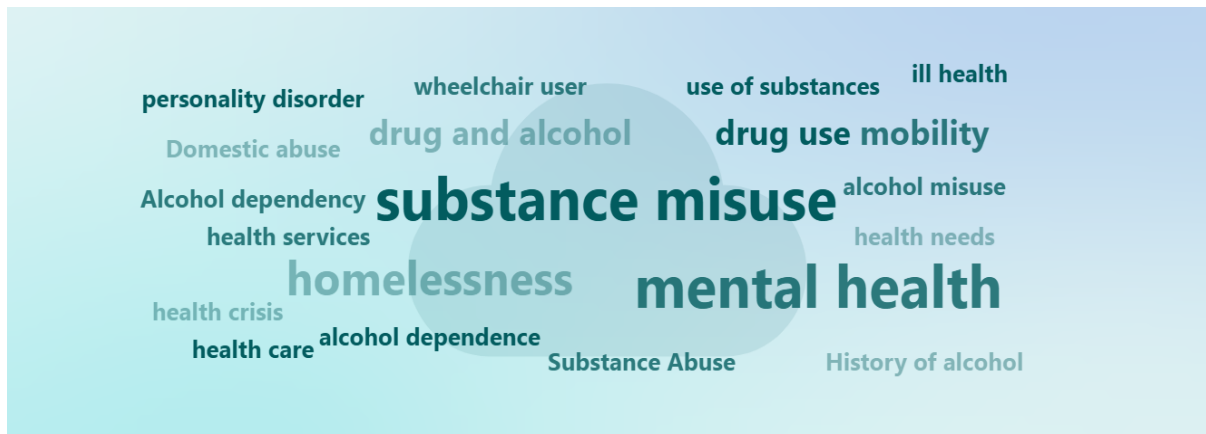
The thematic analysis considered the circumstances of 22 adults with care and support needs who were victims of cuckooing and exploitation. The subject cohort was 28% female and 72% male. Where recorded, the age range is reflected in the chart below:



The 2 young adults aged 19-29 were both known to be vulnerable in childhood and were care-experienced young people. They have in common a history of exploitation, with perpetrators

continuing to target them as they entered adulthood. Two other adults had previous contact with children's services in a context of their own children being removed from their care.

The most common area of vulnerability was substance misuse, or dependency on drugs or alcohol. However, it is important to recognise that the presence of multiple adversities, and complex need arising from this, was a factor for the majority of adults considered.



The complexity of each adult's circumstances created a challenging landscape for the intervention of support and safeguarding services. The presenting need of substance misuse is frequently contextualised by underlying mental health issues, trauma and previous experience of exploitation. The presence of communication impairment was also a feature, perhaps because this increases the reliance of the victim on the perpetrator, whilst reducing their capacity to seek external help. Previous experience of homelessness is also a factor increasing vulnerability.

Whilst not always expressed explicitly, the Safeguarding Adult Reviews considered highlight the importance of trauma-informed approach in practice.

The referral for a Safeguarding Adults Review indicated concerns regarding Molly related to sexual exploitation from multiple perpetrators, sexual violence, historical abuse, self-harm, domestic abuse, self-neglect, homelessness, and drug use.

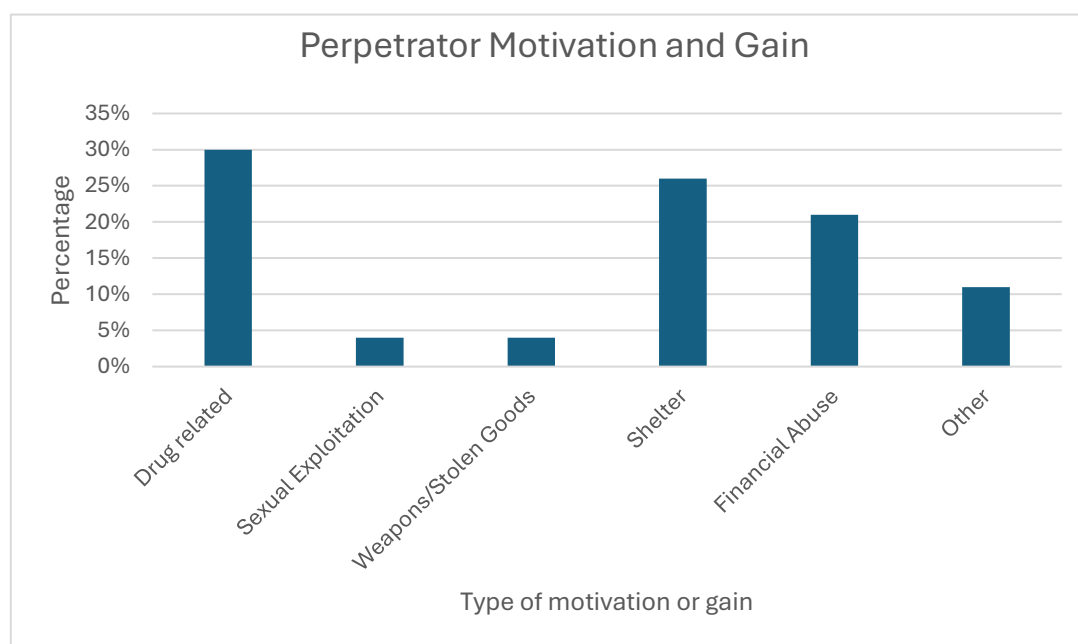
Max had autism, substance misuse, mental health crisis, he was a care experienced young person, with a background of trauma.

Adult AU was a 77-year-old, white British female who had several long-term conditions that significantly impacted her life, with communication being a particular challenge. She had been deaf from the age of 3 and was mute, relying on British Sign Language and the written word to communicate, though she could also lip read.

Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Familial Abuse as a child, domestic abuse as an adult.

3.2. Mechanism of Exploitation

Each SAR sought to understand the impact of the cuckooing and exploitation for the adult victim. In the absence of an all-encompassing definition there is recognition that the motivators of cuckooing behaviour vary between perpetrators and can intersect and overlap. This is well evidenced in the subject cohort, with adults exploited for multiple purposes by the perpetrators. Cuckooing type behaviour can result in financial benefit for perpetrators varying from direct financial abuse to the use of the property to provide shelter, which is arguably another form of financial abuse.



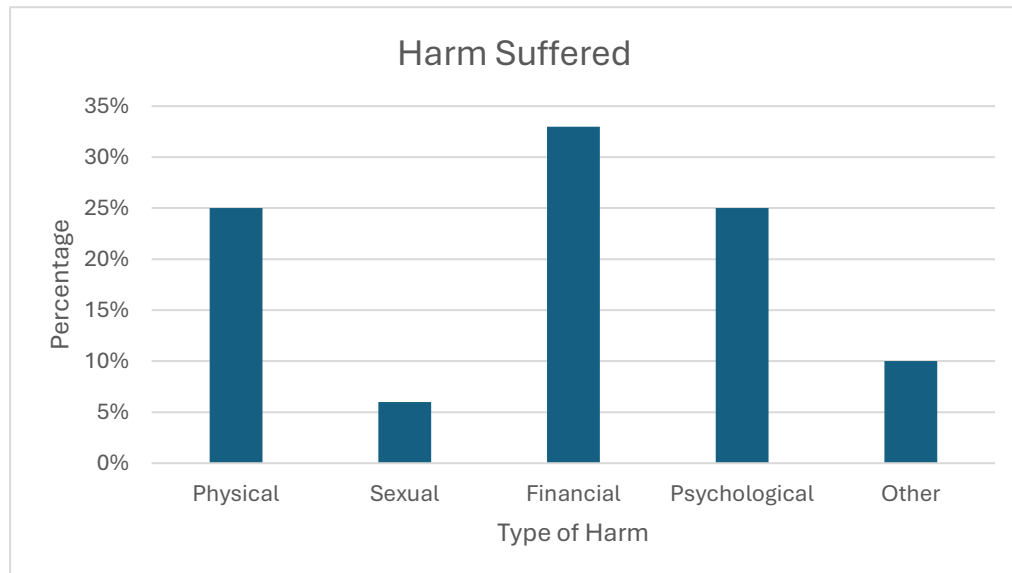
The 'other' category included where there was no obvious motivator for the exploitation, and where medication was stolen so it would appear the motivator included access to prescription drugs.

There is variation in the detail provided about perpetrators.

3.3. Impact on Victim

The SARs explored the impact of the cuckooing and exploitation on the subject adults, with many suffering multiple forms of harm. Where the 'other' category was selected the report authors had highlighted cuckooing as a form of domestic abuse, with another SAR undertaken following a suspected suicide where the coroner had ultimately recorded an open verdict, and a third highlighting concern about forced involvement in criminal activity. Reviewers had highlighted the presence of self-neglect for some adults.

For all victims the consequences were significant and both direct and indirect. There are several deaths relating to substance misuse, and the presence of significant self-harm indicating severe psychological distress. Several of those who suffered physical harm sustained serious injuries.



3.4. Areas of Learning

The Task & Finish Group collated a set of practice themes based on direct knowledge of the SARs, the purpose of this was to identify the most common type of recommendation across the subject cohort, and to provide insight into areas of focus for service and system development.

Recommendation	Frequency
Multiagency Information Sharing	18
Practitioner knowledge and awareness of signs and indicators	18
Local systems and processes for responding to cuckooing as a safeguarding concern	17
Professional Curiosity	14
Risk Assessment	14
Application of the Mental Capacity Act	12
Language and impact on assessment	6
Diagnostic Overshadowing	5

As would be expected SAR authors also made recommendations based on the specific circumstances of the subject adult(s). These are summarised below:

- Actions taken to disrupt perpetrators
- The response of the criminal justice system
- Responding to disengagement with services
- The application of Making Safeguarding Personal in Housing services
- Record keeping and understanding of context
- Recognising and responding to multiple disadvantages
- Understanding barriers to communication/help-seeking
- Training in safeguarding vulnerable drinkers

The quality and effectiveness of **multiagency information sharing** was the most commonly occurring recommendation, this reflects the complexity of need for the subject adults. In all the SARs the adult had contact with a range of services, with substance misuse, housing and antisocial behaviour type services routinely involved. There is variation in the involvement of adult social care, with examples of care and support needs only being identified after the adult had suffered serious harm or neglect.

The capacity of practitioners to recognise the **signs and indicators of exploitation and cuckooing** featured heavily, with awareness that this is a growing need across agencies. There are also examples of structured and high-quality training programs highlighted. The absence of 'frontline' knowledge is compounded by recognition of the need for **multiagency systems and processes** that provide a framework for a safeguarding response, like that which is more embedded for children who are victims of exploitation.

Statutory reviews of safeguarding practice increasingly reference the importance of **professional curiosity**, this is the capacity of practitioners to look beyond the immediate presentation, seeking to understand the adult's reality, and the need to ask questions and explore circumstances thoroughly. This is reflected in the cuckooing SARS, with particular application to how to respond when an adult appears to disengage with services, some of the adults began to miss appointments which was unusual for them, and some adults had a 'pattern' of missing appointments. This 'pattern' had become accepted by the professional network, with the acceptance contributing to missed opportunities to safeguard. The SARs also capture the need for curiosity in terms of others associated with the adult, for example those purporting to be 'friends' or 'carers'.

A smaller proportion of the SARs (6/22) specifically reference the importance of **language choices**, and consideration of how these influence relationships with adults, relationships and understanding

between agencies, and risk assessment. Unfortunate choice of wording can reinforce victim blaming narratives, creating additional barriers for adults to access support. All exploitative and abusive relationships feature an inherent power imbalance, the SARs highlight the need for greater care and attention to language choices in adult safeguarding practice to mitigate the risk of reinforcing victim blaming cultures. Also highlighted is the potential for the creation of a false narrative that undermines the ability of practitioners to identify risks, for example the use of the term 'carer' carries with it positive connotations that can influence future interactions.

Diagnostic overshadowing occurs where behaviours, or symptoms, are misattributed to a known existing complaint, for example a new physical complaint interpreted as being in consequence of a known mental health issue. Where highlighted within the SARs the presence of diagnostic overshadowing acted as a barrier to understanding the lived experience of the subject adult, for example missed appointments understood as being a consequence of the adult's known cognitive impairment.

Legal literacy and specifically **application of the Mental Capacity Act** is a core feature, with SARs identifying the practice challenge of understanding capacity in a context of executive impairment. This task is further complicated due to adults being subject to coercive control in their 'relationship' with the perpetrator. There appear to be parallels with reviews undertaken in respect of domestic abuse related deaths. *'...TSAB should remind professionals via appropriate means, about the complexity of executive capacity and using expert/legal advice where a person is being coercively controlled and/or using large amounts of substances and there is grave concern regarding the decisions they are making that would question executive functioning.'* (Molly)

4. Next Steps

This brief analysis is based upon a small number of Safeguarding Adults Reviews known to the SAB Manager's Network. It is acknowledged that this is a developing area of practice, with some local SABs significantly further along the journey to having comprehensive and effective local arrangements in place than others. Given the variation in maturity of local SAB responses it can only assist to have a centralised repository of good practice examples, as this would go some way to learning from the experience of others proactively, rather than from a retrospective Safeguarding Adults Review undertaken in response to the serious harm of an individual.

The development of agreed terminology and language would assist frontline practitioners to recognise signs and indicators of a complex form of abuse that, as seen in the analysis, can present in different ways depending on the purpose of the exploitation for the perpetrator.

As can be seen within the SARs, the behaviours of cuckooing and exploitation offenders are often similar to those of domestic abuse offenders, particularly in the use of violence and coercive behaviour to control victims. It would assist to understand more about perpetrator's perspectives, this would support more comprehensive intervention that includes disruption activity. Practitioners would find benefit in having the tools available to tackle perpetrators from a zero-tolerance perspective, offering open ended disruption tactics to ensure that intervention is not solely victim focused. One consideration could be to use a similar forum to a perpetrator panel, these have been effective in dealing with domestic abuse offenders who have not engaged in any behaviour change programmes.

Whilst acknowledging the limitations outlined above, it would be beneficial for all SABs to consider:

- 1) What measures are available to raise awareness of cuckooing and exploitation with adults and the wider community with a view to preventing serious harm?
- 2) How do local services equip frontline practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to identify cuckooing and exploitation?
- 3) Is there a sufficient multiagency framework in place to respond to this complex form of abuse?
- 4) Is the SAB working collaboratively with related strategic boards to ensure a cohesive response?

The SAB managers network intend to share this report with the Home Office to consider within their ongoing work to develop national guidance and legislation.

Suzi Gladish, Hillingdon Safeguarding Partnership

On behalf of: The SAB Managers Network