Cuckooing & Student Accommodation



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The **National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC)** recognises that academic institutions, and student accommodation providers are committed to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of students in their care.

Students living away from home may be vulnerable to exploitation from individuals, seeking to identify properties from which they can base their criminal activities.

Often this exploitation may take the form of using properties as ‘stash houses’ for drugs, cash or weapons, or a base to ‘work’ from.

Similar to any other residential property, student accommodation may also be exploited as a place to stay, and may result in a range of other forms of exploitation such as financial abuse, or forced/coerced labour.

This guide aims to explain what cuckooing is, what warning signs to look out for, and the responsibilities held by landlords.

This guide draws together information from subject matter experts from the **National County Lines Coordination Centre** and **The University of Leeds.**

The content within includes material taken from publications by our collaborators. Links to these resources are included at the back of the guide.

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What is Cuckooing?

Cuckooing is a form of criminal exploitation where someone is manipulated, coerced, intimidated or controlled into allowing criminals to use their accommodation for criminal activity.

While often associated with County Lines drug supply, cuckooing can occur independently, and may involve a victim's home being used:

- To deal drugs
- For storage of drugs, weapons, cash, stolen goods
- As a place to stay
- For sexual exploitation
- To facilitate financial abuse

Cuckooing may also present as individuals exploiting the property of another as somewhere to stay, and may involve the exploiter taking food from the occupant and financially exploiting them.

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Why student accommodation?

Students may be vulnerable due to:

Living independently for the first time

Isolation from family and friends

Financial pressures

Mental health or wellbeing vulnerabilities

Social media and peer recruitment

Exploitation may present as social activity

A student whose property is being used by criminals should be viewed as a potential victim in the first instance, not as an active and willing participant in offending.



How does cuckooing take place?

While approaches may vary, perpetrator stages typically follow the pattern below:

Identifying vulnerability (loneliness, financial hardship, substance misuse, isolation, learning difficulties, neurodiversity, mental health conditions, lack of support network etc)

⬇

Building trust (friendship, romantic relationships, social inclusion, offers of gifts/money/drugs/alcohol)

⬇

Creating dependency (debt, gifts, favours, emotional manipulation, encouraging substance misuse)

⬇

Gaining access to property (requests to stay overnight, requests to store items, requests for friends of exploiter to enter, requests for tenant to receive parcels/packages of drugs/cash etc)

⬇

Control (intimidation, threats, violence, debt bondage, suggestion that victim is a willing participant in criminal activity taking place as a means of preventing disclosures)

Vulnerability is not the cause of exploitation
Responsibility for exploitation lies with the exploiter alone
However exploiters will seek to identify vulnerability in potential victims

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Indicators of potential cuckooing

Professional curiosity is to be encouraged, and it is good practice to pay attention when something ‘doesn’t feel right’.

Some common external indicators can include:

Few visitors to an address or, conversely, increased visitors

Visitors attending briefly, throughout the day

Taxis, private vehicles, bikes or mopeds attending frequently

Student rarely seen in/around property

Others remaining in property while student is absent

Closed curtains/blinds

Reports of unauthorised occupants

Anti-social behaviour complaints

Property deterioration

Communal access doors propped open

Excessive litter or takeaway food containers outside the property

Local reports of drug activity



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Indicators of potential cuckooing

Some common internal indicators can include:

New locks fitted to internal doors/restricted access to particular rooms

Evidence of multiple occupants

Drug paraphernalia

Large quantities of cash

Multiple mobile phones

CCTV equipment

Weapons

Signs of violence or intimidation

Bedding or possessions belonging to unknown persons

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Behavioural indicators

Victims of exploitation may:

Suddenly disengage from studies

Stop attending lectures

Withdraw from friends

Become anxious, fearful, or secretive

Appear to be controlled by others

Avoid discussions about their accommodation

Give rehearsed or inconsistent explanations

Receive excessive calls, or messages

Carry multiple mobile phones

Frequently ‘lose’ keys, or access fobs



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Other potential warning signs

Unexplained debt

Sudden access to money

Unexplained injuries

Changes in appearance

Weight loss

Substance misuse concerns

Reluctance to return home

‘Sofa surfing’, or sleeping elsewhere despite holding a tenancy

Unknown adults or peers exerting influence or control

Victims often do not identify themselves as such, and may actively defend those exploiting them.

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Case Study (Provided by a university in England)

Campus security became involved following reports of a fight within a student flat. CCTV enquiries identified a student resident in possession of a knife, and previous reports had already highlighted repeated noise and anti-social behaviour linked to the property.

In response to the emerging pattern of incidents, security staff increased monitoring of the accommodation block. Following further complaints, access was gained to the flat under tenancy agreement powers. The student tenant was absent, but seven other individuals were present, a mix of males and females. Several of the males were aggressive, refused to leave, and displayed behaviour that was unusual for student residents. They eventually left after being warned that police would be contacted.

Subsequent enquiries established that the males were not students. The student tenant had returned to their family home, and did not intend to return to the accommodation, but would not explain why.

A few days later, a male attempting to access the recently secured flat was found in possession of controlled drugs and a knife. Information from incident reports, CCTV and police intelligence suggested that several incidents were connected.

Further enquiries identified the same group operating from a second student flat. Two students disclosed that non-student males had been staying there for several weeks, and had previously occupied another student's accommodation after the student incurred a drug debt. The occupants reported being warned not to reveal the males' presence, and described drugs and cash being stored at the property.

The investigation indicated that organised criminals had gained access to university accommodation through a vulnerable student with a drug debt. One student appeared to be acting as a facilitator, introducing non-students to accommodation, promoting drug use, encouraging students to provide accommodation, and persuading students to move money through their bank accounts.

Case Study – Key learning

The case demonstrated that an individual entering student accommodation is not, by itself, an indication of criminality. However repeated patterns involving the same individuals, vehicles, and accommodation, can provide a much stronger intelligence picture.

Individual incidents may conceal a wider pattern – The initial incident was treated as a serious, but isolated dispute. Only when subsequent incidents were connected did the wider picture emerge.

Accommodation teams are an important source of intelligence – Complaints about noise, visitors, and behaviour, may appear relatively minor, but can become significant when linked to other sources of information and intelligence.

Security personnel are often the first point of contact – Campus security staff are uniquely positioned to identify unusual behaviour patterns due to their familiarity with typical patterns of behaviour around campus.

Students may be both victims and facilitators – Some students may knowingly facilitate activity. This facilitation may be as a result of coercion, intimidation, and exploitation.

Academic performance is not necessarily an indicator – The student facilitating activity was attending lectures, submitting work and behaving 'normally'.

Student disclosures can be critical – Information provided by students provided insight that could not have been gained by other means. Creating a safe environment for reporting concerns is crucial.

Collaboration is essential – Sharing information between security, accommodation management, academic staff, and police, was key to understanding the activity taking place.

Roles, responsibilities & recommendations

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Universities

Promote awareness of criminal exploitation
Maintain safeguarding pathways
Support early intervention
Share information appropriately with partners
Consider exploitation within student wellbeing and welfare assessments

Student Accommodation Providers

Train staff to recognise indicators of exploitation
Record and report concerns
Conduct regular welfare visits and inspections
Escalate safeguarding concerns appropriately
Work with police and local safeguarding partners

Private Student Landlords

Know who is occupying the property
Conduct lawful inspections
Act on reports of suspicious activity
Keep accurate tenancy records
Work in partnership with universities and local agencies where concerns arise

IMPORTANT – Concerns about cuckooing should not automatically result in punitive action against the student without consideration of possible exploitation and safeguarding needs

What do I do if I suspect cuckooing is taking place?

Record
What has been observed?
Record dates and times
Any reports received
Any identified risks or concerns

Safeguard
Is the student safe?
Are they being controlled or exploited?
Do they need welfare support?
Is there an immediate risk of harm?
How can you create the right conditions for the student to speak freely?

Report
In an emergency call 999 (immediate risk of harm, or crime actively taking place)
Non-emergency - contact Police on 101, or through online reporting portal
University safeguarding team
Student welfare services
Local authority safeguarding teams
Anonymous reporting – Crimestoppers 0800 555 111

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Further support & resources

University Resources
Safeguarding Teams
Student Support Services
Accommodation Offices
Campus Security

National
Police (101/999/Online local force portal)
Crimestoppers
Catch 22
Safecall
National County Lines Coordination Centre
The Children's Society
University of Leeds Cuckooing Prevention Network

Additional Resources
University of Leeds Preventing and Disrupting Cuckooing Victimisation: Professional Toolkit
National County Lines Coordination Centre - What is Cuckooing?
The Children's Society - #LookCloser To Spot Exploitation
Crisis - Cuckooing Toolkit

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CUCKOOING
RESEARCH & PREVENTION NETWORK

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