



Protecting the Vulnerable: Addressing “Cuckooing” in London



May 2023 · Unmesh Desai AM

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Executive Summary

Cuckooing is the practice where an individual’s home is taken over by another person or persons and used for criminal purposes. It has a devastating impact on the life of the person who is being exploited. Having their home taken over creates problems for neighbouring households and the local community as the residence can become a hub for anti-social behaviour and crime.

New data obtained through Freedom of Information requests shows recorded cuckooing cases have quadrupled in recent years. There has also been a rise in property closures and vulnerable adults needing to be relocated. This increase comes despite patchwork, uneven recording of cuckooing cases across local authorities in London and by the Metropolitan Police Service [MPS], suggesting the true figure is likely to be even higher.

This report finds that there remains inconsistency in the response to cuckooing at council and police level. This is in part due to the lack of clear guidance around what constitutes cuckooing and a lack of partnership working in responding to the problem.

To address this, the report highlights areas of existing best practice. However, this is the exception rather than the norm. Cuckooing needs a sharper focus - it is currently an under-reported crime and we need to raise public awareness of the issue. In addition, we need an improvement in recording practices so that all authorities working to tackle this crime have a shared understanding and picture of the scale of the problem. Lastly, we need greater guidance and training for councils, the police and government departments on how to respond to cuckooing, so that perpetrators are brought to justice and all victims of cuckooing receive a high standard of support, regardless of where they live.

Recommendation 1

The Mayor should work with the Metropolitan Police Service [MPS] to develop a standardised partnership working response on addressing cuckooing cases across London. This should include each Basic Command Unit having dedicated police officers trained on how to deal with the issue.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should write to all local authorities in London to ask that they begin to accurately record cuckooing cases and outcomes for victims within their borough as soon as possible. Frontline staff need to be trained, so that they respond appropriately should cuckooing concerns be raised with them.

Recommendation 3

The Mayor and MPS should promote awareness raising campaigns so that London residents know how to spot the signs and report cuckooing to local authorities and the police.

Recommendation 4

The MPS should ensure its officers are recording cuckooing and systematically using the newly developed flag on the police systems, ensuring all cases are both recorded by the MPS and are referred to local authority safeguarding teams.

Recommendation 5

The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime [MOPAC] should conduct or commission data analysis of cuckooing cases in London, looking at the profiles of victims and perpetrators, in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that lead to both parties becoming involved in cuckooing.

Recommendation 6

The Mayor should work with London Councils to develop guidance for local authority rehabilitation services on how to deal with perpetrators targeting their service users.

Recommendation 7

MOPAC should work with the Victims' Commissioner and the MPS to get a better understanding of the experience of victims and the kind of support they require.

Recommendation 8

The Mayor should call on the Government to develop guidance for local authorities on how to deal with cuckooing cases most effectively and how to prevent the re-victimisation of vulnerable adults. This should specifically include guidance on how best to deal with the perpetrators of cuckooing offences.

Recommendation 9

The Mayor should work with London Councils to help convene a London wide cuckooing summit between local authority safeguarding leads, to help disseminate best practice on how to deal with the issue. We would recommend the Mayor works with the London Borough of Southwark to explore options for expanding the multi-agency cuckooing forum model to different areas of London.

Recommendation 10

The Mayor should call on the Ministry of Justice to review whether existing laws and legal frameworks are effective in dealing with the problem of cuckooing and its perpetrators effectively and for the Government to produce guidance for the Crown Prosecution Service on how to process local authority action to address the perpetrators of cuckooing.



Unmesh Desai AM with the Commissioner of the MPS, Sir Mark Rowley, for whom the issues raised in this report are one of many challenges.

Protecting the Vulnerable: Addressing “Cuckooing” in London

Cuckooing is the practice where an individual's home is taken over by another person, or by a group, for criminal purposes such as dealing or storing drugs, or for illegal sex work. It has gained increased media attention as a form of anti-social behaviour in recent years and has gained recognition amongst practitioners across public services. The issue is often associated with “County Lines” drugs gangs operating outside of large urban centres, but as this report shows, this is a problem increasingly occurring within London and affecting the most vulnerable Londoners.

The experience of being “cuckooed” has a hugely negative impact on the vulnerable people victimised, who often experience violence, psychological distress, substance addiction, and being indebted to criminal networks as a result. Female victims have been known to disproportionately experience the additional torment of sexual coercion and assault.

The lives of victims subject to cuckooing are ruined as a result of the practice. They are often some of the most vulnerable in society, and are targeted by perpetrators due to factors including disabilities, mental ill health, problems with substance misuse and social isolation.

Whilst recognition of the problem has grown in recent years, the collection of data in relation to cuckooing remains patchwork. There is a clear absence of guidance from the government on what the best practice towards dealing with the problem should look like, or even a clear definition of what constitutes a cuckooing incident.

We are sympathetic to the recent calls from the Centre for Social Justice to make cuckooing a criminal offence and we would support calls

that will increase the clarity and resourcing for efforts to tackle cuckooing.¹ However, this report is mainly focussed with how better to improve the institutional response to cuckooing within the current legislative framework and is focussed on how to do this in London.

The response to dealing with cuckooing cases is led by local authority services and the police. Where good practice has been identified through our research, this has come from local authorities “doing their own thing” to improve the service they are providing to safeguard and support victims. Whilst the MPS has begun to recognise the problem as an issue in its own right in recent years, it is clear that a more focused approach could and should be adopted.

We have heard through our research interviews that having a strong Safer Neighbourhood Team or relationship with Council Police Partnership officers is crucial. Without standardising how the MPS and local authorities approach working together, there is a strong likelihood that gaps will remain in some boroughs across London.

This report seeks to identify how cuckooing is recorded and reported in London and what approaches are currently being taken to address this crime. Having identified these gaps, it makes a set of recommendations which could improve the current situation for some of the capital's most vulnerable people.

Recommendation 1

The Mayor should work with the Metropolitan Police Service [MPS] to develop a standardised partnership working response on addressing cuckooing cases across London. This should include each Basic Command Unit having dedicated police officers trained on how to deal with the issue.

Cuckooing case example #1

A male in his sixties with learning difficulties and a history of alcoholism had his housing association flat taken over by local group of street drinkers and drug users he knew from associating with on the local green.

The man had a long history of alcoholism and was isolated from his family who he had not spoken to in over a year.

Once the group had entered his property, he was forced to sleep in the living room as another man had occupied his bedroom. He had his clothes stolen and bank cards taken from him by other members of the group.

The property was used mainly for the consumption of class A drugs, although the man also said he suspected there was drug dealing from the property. A fight over drugs at the property was also reported to the police in which a man had a bottle smashed over his head in the victim's kitchen. The property also began being used by local prostitutes.

After an incident at the flat in which the police were called, the MPS referred the case into the local authority's cuckooing partnership board, and there is now a plan in place to keep the perpetrators away from the adult's property, with local MPS officers in the Safer Neighbourhood Team conducting regular unannounced welfare visits to the property.

Assessing the Scale of Cuckooing in London

There is very limited data available on the number of cuckooing cases occurring nationally, as there is no obligation for local authorities or the police to record antisocial behaviour [ASB] as cuckooing. Indeed, it is unclear for authorities what exactly constitutes cuckooing, given there is no single nationally agreed definition set out by legislation or central government.

In order to attempt get a better grasp on the scale of the problem across London, we contacted all of London's 32 borough councils and the City of London to request details of how many cases of cuckooing they had recorded in recent years. We also asked how many vulnerable adults they had relocated, as a result of cuckooing.

The data we received back from local authorities

has shown that whilst there has been a notable rise in the number of cases in recent years, it is clear that many London boroughs do not as yet accurately record the problem on their systems. Given that there remains a lack of definition from the government as to what types of activity constitute cuckooing or guidance for local authorities on how to deal with and record the problem, this is understandable.

Of the 33 local authorities that we sent Freedom of Information [FoI] requests to, fewer than half (39%) were able to provide us with data from all of the four years requested. This shows that routine collection of cuckooing data is far from uniform across councils.

Additionally, around a quarter (27%) were unable to provide any data at all when asked how many cuckooing cases they had dealt with in the past four years. This was either because they did not

reply to our FoI requests (6%) or because they replied to say they do not collect cuckooing data (21%). The reasons stated included that the council did not have housing stock or that this data was too time consuming to collect.

The remaining councils (33%) responded to us with data covering part of the time we asked for, although 90% of these remaining councils did have some data for the most recent year we asked for, suggesting that they are starting to record cuckooing in a more systematic way as of this year.

This patchwork collection of data and hugely variable numbers of cases indicates that whilst there is a recognition of the problem, there is no standardised way of recording cuckooing across Local Authorities. Some simply stated that they did not hold the information we requested.

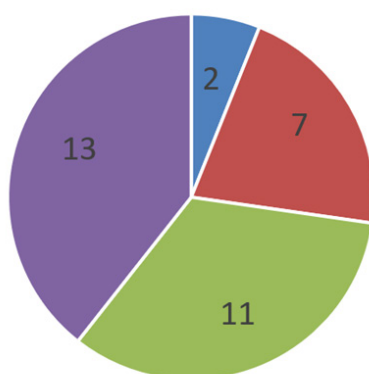
A response that typifies those from boroughs that responded with no information is as below:

"Our Crime Enforcement and Regulation teams system does not record Cuckooing as category, so to answer this request they would have to read through all cases on their system to determine if cuckooing was part of the issue.

Therefore, we apply Section 12(1) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, 'Exemption where cost of compliance exceeds appropriate limit', to your request. Section 12 states: (1) Section 1(1) does not oblige a public authority to comply with a request for information if the authority estimates that the cost of complying with the request would exceed the appropriate limit"²

This is an issue, as without being able to accurately grasp the scale of the problem within London, it is hard to understand what level of response the problem requires from local and central government. Local authority frontline staff are therefore not routinely trained to understand and recognise cuckooing.

Recording of Cuckooing Cases by Councils in London 2018-2022



- Local Authorities who did not reply to our FOI
- Local Authorities who replied to our FOI to say they do not record Cuckooing cases
- Local Authorities who provided incomplete data for the four year period
- Local Authorities who provided complete data for the four year period

In addition to the issues with local authority recording, cuckooing remains a hidden issue which members of the public may not be able to spot. This means cases could go unreported to the local authority and MPS. As well as improving data recording systems, there is a need to raise public awareness of cuckooing so victims can be provided with the support they need and perpetrators have the necessary enforcement action taken against them.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should write to all local authorities in London to ask that they begin to accurately record cuckooing cases and outcomes for victims within their borough as soon as possible. Frontline staff need to be trained, so that they respond appropriately should cuckooing concerns be raised with them.

Recommendation 3

The Mayor and MPS should promote awareness raising campaigns so that London residents know how to spot the signs and report cuckooing to local authorities and the police.

In spite of this, the responses we received from the 24 local authorities who did either fully or partially record information relating to cuckooing cases in their borough clearly showed that the number of cases being dealt with has risen steeply in recent years. The number of vulnerable people being

relocated by local authorities, as a result of being victimised, has also increased.

Between 2018 and 2022, the overall number of cuckooing cases recorded by London boroughs rose from 79 to 316, a 300% increase. The number of vulnerable adults recorded as being relocated rose from 32 to 71 and the number of "closure orders" local authorities reported they had applied for in relation to cuckooing cases rose from 13 to 55.³

The MPS, when describing how they record cuckooing, informed us that "the reporting of cuckooing has been streamlined by the addition of a flag to Pre-Assessment Checks (PACs) which are created when the police deal with vulnerable people, and a cuckooing flag can also be added on the Crime Report Information System (CRIS)."

The MPS said that it recorded 160 cases of cuckooing in 2022, just over half the number recorded by local councils. This significant disparity in the data provided to us by the MPS as compared to that provided by local authorities again demonstrates the lack of a standardised approach to recording and addressing cuckooing cases.

As the local authorities we spoke with and previous research has confirmed, the police will attend nearly all cases of cuckooing that council officers deal with. Whilst it is positive that the MPS has taken the step of formally introducing a system for flagging cuckooing cases, it is a concern that at present it does not seem to be being used as standard across the cases officers attend.^{4 5}

One of the local authorities we spoke with highlighted that there appeared to be gaps in what the police are recording. Sometimes cases

Closure Powers allow the local authority or police to quickly close premises which are being used, or likely to be used, to commit nuisance or disorder. This power can be used for up to 48 hours out of court and is single power that is intended to cover a wide range of behaviours in a quick and flexible way. This replaces specific closure powers in relation to noise, drugs, persistent disorder or licensed premises. A breach of a closure notice or closure order is a criminal offence.

are being put down as drug dealing rather than cuckooing; which local authorities said affects the partnership response to the problem. Where the police do not record and flag that there is a victim of cuckooing in a property to a local authority, the right services will not become involved to safeguard the victim and their suffering will persist for longer. The MPS should consider carrying out an audit of a random sample of drug dealing cases to understand how often cuckooing is not being flagged and put measures in place to boost recording.

There is also a concern that the MPS are not communicating the way that they are now flagging cases with local authorities. Whilst one of the local authorities we spoke to have a very strong relationship with their local police with regards to partnership working to tackle cuckooing, they were unaware of the flag on the MPS system when we spoke to them.

"I wasn't aware there was a cuckooing code... actually we will bring this back to our Cuckooing Panel and say "we need the cuckooing flag in the police to be used, use it and then use the panel to bring those cases to it" Like I said, there will be cases we know nothing about at this current time"

(Local authority anti-social behaviour manager leading on cuckooing)

Recommendation 4

The MPS should ensure its officers are recording cuckooing and systematically using the newly developed flag on the police systems, ensuring all cases are both recorded by the MPS and are referred to local authority safeguarding teams.

Victims and Perpetrators of Cuckooing

Cuckooing victims are predominantly older, male

and almost always have some form of underlying vulnerability.⁶ Victims will almost always live alone and often will have either, or a combination of, substance misuse needs, learning disabilities and mental health needs. Loneliness, low self-esteem and social isolation were also identified as key factors affecting an individual's likelihood of being targeted.

Victims are "befriended" by perpetrators, in order to gain access to their home. The ways in which victims are groomed involved perpetrators buying them shopping, providing them with alcohol or illegal drugs, money, or in the case of some female perpetrators, pretending to be the vulnerable person's girlfriend. Once access to a vulnerable person's home has been gained, the perpetrators will use this as a base from which to store, consume and sell drugs, and will often invite other associates into the property to do the same. Perpetrators will seek to control the victims through either the fear or use of physical violence and abuse, or by continuing to feed addiction and substance misuse issues, supplying them with drugs and alcohol.

One of the local authorities we spoke to shockingly described the issue of perpetrators waiting outside the council's addiction service waiting to try and re-groom a victim who had previously been moved from one property to another due to cuckooing.

A recurring issue highlighted was the lack of recognition that cuckooing victims have that they are being exploited, due to the grooming tactics used by perpetrators and the vulnerability of the person involved. This can make enforcement action particularly difficult due the victim not wanting to work with the police to prosecute. Local authorities were clear with us that it is not always due to the victim's refusal to accept they are being exploited, but in many cases is due to the fear of repercussions and violence from the perpetrators if they were to press charges.

Recommendation 5

The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime [MOPAC] should conduct or commission data analysis of cuckooing cases in London, looking at the profiles of victims and perpetrators, in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that lead to both parties becoming involved in cuckooing.

Recommendation 6

The Mayor should work with London Councils to develop guidance for local authority rehabilitation services on how to deal with perpetrators targeting their service users.

Victims of cuckooing would benefit from some specific support given their profile, the specific vulnerabilities that they suffer from and the all-encompassing nature of the crime. Centring the experiences of those who have suffered from cuckooing would be essential in this task as it would give policy makers a better insight into not only the specific vulnerabilities that lead someone to be cuckooed but also provide them with the targeted victims support services they require.

Cuckooing is often talked about in sensationalist terms in the media and in conjunction with county lines gangs, however, the local authorities we spoke with did not recognise county lines as playing a significant role in the cuckooing cases they had come across in their areas of London.

Cuckooing, as described by the National Crime Agency,

"was initially used by county lines groups

originating from London. County line dealing 'franchises' then spread throughout the country, taking the cuckooing model with them...the success of this model has now been adopted by other drug supply networks"⁷

Research suggests that due to the success of the county lines model, cuckooing is now being used by local drugs networks in cities such as London. This corroborates with other reports from the local authorities we spoke with, that referred only to localised drug networks being involved in the cases they had come across.

We were told that in some areas within a borough, cuckooing may clearly be being adopted as a model by particular gangs, but that the individual perpetrators involved would only ever be low level players in any organised criminal network. It also became clear that not all perpetrators of cuckooing are strongly linked to gangs, with some cases involving low-level drug dealing, in order to service the perpetrator's own addictions.

The perpetrators who are not directly involved in gangs were described as a network of drug users impacted by issues of poverty and homelessness, moving from one property to another to use as a base for storing and taking drugs and for low level dealing. The only link to organised gangs with this cohort of offenders is an understanding that there is almost definitely a link to an overarching drug supply network within the area.

Recommendation 7

MOPAC should work with the Victims' Commissioner and the MPS to get a better understanding of the experience of victims and the kind of support they require.

Cuckooing case example #2

A man with learning difficulties and previous addiction issues was targeted outside a local authority rehabilitation centre by a female known for cuckooing vulnerable people.

The vulnerable male in question had been free from Class A drugs for five years at the time he was approached by the female. The perpetrator befriended the man and convinced him that they were in a relationship and moved into his property. Shortly after the perpetrator had moved in, the council received reports of the man screaming and crying in the property and that masked men had smashed the back door of the flat in looking for the woman.

Local authority officers attended the property with the police and noted that it was clear what was happening in the property, and that the man was again addicted to class A drugs. The victim's underlying vulnerabilities resulted in him being groomed and exploited by the perpetrator, with him telling council officers that he would not cooperate with them, as he had been told not to speak to them. The man's bank card had been taken and his furniture had been sold.

The victim continued to refuse to cooperate and the local authority was going to begin to pursue legal proceedings to close the property due to the serious breaches of tenancy occurring at the address. However, before this was done the man presented at the council's primary service hub to report he had been seriously assaulted and was seeking help.

The local authority then moved swiftly to place the victim in safe accommodation, whilst applying for an emergency injunction to prevent the female perpetrator and her associates from going to the tenant's property or having any contact with him.

Social services began to work with the victim to assess his needs and to seek alternative accommodation, and he was eventually moved into supported accommodation and has been clean from drug use since.

The female breached her injunction by waiting for the victim again outside of the council's rehabilitation service after one of his appointments there, after which the local authority was able to have her arrested and sentenced to prison for 4 weeks.

Whilst there is existing knowledge of the factors which lead to individuals both being cuckooed and becoming perpetrators of these crimes, local authorities have suggested that there would be benefit in further research into the profile of both in order to identify what causes cuckooing and what interventions would have the most impact in preventing it from happening. It was clear from those local authorities we spoke with that there also needs to be a much clearer strategy and guidance for local authorities and the police on how to deal with the perpetrators of cuckooing more effectively. Victims often do not want to press charges out of fear, or a lack of awareness that they are being exploited. This means the same perpetrators are repeatedly cuckooing vulnerable people within a borough. Better understanding of this problem and taking tougher action on repeat perpetrators, through both enforcement action and tackling their own addictions and issues, may be productive.

Response of Local Authorities and the Police to Tackling Cuckooing

Local authorities will broadly approach the issues involved under the remit of safeguarding adults, as defined by the Care Act 2014, which places a duty on local authorities to protect adults with care and support needs, who are experiencing, or are at risk of, abuse or neglect. It is clear, however, that there remains a lack of a standardised response from local authorities or the police on how to address cuckooing at present, owing to the absence of any official government guidance or a strategy for addressing the problem.

Effective partnership working, between the various local authority services and the police who deal with each case, was emphasised as essential in properly dealing with cuckooing and appropriately dealing with both the victims and perpetrators. Numerous services, including anti-social behaviour teams, the police, substance

misuse services, supported-living providers, housing departments, anti-social behaviour units, mental health services and adult social care will have an involvement in cuckooing cases due to the multiple needs of victims and the nature of the crime involved.

Without a joint understanding between partners of what is going on in a cuckooing case, the outcomes for victims are likely to be ineffective and may lead to missed opportunities to stop the crime or lead to victims being targeted again at another address.

One local authority's anti-social behaviour team spoke of the type of difficulties of dealing with the problem when a partnership approach and appropriate training is not in place. They described a process of referring victims of cuckooing into alcohol and mental health services, only for the case to be sent back to them due to a victim being deemed as too difficult to engage with. This was a process described as happening "a couple of times" before "someone decided to do something about it". It was made clear that if there were a better understanding amongst services of the importance of persevering with cuckooing victims who may be difficult to engage with, then the issue would be dealt with much more swiftly and effectively.

Southwark Council has led the way in London in developing a partnership response towards tackling the problem, in an effort to avoid the issues that have been described. Their multi-agency cuckooing forum brings all the agencies that are likely to be involved in cuckooing cases together, so that there is a clear partnership-based plan of action involved in each case. The police are also linked into this approach to help ensure that enforcement is on hand and aware of properties where cuckooing is taking place. The council described this to us as an approach which saves officer time and money in dealing with cuckooing cases.

The approach taken in Southwark is one that we

recommend should be analysed with a view to piloting this type of approach across different boroughs in London to see if it can be effectively replicated elsewhere.

Recommendation 8

The Mayor should call on the Government to develop guidance for local authorities on how to deal with cuckooing cases most effectively and how to prevent the re-victimisation of vulnerable adults. This should specifically include guidance on how best to deal with the perpetrators of cuckooing offences.

Recommendation 9

The Mayor should work with London Councils to help convene a London wide cuckooing summit between local authority safeguarding leads, to help disseminate best practice on how to deal with the issue. We would recommend the Mayor works with the London Borough of Southwark to explore options for expanding the multi-agency cuckooing forum model to different areas of London.

Southwark Multi-Agency Cuckooing Forum

Southwark Council established their multi-agency cuckooing forum in 2019 to ensure that there is a multi-faceted approach to supporting those affected by cuckooing in the borough. The forum draws on the principles of Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences used in domestic abuse and child safeguarding cases, and its stated aims are as below:

- To provide and share intelligence and information on individuals subjected to cuckooing, to increase the safety, health and wellbeing of victims (adults).
- To provide and share knowledge on alleged perpetrators, to highlight any care and support needs that they may have. To document unmet need.
- To construct jointly and implement a plan, including risk management, that provides professional support to all those at risk and that reduces the risk of harm.
- To ensure support services are aware of a high risk or potentially high-risk situations, and that adequate and appropriate support is available to the victim.
- To gather data regarding cuckooing cases (victims and perpetrators) to inform further analysis of relevant contexts in the borough.
- To identify systemic issues that could be addressed to reduce the impact of cuckooing on vulnerable adults and residents.

Agencies who attend the forum, which meets once a month, include Adult Social Care, SLaM (mental health), Housing, Southwark's Anti-Social Behaviour Unit, the Metropolitan Police, local drug and alcohol services and Probation.

In response to questions around how they were working to address the issue of cuckooing, the MPS has said:

"The MPS has developed guidance for officers on how to deal with cuckooing. This includes guidance around the law, identifying vulnerable persons or venues, how Safer Neighbourhood Team Officers can assist by conducting regular visits, partnership working with other agencies, and obtaining a closure order when antisocial behaviour is associated with a premises.

The reporting of cuckooing has also been streamlined by the addition of a flag to Pre-Assessment Checks (PACs) which are created when police deal with vulnerable people, and a cuckooing flag can also be added on the Crime Report Information System (CRIS)."⁸

As we have identified already, use of the cuckooing flag on the MPS systems is something that is not yet commonplace across the MPS. Indeed, local authority officers that do work closely with police colleagues to tackle the problem still reported that they had not been made aware that this system was in place.

Whilst it is encouraging to hear the MPS has guidance in place in relation to cuckooing, our research has highlighted inconsistencies in the response from the police to the issue in different areas of London, and between different units within the police.

A strong link with the police was noted by local authorities as a particularly important aspect of the partnership response to cuckooing, and those we spoke to were hugely grateful of the police's assistance in dealing with the issue and praised their work and sensitivity in dealing with cases. The police partnership is again, however, something that is likely to vary significantly across different boroughs in London.

One local authority described to us the poor links they had with the local Safer Neighbourhood Teams in their area, and instead emphasised the

importance of the Police Partnership officers who were funded by and based within their council itself. They said that these council funded officers were the ones who helped assist council officers in dealing with cuckooing incidents and potentially dangerous offenders.

"Where we lack in this borough is the Safer Neighbourhood Teams that we have, we don't really know who the officers are, it's very hard to get hold of them... if they were more available and effective in the area it would help us to challenge some of these issues. We're just lucky we have a police partnership team that works solely for the council and they work closely with us.... If they took the Partnership Team away from us we would have some real issues with trying to deal with ASB and crime in the area".

In contrast to this, another council we spoke with described the crucial importance of the strong link with their Safer Neighbourhood Team towards dealing with the issue in their area. These officers were considered the "eyes and ears" in the borough who understood the issues involved with cuckooing better than general response units and were involved in the discussions they had as part of their partnership response to the problem.

The actions of officers in response teams who are called out to deal with incidents at an address, as opposed to officers based within local Safer Neighbourhood Teams, or those embedded within a council, was also deemed as an area of concern by the local authorities we spoke with.

Whilst response officers were highlighted as being very effective at addressing any immediate danger and taking enforcement action, it was mentioned that these officers may not be accurately recording the cases as cuckooing. There are equally concerns about referrals to the council once officers have attended. Whilst it is understandable that those officers are likely to be under pressure and will have competing priorities to deal with, if cases are routinely not

being flagged with local authorities by the police when they attend addresses where cuckooing is occurring, then this could result in the root causes of the issue remaining unaddressed.

Given the importance of local policing in tackling cuckooing, the Mayor's announcement of an additional 500 Police Community Support Officers [PCSOs] in his 2023/24 budget could further assist in building up this local knowledge. These officers can be deployed into local communities and are often seen as more accessible than other types of police officers. Through boosting PCSOs, as well as a commitment to maintaining dedicated ward officers and close partnership working with the boroughs, it is clear we can better tackle perpetrators of cuckooing.

Part of the issue with tackling the perpetrators of cuckooing is the limits on legal action that can be taken against perpetrators when a victim does not wish to press charges. Limitations on legal frameworks and police powers lead local authorities to have to seek civil injunctions against offenders.

Civil injunctions would typically prevent an offender from being in a certain area or address and would mean more punitive action could be taken by the police were the individual to be breaching their terms. Unfortunately, this type of action has its limitations for local authorities who described a frustrating process. Better guidance and understanding amongst the Crown Prosecution Service [CPS] on how local authorities seek to deal with the issue is required. If the current framework cannot be improved following updated guidance, it may be that a new legal framework is required, if offenders are to be properly dealt with in the courts.

As one local authority described to us, the limitations on this type of action are compounded by the current issues of backlogs within the court system, affecting the time limits

with which such cases need to be heard.

"we've got a lady who is a systematic exploiter and groomer. I had an injunction against her, I had 28 breaches of the injunction. Because of the pandemic, I couldn't get the prosecution into court quick enough, by the time I got to court, the injunction had expired... the court dismissed my claim because of the time.... Taking cases into court, you've invested lots of officer time, money, public money on that, and being dismissed from court because of a time delay or because there hasn't been an offence in the last four weeks... well, no, I'm bringing a catalogue of offences.

Bringing the courts into line or giving some guidance to the courts about cuckooing, about the safeguarding approach every local authority and police partnership will bring, particularly when we are doing closure applications or injunctions against exploiters and groomers, that is absolutely one of the key fundamentals"

The government should seek to assess whether the current laws and legal frameworks available to deal with cuckooing cases are adequate given the difficulties experienced by local authorities in dealing with serial perpetrators who will often move from one address to another targeting vulnerable people in a local area.

Recommendation 10

The Mayor should call on the Ministry of Justice to review whether existing laws and legal frameworks are effective in dealing with the problem of cuckooing and its perpetrators effectively and for the Government to produce guidance for the Crown Prosecution Service on how to process local authority action to address the perpetrators of cuckooing.

Endnotes

- 1 Centre for Social Justice, [Slavery at Home: a new bill to tackle slavery in Britain'](#), February 2023.
- 2 Local authority response to FOI request submitted by London Assembly Labour Group office, August 2021
- 3 Combined data from London Local authority responses to FOI requests submitted by the London Assembly Labour Group office in August 2021 + October 2022
- 4 Mayor of London, MQ 2021/1745, Monitoring Cuckooing Offences asked by Unmesh Desai AM, May 2021.
- 5 Mayor of London, MQ 2021/1088, Cuckooing asked by Unmesh Desai AM, March 2021.
- 6 Salil Meech Mazumdar, 2019.
- 7 National Crime Agency.
- 8 Mayor of London, MQ 2020/0736, Cuckooing asked by Keith Prince AM, February 2020.

