



## ANITA'S STORY

### Reconnecting a long-lost relative.

**Anita had not been in touch with her family for several years following an argument with her parents about some choices she had made when she was younger. Anita's brother contacted Missing People, and staff discussed with him how he thought she would feel about hearing from him. He felt that she wouldn't mind it because he hadn't been involved in the arguments in the past, although he accepted that she had chosen to be out of touch. The brother also had some sad family news that he felt Anita would want to know.**

Missing People agreed to take on the case because her brother wanted to resume positive contact with Anita. A member of staff discussed in depth the charity's remit and confidentiality policies, explaining that if Anita chose to remain out of contact, Missing People would not share her details with her family.

Missing People took on the case, and began enquiries by searching the Trace IQ database and social media sites. Immediately an address was found for Anita, and a letter sent asking her to contact the charity because her brother was searching for her.

A week after the letter was sent, Anita contacted the charity. Anita said that she had felt somewhat upset when she received the letter, and had taken a few days to decide what to do. She wanted to discuss her options. Anita was very concerned about her privacy, and wanted to understand how Missing People had traced her. The Missing People volunteer who answered Anita's call was able to explain that Missing People would respect her wishes and would not share her whereabouts with her brother. Anita understood this, and decided that passing a message via the charity would be the best option.

Missing People contacted Anita's brother to give him her message. He was happy that she had been in touch, and asked to pass a message back. Missing People was able to pass several messages between the two, before Anita decided to share her email address with her brother so they could contact each other directly.

## MISSING PEOPLE AND FAMILY TRACING

This case study explores the experiences of families who attempt to trace a relative who has lost contact, the types of reconnection that take place, and the impact of reconnection on families.

In 2011, Missing People opened lost contact family tracing searches for 245 adults; in 2012 the figure was 232 and in 2013 it was 421<sup>8</sup>. In the majority (70 per cent) of instances in 2011 when a family approached Missing People for help tracing a family member, they had not tried anything else first, and nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of families had not seen their missing relative for more than a year when they contacted the charity.

When families contact the charity, Missing People will check whether it would be appropriate to involve the police. Where there is no concern for the person's wellbeing, and there is no reason to suggest the police should be involved, the charity can undertake family tracing enquiries using a variety of methods. These are best used when the person has been out of contact for a number of months, because before then it is unlikely their details will have been updated on official records. Enquiries are likely to be most effective when the available information about the missing adult is accurate, and when the missing person is living a

lifestyle that is conducive to tracing them through official data sources.

*“As long as they're open to being found, so they're registering themselves, with their original name, on the electoral roll or on the telephone, they should be found very easily. But the problems that would occur is when individuals don't want to be found, they change their names, they opt out of the electoral roll, or they're not on the phone. [...] Generally people do live in a household and they do have a connection with some sort of data source. [...] In cases where they don't have a residential address, that would be very difficult.”*

(Missing People Tracing Partner, project interviewee)

Missing People uses a range of enquiry methods, including searching online networks and data sources (both public and private) and working in partnership with tracing agencies. In some instances, Missing People is not aware of the traced person's contact details, but passes a letter to them via a partner agency. On other occasions Missing People traces the missing person directly, and sends a letter to them inviting them to contact the charity.

### PRACTICE EXAMPLE: MISSING PEOPLE/TRACESMART PARTNERSHIP

Tracesmart, a Lexis Nexis company, is a leading UK consumer data company. The company is Missing People's official Data Partner, providing pro-bono data cleansing and analysis, as well as free access to the company's Trace IQ tool. This access provides a core of the charity's family tracing service.

More details about this partnership can be found at <http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/tracesmart>

Family tracing work is not rushed; enquiries are undertaken in the knowledge that some traced people will take time to respond, and that missing people must not be harassed. After sending a letter to a traced person, Missing People will wait for three months before starting a new enquiry, and will not send more than two letters to the same address. Despite the time delays built into the system, this study found that nearly one-third (31 per cent) of all cases had been resolved within six months of the charity beginning to search. Forty per cent of the lost contact people searched for in 2011 were found

alive within a year. A small proportion (1 per cent) of people who were traced were deceased, and sixty per cent of tracing cases remained unresolved more than a year after being opened.

In 2011, Newiss explored fatal disappearances amongst the missing person cases Missing People worked on in 2006 and 2007. The study found that, of 64 family tracing investigations that ended when it was discovered that the missing person had died, more than two thirds of the missing people had died before their family started working with Missing People to find them (Newiss, 2011: 20).

While there are conceptual difficulties with the notion of intent as it relates to missing incidents (Holmes, 2015, forthcoming), in circumstances where families have lost contact, consideration of whether the missing adult had deliberately withheld contact will be relevant both to the family and to the missing person. This study found that, in nearly half (47 per cent) of all 245 family tracing cases Missing People worked on in 2011, the missing person had drifted out of contact. In 11 per cent of cases there had been conflict with family or partner, and in 7 per cent of cases the missing person had cut off contact (the remainder were missing for other reasons or reasons were unknown).

*“I received a letter from the charity asking me to contact one of my sisters. Having spoken to (my sisters) and been told how much they wanted to get back together with me and my wife, we decided it was time to re-establish relationships” (Samuel, missing 30 years, from age 26 – conflict over choice of partner).*

(Biehal et al 2003: 42)

## FAMILY TRACING AND RECONNECTION

In this study’s sample of 245 family tracing cases opened in 2011, 97 people (40 per cent) were found alive within a year<sup>9</sup>. Of these, 63 people (65 per cent) had been reconnected with their family by the charity, and 34 people (35 per cent) were independent reconnections, where the missing adult had been found by the family or police, or had made contact of their own volition. A subsample of 60 reconnected cases was explored in more detail. Of these, more than half of the traced people (53 per cent) had shared their contact details with those searching; 7 per cent opted for a partial reconnection (to some family members but not all, or only sharing certain details, such as an email address); 18 per cent passed a ‘safe and well’ message but wished for no further contact; and 10 per cent asked for their family not to be informed that they had been found.

This finding is reflected in responses to the charity’s annual Family Feedback Survey. Across four years’ of responses (2011 to 2014) 85 families of traced missing people responded and, of these, 22 per cent were not in contact with the traced person at the time of the interview.

## Reconnection can take time or be immediate

Some people who are traced, and receive a letter from Missing People, take some time to decide how to proceed. In a 2011 study of fatal disappearances, Newiss found that two missing adults (of a sample of 64 non-police cases) had died in possession of a tracing letter from Missing People (Newiss, 2011: 21). Missing People staff members have had experience of working with traced people who have waited for a while after receiving a letter before contacting the charity. Staff members at Missing People emphasise to families searching that tracing can be a lengthy process, so as not to raise hopes unfairly.

*“It is essential for us to get what we do across to them. [...] We need to say that they might get the letter and they might not. And they might not want to come back to us. [...] They might get the letter, it might be that they keep the letter for months and months before they reply.”*

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

As well as allowing the traced person as long as necessary to respond, Missing People also maintain contact details indefinitely, so that should someone change their mind in future, they can reach out to reconnect.

*“To spend time with them if they want to talk. To say to them ‘He does not want contact at this moment but if you do change address do let us know’. Because you know we will always keep this case open. So even though it has not been the outcome you wanted at this time, just bear in mind that things do change. I think I would probably end with ‘But at the moment he does not want contact’, because you do not want to give the false hope of ‘Yeah, he is going to change his mind’, or instil that in them. So it has to be very balanced.”*

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

<sup>9</sup> Of the remaining 148, 3 were found to have died, while the remaining 145 were still missing after a year. **When the Search is Over: Reconnecting Missing Children and Adults | 43**



*“There is always the chance she might well call back. You know, she might change her mind. It is always out there for her and she knows she has a way back if she chooses.”*

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

*“When a party does not want to reconnect, that is always going to be difficult. But I think you have to be really, really tactful in the wording that we use. We always sort of say, ‘This person is not ready to reconnect at this moment in time’. We would never say ‘Never never never’, because both parties know that they can always contact us. And he might change his mind, like other people have, further down the line.”*

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

## Reconnection can be partial

Traced adults can reconnect partially with the family members who have been searching for them; either by reconnecting only through messages passed by Missing People, by only reconnecting to certain family members, or by only sharing certain contact details (such as an email address). This can be protective for the traced adult, allowing them to regain control of a situation in which they have not chosen to be traced, to be found, or to reconnect.

*“She obviously wanted to have some sort of link with us, to maintain contact even though she didn’t want us to come after her. [...] I just don’t know where she’s living. I understand why she won’t say.”*

(Parent of a formerly missing adult, project interviewee)

*“I am so grateful for finding him. He does not want me to inform his parents - I honour his wishes. I write to him every month. He does not want a visit, unfortunately, but I understand. [...] It has made my day that I have found him.”*

(Relative of a formerly missing adult, Family Feedback Survey 2014 participant)

*“Some family members are happy just to know that the person is safe. For others, if you go back and say they are safe and well and they do not want contact, that can cause a lot of upset.”*

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

## Third-party mediation can be helpful

As when missing adults and children reach out for help, traced adults may appreciate the role the charity can play as contact broker between them and their family. Since traced adults have disconnected from their families intentionally (to some degree), being traced may raise difficult emotions. By making contact initially through Missing People, traced adults can find the reconnection process less stressful. If they choose not to resume contact immediately, or at all, using the charity to pass messages can make communicating this to their family significantly easier. This is also protective for the family who have been searching, as they are supported to deal with their own emotional reaction to receiving messages.

*“At least if we are able to open up the lines of communication then we are reconnecting, even if there is no direct contact necessarily between the two parties.”*

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

*“The person who’s run away might not ever want to come back, and that would have to be respected, but at least it would facilitate some sort of contact. [...] But I don’t know what would happen if she became ill or, you know, had an accident and she wasn’t able to contact us”.*

(Parent of a formerly missing adult, project interviewee)

### **Reconnection can be straightforward or more complex**

Even when traced adults choose to resume contact with their families, the process of reconnecting can go on for a long period, as they and their family members gradually share information and rebuild relationships. In some cases, both families and traced adults find that the reconnection is not what they had hoped for, and presents new challenges.

*“I’m happy to be in contact with my father again but it’s difficult to get him to write anything of interest in his emails at times. He still hasn’t told me his address and never has apologised for not being in touch for years.”*

(Child of a formerly missing adult, Family Feedback Survey 2014 participant)

*“Another phone call [from Missing People] a little bit later after he had been found would have been really useful as difficulties surfaced.”*

(Child of a formerly missing adult, Family Feedback Survey 2014 participant)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

15. Reconnection can be daunting and stressful for adults who have been traced after losing contact with family members. Missing People should therefore consider developing enhanced support for people who have been traced, both on the phone and online (e.g. guidance documents, policy statements), with the aim of supporting reconnections whilst also safeguarding missing people’s rights.
16. While adults have the right to go missing and stay out of contact, the police will not close a missing person enquiry until they are satisfied that the missing person is safe and well. Support services that provide information to adults who may be missing (such as people who are homeless, or people who have fled domestic abuse) should ensure they are able to provide up-to-date and accurate information about being reported missing, a missing person’s rights and the nature of police investigations. They can do this by pursuing partnership working with local police Missing Person Units or Missing Person Coordinators and the charity Missing People.
17. In order to maximise the chances of reconnecting missing people, Missing People and current and potential Tracing Partners should explore opportunities to extend the charity’s Family Tracing service. Preference should be given to partnerships which allow access to national level data, to ensure that the charity’s service is of consistent quality across the UK. Opportunities should be sought which improve the chances of tracing missing adults who are less likely to be registered on the Electoral Roll or have a landline telephone.