Missing People's response to the Authorised Professional Practice consultation on missing persons - October 2015.

Introduction

We welcome the consultation on the Authorised Professional Practice on missing persons.

Overall we think the document is detailed and clear and provides thorough and helpful guidance for police officers dealing with missing persons, and we think it is helpful to have all police guidance consolidated into one document.

We are also pleased to see the work of the charity Missing People highlighted throughout the document. Our partnerships with police forces are vital to ensuring we are able to help find, safeguard and support missing people and provide support the families left behind, so it is vital that police officers and staff know about our services and how to use them.

Why people go missing

We think it would be helpful for the APP to include further information about why children and adults go missing, and what happens while they are missing, including being at risk of harm. This context would help police officers and call handlers identify and respond more effectively to risks for missing children and adults.

We feel this new section should explain that most children and adults are vulnerable before they go missing and made more vulnerable by being missing for example being at an increased risk of sexual exploitation, gang exploitation, and victims of violent crime, self-harm or suicide.

Below is an example of the information we would like to see included;

The most common reasons for children to go missing include abuse, conflict or neglect at home or in their care placement (The Children's Society: 2005), or because they are drawn out of their home by someone who wants to exploit them – 70% of victims of sexual exploitation have been missing, (OCCE: 2012) and there is growing evidence of the links between young people going missing and gang exploitation (Catch 22 and Missing People: 2015). Young people also go missing to escape forced marriages, FGM and because of being trafficked (Missing People and ECPAT: 2014; Missing People 2013). While missing young people are at increased risk of sexual exploitation, being trafficked and gang exploitation, as well as violent crime – with 1 in 9 being hurt or harmed while missing (The Children's Society: 2011).

Up to 80 per cent of missing adults have mental health issues, and a significant number have experience of domestic violence, financial problems, family conflict, or alcohol problems (Woolnough, P and Gibb, G: 2007; Biehal, N et al: 2003; Stevenson, O., Parr, H., Woolnough, P. and Fyfe, N: 2013). In addition, research has shown that 40 per cent of adults who have dementia will go missing at some point, mostly unintentionally (McShane R et al: 1998; Biehal, N et al: 2003). Being missing makes all of these adults more vulnerable, as they are separated from their support networks and professional help, and are at greater risk of becoming a victim of crime.

Sadly, around one in every 100 people who go missing is found to have died, with suicide one of the most common causes ([Newiss, G: 2011](#)).

Risk assessments

We believe that the following topics should be covered in each risk assessment in addition to the list of issues highlighted in the "Gathering Information" and "Quick Reference Guide: Call Handlers" Sections:

- The person's state of mind and events which occurred before they were reported missing
- What caused the person to go missing
- Past missing incidents – why they went, what happened while missing, when they came back
- Who they missing person was with before they went missing as well as who they may be with whilst missing
- Capacity to keep themselves safe
- Why they might be at risk of harm: - it would be helpful for this list to include risk factors beyond sexual exploitation such as mental health and stress, learning disabilities, dementia, gang exploitation, sexual exploitation. These questions should cover current risks as well as previous and longer-term risks

We feel there should be further consideration about how call centres should handle initial calls, for example the need for a question script that answers can be scored against to assess risk.

We believe that it is vital that call handlers have excellent understanding of how to identify and respond to the risks associated with people going missing. This means call handlers should all receive in-depth training to understand the warning signs for risks including sexual exploitation, gang exploitation, mental health issues, self-harm or suicide, and alcohol or drug misuse, and the impact of these risks.

We believe that there is a need to clarify whether the questions listed in the "Quick Reference Guide – call handlers" and the "Gathering Information" sections of the APP are designed to be a script or a guide. We think that there would be value in including a good practice example of a call handler's script for clarity.

We feel it would be helpful to combine the risk assessment questions and areas currently under two sections "Quick Reference Guide- call handlers" and "Gathering Information"

In addition, we believe that the questions a call handler should ask should be jargon free, as the caller is unlikely to use terms such as sexual exploitation. Therefore more general questions such as

- "Why are you worried about the missing person?" would be easier to answer and likely to elicit more information than "What is the specific concern in this instance?"

- Similarly, "Can you tell me why you think the missing person left?" "Can you tell me about how they were before they went missing?" "Have they been missing before – if so what happened while they were missing?" "Who do you think they might be with while they are missing?" "Do you think they can keep themselves safe while

missing?" "Do you think they are at risk of being hurt or harmed?" would be easier to answer than "Are they currently at risk of sexual exploitation".

If call handlers received the training outlined above, they would find it easier to use their professional judgement to analyse responses to those questions in terms of risk, and probe further as appropriate.

Absent and missing

We are concerned that the use of the absent and missing categories is presenting significant risks. . The previous guidance around the introduction of the absent category (ACPO: 2013) stated that certain criteria must be in place before a force can consider introducing the new absent/ missing classifications including a missing persons co-ordinator to collate, analyse and review information on absence and missing. These criteria do not seem to be made clear in the new APP. Without proper systems, processes and training and the right resources, such as a missing person coordinator to review people classified as absent, we are very concerned that vulnerable adults and young people could slip through the net and not receive the appropriate safeguarding response.

We are very concerned that absent children and adults could be experiencing or be at great risk of harm while absent, but because these risks are not known to the police or other services or the person reporting the person classified as absent is not receiving the same level of response as missing children and adults.. We therefore think it is essential that the absent category is used with great caution. We also believe that return home interviews should be available to children who have been classified as absent as well as those who have been classified as missing, to develop understanding of any risks that person may be facing.

Furthermore, we are concerned that there is a lack of data on how the absent category is being used across forces, or evidence to confirm that it is an effective and safe approach to managing and responding to vulnerable people. We believe there is an urgent need for data analysis on the use of the absent category by police forces that details how many people are being classified as absent and subsequently how many go on to be labelled as missing, and what their characteristics are. We also believe there is an urgent need for a national evaluation of the impact of the absent category in terms of safeguarding vulnerable children and adults.

We know that non-police professionals find the absent category confusing and are unsure on how children and adults are classified as either absent or missing, and what the different responses are. It would be helpful if the APP clarified how police should ensure other agencies including social workers and care home staff are trained to understand the local use of the absent category, and their responsibilities to absent children.

Furthermore, we feel that it would be helpful to include more specific timescales for reviewing absent, such as a minimum and maximum time taking into account that there may be variations in different situations.

Moreover, we would like to propose that the current example used in the hypotheses section is changed to a more complex one to provide guidance which might be more valuable. We suggest that the example is of someone who repeatedly goes missing.

Tracing a lost relative

This section should highlight that Missing People, the charity, offers a free lost contact tracing service for families who have lost contact with a family member who has been missing. It may be helpful to include a link to a webpage about our service which [can be found here](#).

Child Rescue Alert

We feel this section needs to include the criteria upon which a Child Rescue Alert is issued, which could be the following paragraph:

Child Rescue Alert is intended to be activated by the police when particular criteria are met:

- The child is believed to be under 18 years old;
- There is a perception that the child is in imminent danger of serious harm or death;
- There is sufficient information available to enable the public to assist police in locating the child.

The section should also clarify that the CRA can be issued on a local, regional or national level.

Where the section mentions that Missing People can disseminate alerts this should include the following information:

Missing People's alert system can send a message to hundreds of thousands of subscribers and onto digital advertising billboards, as well as out via partners – including Royal Mail, to reach the PDAs of post men and women across the country, and Facebook, where it will appear on users' news feeds.

We want the APP to outline that Missing People is the delivery partner *for*, not of the NCA.

Family support

This section would benefit from more information about the impact on families when someone goes missing in the main guidance, although the links to further guidance and research are appreciated. It should explain the shock and trauma families go through when they find out a loved one has disappeared, and their need to know that everything that can be done to find their missing loved one is being done by the police and other agencies. For families who have to deal with their loved one being missing for an extended period, they describe feeling a type of loss that is unresolved, uncertain and enduring, with many unanswered questions leaving them in a painful state of limbo for as long as their loved one is missing (Living in Limbo: 2008)

We feel the first line in this section would better read "The impact that having a person missing can have on families should always be considered," rather than the impact that a missing person can have on families should not be overlooked.

We appreciate the statement in the first bullet point under the section which details police actions in relation to support for families, which says that ''ensure that families are informed

of the role of the charity Missing People and the support services available to them." We also feel this section could be strengthened by information on who we are, what we do and how to reach us. It could say "ensure that families are informed about the charity Missing People and the free, 24/7 confidential support services they offer through their helpline 116000, which include emotional support, practical support (e.g. with financial affairs), specialist counselling and peer support opportunities". It could also link to section 13.2 in the [Investigation section of the guidance](#).

The second bullet point in the section entitled "Police sections in relation to support for families" should say "recognise the impact of the incident on families," rather than "recognise the importance of the incident to families," which we feel is a more accurate description of what families experience.

The sixth bullet point in the section entitled "Police sections in relation to support for families" should state that police and family should agree how often a family will be updated and by who. It is vital for families to know everything possible that could be done to find their missing loved one is being done and regular updates make a big difference to this.

In the section entitled "Long-term case reviews" the following information should be added: "Families should be informed if a staffing change means there is a new point of contact, along with their contact details."

Missing People charity section

This section should clarify that our phone/ text and email helplines are all 24/7and not just our phone helpline service.

The section on our family support should clarify that we offer specialist counselling and peer support to families as well as practical and emotional advice and support.

The section on TextSafe should read "At the police's request, a supportive text message can be sent to a vulnerable missing person's phone offering Missing People's support services and explaining how to reach them. This is an effective way of reaching out to missing people who may not wish to contact their family or the police."

The section should also include a link to [how to refer to TextSafe](#) on Missing People's website.

Sightings

In the "Sightings" section we feel the following should be added "reputable agencies such as Missing People are trained to take sighting information from members of the public, and so information from them should be taken seriously."

In addition this text should also be included: "consideration should be given to whether it is appropriate to share sightings information with the family."

Search

There are a number of tools that can help police plan a search. There is useful information contained within the report produced by Grampian Police, which was called 'Missing Persons: Understanding, Planning, Responding' (Gibb, G. and Woolnough, P., 2007. The report is popular with search planners, who use it to map search areas.

More recently, work has been done by the National Crime Agency to update the Grampian work, which has been called iFind. It has been produced as a booklet and is designed as a guide for search planners. The UK Missing Person's Bureau had hoped to publish it by now, but a request to pilot it has been received. Communication from the UK Missing Person's Bureau indicates that they expect it to be rolled out in 2016.

We believe that Senior Investigating Officers should give early consideration of consulting a PolSA for advice and involvement. They should also give careful consideration to who conducts home search/briefs the family about home search, in order to reduce the likelihood of distress to families. Please note Missing People is collaborating with Penny Woolnough on a piece of research regarding this and we would be happy to share further detail in due course.

Managing return

We feel that the first sentence in the section called Code of Ethics is unclear and should be clarified.

The managing return section should be re-ordered to reflect the timings and order for example of when safe and well checks and return home interviews should take place.

We feel that the section regarding what might happen when the missing person is located should take place before they are found it should also mention that there should be an assessment of or the need for immediate medical attention.

We welcome the section on confidentiality as the section highlights the person reporting them missing may have an ulterior motive. Indeed, the missing person may be vulnerable to a number of risks for example through forced marriage. Revealing the missing person's whereabouts to the person reporting them missing could put them in danger if the latter has an ulterior motive such as domestic violence or forced marriage.

The section which is in bold and just before the accommodation part of the management of return section could be phrased in a more positive way, for example acknowledging that the missing person may be worried or daunted by police presence, that there are always reasons for people going missing and that it is expected that officers should act respectfully.

We think this section should refer to ensuring that the missing person's opinion is taken into account.

Safe and well checks

We feel that safe and well checks should not be referred to with the word 'interview' as this could cause someone to confuse them with return home interviews, which are different.

We also think that safe and well checks should compare the initial risk factors which led to them being a missing person to their current circumstances in case anything has changed. This provides officers with a helpful way to assess whether the risk to this particular individual has reduced, stayed the same, increased or changed.

Return Home Interviews

We agree with the statement that return home interviews should be provided by a professional from an independent agency. We have experienced confusion among police officers about the definition of 'independent' in this respect and we would like to see this defined more clearly. Our understanding of 'independent' is independent from the statutory sector.

As well as providing return home interviews ourselves we have strong partnerships with other independent organisations in the English Coalition for Runaway Children who provide this service. We know from these services that young people are more likely to trust a trained professional from an independent agency, and therefore open up to them about why they went missing and their experiences while missing including information that will help to safeguard them and intelligence about crimes they may have been a victim of. We therefore think it is vital for young people to be offered the opportunity to receive a return home interview from an independent provider.

We understand that it is ideal to meet a young person within 72 hours so that any safeguarding concerns can be addressed. However, we believe that it is not always in the best interests of the child, or possible, to enforce this rigidly. We propose that 72 hours be used as a guide, rather than a deadline. In our experience, return home interviews gather more useful information about the young person's welfare and safeguarding needs as well as intelligence about whether they have been a victim of crime if they are conducted at a time that suits a young person and at a point when they are ready to discuss their experiences. This may fall outside the 72 hour window. To enable the young person to become ready to discuss their circumstances this may require time to build up trust and rapport with the professional from an independent agency.

Emergency accommodation

We agree with the statement within the first paragraph on emergency accommodation that police stations are not appropriate places or a suitable environment to accommodate children, even for a short time. We also know from our helpline team that sometimes a police station is the only safe place for a child to be when no other services are available.

We believe that every young person who is missing deserves a safe place to stay – we know that one in six young people who are missing end up sleeping rough or stay with someone they've just met (The Children's Society: 2011), putting them at greater risk of sexual exploitation and becoming a victim of other violent crime. We are therefore campaigning for young people to have better access to safe, good quality emergency accommodation – linked to Missing People's Manifesto for Missing People (2014) and Railway Children's Research into Safe Places (2014).

missing people

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We would like to work with local authorities to explore how the range of and access to emergency accommodation provision can be improved to ensure every young person who is missing is able to have a safe place to stay.

Training

Missing People can provide a number of services to train police officers and call handlers in the following areas:

- Identifying and responding to risk – understanding reasons why people go missing and risks they face
- Family support
- How to effectively use our services
- Supporting people who return from being missing, including how to deliver Return Home Interviews

We think there would be great value in including this information in the APP together with contact details of our Partnerships Team: telephone - 020 8392 4590; email - partners@missingpeople.org.uk

If you would like any further information in relation to our response please contact:

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