



The English Coalition for Runaway Children

Return Home Interviews – Good practice

An outline of good practice for conducting return home interviews with a child or young person who has been missing, jointly developed by charity members of the English Coalition for Runaway Children (ECRC)

July 2017

Introduction

When a child or young person returns from being missing it is vital that they are offered a safe place to discuss the reasons they went missing, any risks they may have faced while away, or any harm they or others may have experienced. This discussion and the subsequent support are crucial in effectively safeguarding them from further harm.

One study found 1 in 9 young people who had gone missing overnight had been 'hurt or harmed while away from home', and 1 in 6 had slept rough or stayed with someone they just met.¹

A separate study suggested that one in every eight young people who are reported missing have been physically hurt while away and one in nine have been sexually assaulted.²

The government recognises the need for children and young people who have been missing to have a safe space to talk in the shape of a Return Home Interview (RHI)³.

Statutory guidance on children who runaway or go missing from home or care⁴

When a child is found, they must be offered an independent return interview. Independent return interviews provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home.

The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the 'safe and well check' by the police – either before they ran away or whilst missing;
- Identify underlying risks to the child, which may not previously have been disclosed, therefore ensuring that agencies can put the right support and safeguarding in place and improve future risk assessments;
- Understand and try to address the reasons why the child ran away;
- Help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away;
- Provide them with information on how to stay safe if they choose to run away again, including helpline numbers.

Currently, RHI provision across the country is inconsistent. A recent report by The Children's Society⁵ suggests that, although nearly all local authorities are offering interviews to children who have been missing from home or care, many areas are not providing for children categorised as 'absent'; others are failing to offer an independent service provider, and many are showing significantly low numbers of interviews being delivered for all children.

¹ Rees, G. (2011) Still Running 3: Early findings from our third national survey of young runaways.

² Biehal, N., Mitchell F., and Wade J. (2003) Lost from View

³ These interviews are often referred to in a number of different ways depending on the provider. For example: Independent Return Interview (IRI), Return Discussions, etc.

⁴ Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care January 2014

⁵ The Children's Society (2017) Making Connections: how local agencies can better keep missing children safe

The report shows that, for all the specified groups of children (missing from home, missing from care, absent from home and absent from care) the most frequently cited provider of RHIs is staff from children's services. This is particularly concerning for looked after children as it is unlikely that local authority staff will be as independent of the child's care as practitioners from other agencies would be and many looked after children who runaway cite problems with their placements as one of the contributing factors in their decision to go.

Comprehensive data was not available for analysis, however, estimates based on Freedom of Information responses from local authorities and NCA data suggest that the national average of return interviews being delivered when compared with the number of missing incidents is approximately 38%. However, the report shows that service delivery and the numbers of completed interviews vary hugely across different areas. This means that children and young people are facing a postcode lottery when they should all be receiving consistent and high quality support.

In many cases, Return Home Interviews are helping to ensure that children's wellbeing is improved and that they are made safer. In one area, where Missing People provide return interviews, over the course of 2016, the charity identified that 62% of children and young people who received interviews were likely to require further support to address the challenges they faced. These children were subsequently referred to the charity's specialist Runaway Helpline for information, advice and guidance. Meanwhile, 12% of the children and young people who received an interview went on to receive 1-2-1 support from one of the charity's dedicated workers.

In addition, in 9% of the interviews, serious safeguarding concerns were disclosed. This information was then shared and escalated to the police and local authority who could take appropriate next steps. Without a non-judgemental, impartial space to talk and to disclose vital information these children may have continued to be at serious risk of harm and may never have received the support that they needed.

Return interviews are a vital safeguarding tool for children and young people who have been missing. It is crucial that every child is offered an interview, and that those interviews are of a good standard to ensure that they are effective.

Due to the number of agencies providing return interview services, it is important that a set of good practice guidelines are agreed upon and adhered to. We have developed these guidelines for RHI providers and commissioners with the aim of achieving the following outcomes in all return interviews:

1. Provide independent, non-judgemental, 'confidential' and child centred return home support for all vulnerable children who go missing, in spaces where they feel safe and able to talk and using inclusive approaches.
2. Develop prevention and risk reduction strategies alongside children who regularly go missing including safety planning and addressing wider risk factors such as CSE, Drug and Alcohol Misuse, Domestic Abuse
3. Support and sign post young people to access specialist support services in their areas that can help address their specific needs
4. Provide high quality engagement and follow up intervention with young people.

Throughout the following we have outlined recommendations for good practice which we believe should be adopted for all return interviews.

Good Practice

All children who go missing should be offered a return interview

Statutory guidance already stipulates that all children should be offered a return interview after every missing episode. However, the Children's Society report shows that in many areas the option for an independent interview is not being given. The following groups of children and young people have been identified by the English Coalition for Runaway Children as not routinely being offered interviews. In addition to this, as mentioned above, the service for all children in some areas is often inconsistent.

Firstly, further clarity is needed in relation to children categorised as absent. It is currently unclear what the recent change in Authorised Professional Practice (APP) guidance on the absent category will mean for the delivery of RHIs. We recommend that the offer of return interviews for these children and young people is reviewed and clarified at the earliest possible opportunity.

Secondly, young people who have been moved to a care placement out of their local authority area are regularly falling through the cracks. Statutory guidance stipulates that the home local authority⁶, who initially placed the child in the new area, is responsible for ensuring that an RHI is offered. However, evidence from a number of different service providers suggests that interviews are often not being offered to this group of young people, or they are only being offered an opportunity to speak to someone over the phone who is often not independent of their care. As these young people may already be highly vulnerable due to being in care and being moved away from home, it is a significant safeguarding concern that they may not regularly or ever be being offered an interview on return from any missing episode.

When a child or young person is placed out of area more needs to be done to ensure that they are offered an independent return home interview. We recommend that the home local authority make arrangements with the host authority, this could be in the form of spot-purchasing interviews from the local service directly; asking the host authority to arrange the interview through their normal process; or asking staff from their own service to travel to the young person in their new area.

When a child goes missing who has been placed out of area by a local authority where Missing People's RHI service are commissioned, there is an expectation that the local authority will pay the additional costs for a member of the team to travel and deliver a return interview. This process ensures that the young person receives absolute parity of service and does not fall through the cracks.

Thirdly, trafficked children have a particular vulnerability to going missing and are at a high risk of being re-trafficked or exploited⁷. Some trafficked and unaccompanied asylum seeking children who go missing remain unfound for long periods, however many are subsequently located but continue to be at significant risk of going missing again, sometimes very soon after their return. It is therefore vital that this group are offered a return interview in a timely and sensitive manner. For children who are not proficient or confident in English, or who are still in fear of traffickers, providing good quality 'return home interviews' is more challenging and yet, essential. These children may have been witness to serious crimes and the information they share, when passed on to the police, may help to prevent further risks to them and other children.

⁶ Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, January 2014

⁷ Heading Back to Harm, November 2016

Finally, it's important for practitioners to remember that all children have the right to refuse a return interview when it is offered. In some situations parental or carer consent may also need to be given before the interview takes place. Parents and carers may refuse the interview on a child's behalf because they believe or think it is not in the child's best interests. However, if a young person has been missing repeatedly and the parent or carer regularly refuses an interview, it may mean that the child is being denied the opportunity to speak to an independent person. It may signify a safeguarding issue at home or elsewhere so it is important that refusals by parents or carers are recorded and necessary steps are taken if a safeguarding concern is identified.

Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to ensure that every child is offered a return interview on their return from being missing. The necessary structures should be put in place to ensure the groups outlined above are included by the service in their area.

Young people should *have a choice* when deciding who delivers a RHI

RHIs are most effective and provide the best support when the young person has been given a choice of who to speak to, whether it be a professional they already have contact with or a voluntary sector worker commissioned specifically to deliver return interviews. We agree with statutory guidance, which states that the interviewer should not be someone directly responsible for their care.⁸ Young people may be running away or going missing because of problems within their home or care setting and it's vital that they are always given the opportunity to express any concerns to someone outside of that environment.

Maya*, a 14 year old girl, had been going missing regularly and had a number of different professionals involved with her care, all of whom she had refused to engage with. After another missing episode St Christopher's, a children's charity, were asked to deliver a return interview and Maya finally decided to engage. She disclosed that she had been at a house party and one of her friends had been assaulted. Further discussion led to disclosure of a number of similar parties happening with no adult supervision and other incidents had taken place.

Maya hadn't disclosed this to anyone else. St Christopher's were able to pass this information to relevant statutory agencies which led to significant safeguarding activity.

Voluntary sector organisations should be included as an option for all young people. The cross government strategy for missing adults and children⁹ acknowledges that there is greater likelihood of disclosure from children when return interviews are undertaken by an independent voluntary sector worker. However, the young person's choice should always be respected.

In Manchester young people who are working with Protect (a multi-agency service supporting victims of child sexual exploitation) are given the option of their Protect worker delivering the return interview, or a worker from The Children's Society.

The child is always reassured that their Protect worker won't be informed if they do not choose to speak to them, thereby ensuring that the child or young person is under no pressure.

⁸ DfE. (2014) Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care

⁹ Home Office. (2011) Missing Children and Adults: A Cross Government Strategy

Is the 72 hour deadline in a child's best interest?

Department for Education guidance¹⁰ currently stipulates that RHIs should 'be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting.'

It is incredibly important that YP are given the space to talk as soon as it is possible and appropriate after they return from being missing. By meeting with them within 72 hours practitioners can ensure that:

- They can respond to any harm done to the child in a timely fashion
- The young person has access to the services and support that they need as quickly as possible
- If the child was harmed an early disclosure may help with preserving the evidence and identifying the perpetrator

However, the 72 hour target can also have a negative impact on the integrity and quality of a return home interview:

- Some young people are highly vulnerable and have little or no trust in professionals. This means it can take time to build a relationship in which the young person is happy to disclose any information about their missing episode. By only offering a window of 72 hours in which to meet a practitioner could discourage the young person from engaging with the service.
- Every young person is different and what happened during a missing episode will vary on every occasion. Some young people may need time and space to process what has happened before they feel safe and able to talk. They may also have returned to a chaotic situation. Pressuring someone to speak before they're ready to do so could be harmful to the young person and the trust they might have in the practitioner.
- The young person should have a choice in deciding when the interview should take place. Taking part in a return interview is not compulsory for any child and it's important to be led by them on what is appropriate and safe for them.
- The 72 hour window can force practitioners to be target driven rather than focusing on the needs of the child. Persistence is vital when trying to engage some young people, however, by focussing on a 72 hour time window it is possible that some agencies may cease attempts to engage the child once that deadline has passed.

Finally

- Completing an interview within 72 hours is, in some cases, impractical. Referrals made over a weekend may not be received until the Monday, a delay of up to 64 hours; a young person may not be available to meet within 72 hours; they may want to wait until a specific worker is available; or the young person may want to meet at school or in a particular environment which necessitates waiting.

In the Barnardo's Service in Buckinghamshire the 72 hour requirement has had some significant unintended negative consequences on the service's ability to effectively safeguard children. Following an OFSTED inspection the focus for commissioners has been drawn to compliance with the 72 hour deadline rather than the wider risk management for all vulnerable children at risk worked with by the service.

For example: One young person had been missing for several days and had suffered a highly traumatic series of experiences whilst missing. On return she was upset, exhausted and required time to rest and come to terms with what had happened before revisiting this

¹⁰ DfE. (2014) Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care

through a return interview. The inflexibility of the timescale means that experienced workers are unable to make professional judgements informed by young people, their families and other professionals on the most appropriate time to start engagement and support, which can lead to increased harm to the young person's wellbeing as well as a breakdown in the relationship between the young person and return interviewer.

In other situations, young people with mental health concerns have needed time before being interviewed, being forced into an interview within 72 hours of their return can cause additional distress and discomfort, and has even on occasion put the return interview worker at risk of harm.

We recommend that statutory guidance is reviewed to ensure that this section of the guidance is effective and maintains the best interests of missing children. We suggest the government holds a public consultation to gather evidence regarding the efficacy of the 72 hour guidance and considers whether an alternative timeframe would be more appropriate.

"The way I see it I wouldn't want something really bad to happen and then two days later someone be like 'so how was that, how did you feel?' In some cases that might just throw someone back completely and make them feel really put off.... Maybe someone wouldn't want to talk about it after 3 days but maybe a week or so would be fine."

Quote from a young person who has been missing

Tone & Environment

The tone of the interview, coupled with the environment in which the interview is held, can make a significant difference to the child's comfort and willingness to discuss their missing episode. It is important that only trained professionals deliver return interviews. They need to have the skills to engage with a young person, the knowledge and experience to manage the process safely and a manner which allows the young person to build trust. In addition to this the professional needs to have awareness of a broad range of risks and their warning signs, as well as the knowledge to identify and escalate safeguarding concerns.

As detailed in the statutory guidance, the interview should be delivered by a professional independent of the child's care. It is possible that a child's home life or existing support network could be a factor in their decision to run away. To ensure that the interview is appropriate for their needs, they should be offered the chance to talk with someone outside of their existing support environment.

The interview should be responsive to the needs of the young person and the questions should be open to enable the young person to pass on the information they wish to share. Some young people may not even understand or agree that they have been missing, for example, if they were out with friends and didn't perceive themselves to be at any risk. In this situation the professional delivering the interview must be able to talk through what missing means and help the young person to understand why they were reported as such and have consequently been offered the interview.

It is vital in every return interview that the tone is non-judgemental and that the child feels listened to. An appropriate amount of time should be allocated, ensuring that the young person has the space to talk at their own pace and the interview does not at any point feel rushed. The location should be safe, comfortable and private; this could be at the young person's school, home, care setting or even a quiet public place if that is preferable for the young person.

Confidentiality

Levels of confidentiality offered to young people in RHIs vary across different local authorities. In some areas everything discussed in the interview will be shared with the police and local authority regardless of the child's wishes, this may prevent some young people from engaging with the interview process and discussing their experiences openly.

Offering young people choice and control over what happens to the information they share can help to build a trusting relationship and give them the confidence to make important disclosures.

All practitioners have a duty of care to ensure that young people are safeguarded. If a young person discloses a risk to themselves or others the practitioner will have to break confidentiality to ensure their safety. It is always vital that this safeguarding process is followed. However, it is important that any action is clearly explained to the young person, and where possible that their consent is obtained.

The services provided by Missing People can offer confidentiality regarding information that is not a safeguarding concern. On average 96% of children and young people agree to have all the information shared with partners. Offering confidentiality does not prevent important intelligence being gathered and shared, but it does allow the young person to be in control of their own support from multiple agencies.

Young people should be empowered to talk openly about their experiences, and if necessary, to support any safeguarding actions taken on their behalf.

"The fact that she told me what she'd tell someone and who she wasn't gonna tell, anything like that, it made me feel a lot more comfortable and able to talk to her"

Quote from a young person who has been missing

How information is shared

As outlined above, young people should be able to give their informed consent for what information is shared and with whom. This is not just limited to the local authority and police, but could include parents, schools or other support agencies if the child suggests it and the professional feels it would be appropriate and useful.

How information will be shared should always be explained in an accessible and age appropriate manner at the beginning, and if possible also at the end of each interview. There should be a record confirming that the practitioner has explained what will happen and that the young person has consented. If the practitioner needs to share any information against the young person's wishes for safeguarding reasons, what will happen with this information should be thoroughly explained.

The purpose of any return home interview should not only be to give a young person space and a chance to be heard, but also to identify (or help them to identify) any risk or harm done to them before or during the time they were missing; to build intelligence of patterns surrounding missing incidents; and to act on that information to ensure the young person's safety. Every local authority should have a clear information sharing protocol in place. The

Children's Society report¹¹ found that almost half of the local authorities that responded to Freedom of Information requests did not have a protocol in place between themselves, the police and RHI providers.

Sharing information which could help to safeguard a child or young person is an integral part of the interview process. There should be clear pathways for sharing any necessary information with both the police and local authority and fast referral processes should be in place in the case that there is immediate risk.

The Brighter Futures Missing Service coordinator was attending the Stoke-on-Trent Police station each morning to access the police Compact IT system and pick up referrals from the missing reports. As a result, she was invited to take part in the morning Child Exploitation Team briefing to contribute information from recent RHIs and to gain further background information from the team.

An interview with a young person who had received a return interview highlighted the importance of having a conversation about what information will be shared and with whom:

"I could have either been worried that she wasn't going to say anything to someone that I wanted her to address, or she was gonna go say something to someone that I didn't want her to say"

In this case the young person would have been concerned that information that she did want shared might not be. By engaging the young person in that conversation you ensure that they understand exactly what is going to happen with their information, therefore increasing their trust and confidence.

Finally, the agency carrying out the interviews should be informed of any developments or changes in a child's care. It is vital that the both the agency and the young person are aware of any action being taken following information from a RHI being shared. Each local authority should agree with partners how the information can be appropriately shared in both directions.

Commissioning follow-up services

A 2015 report by Railway Children¹² shows the value of interviews which include follow up support. Positive outcomes that were recorded included, but weren't limited to:

- Reduced episodes of running away
- Young people having a more positive view of their future
- Reduced risk

Gemma* was just 16 when she was first referred to Missing People for a return interview. She had been missing from her care placement multiple times. During the conversation the return interview worker and Gemma spoke about why she had gone missing and let her know the details for Runaway Helpline in case she thought about going missing again.

Since then the Runaway Helpline team have heard from Gemma multiple times. Whenever Gemma feels she needs some help or advice she gives them a call and happily she has told them that she no longer thinks about running away. Recently Gemma has even called to find out what she can do to support others in her care home who are thinking of running away.

¹¹ The Children's Society (2017) Making Connections: how local agencies can better keep missing children safe

¹² Bagley, A. (2015) The Value of Return Home Interviews and follow-up support when young people have been missing. A social return on investment analysis

There are three different bands of support which we believe should be available to young people in conjunction with a return interview:

1. **Signposting and referring** based on the initial return interview – this is absolutely vital and should be offered in all instances. Young people should be given contact details for services relating to any disclosure they make, as well as general support services (for example, Runaway Helpline or Childline) that they can access at any time if they are upset or thinking about running away again.
2. Young people should be offered a **follow-up contact**. This call or visit can mean practitioners learn new things about the young person or their situation which can help to keep them safe. It is also an opportunity to show the young person that the practitioner cares about their ongoing welfare.
3. **Intervention or one-to-one support**. This will involve ongoing or long-term support which is tailored to the young person's needs. It might include helping them to access other services, advocating for them or building their confidence in professionals.

Katie*, a 17 year old young woman, was reported missing 22 times and absent 10 times during a 12 month period. The Brighter Futures service in Stoke-on-Trent delivered return interviews to Katie over the course of that year. During the numerous interviews conducted, it was noticeable that Katie gradually started to trust the worker, who was the same each time, and began to cooperate with the process and eventually disclosed that she and her younger siblings were involved in an ongoing Police investigation regarding sexual abuse. However she was reluctant to accept any additional support or referrals to other services.

During the last return interview, she admitted that she was struggling to cope with the sexual abuse that she had suffered as a child and the impact that this was having on her mental and physical health. She finally agreed to a referral to Savana, a service for survivors of sexual abuse, to receive specialised counselling. With the persistence of a non-judgemental return interview worker Katie felt able to access help and has not been reported missing again since.

Wherever possible all returned young people should be offered the choice of all three services. However, due to restrictions on resources we would recommend that all return interview services should offer the first as mandatory and the latter two should be offered on a needs-basis.

The support outlined in options two and three may be offered by the service providing the initial return home interview or could be delivered by an alternative provider. Each local authority should clarify what additional support is available and the necessary referral pathways.

The Railway Children report used a social return on investment model and found that the social value achieved per £1 invested in providing return interview services, with follow up support, produces £5.27 of social value. It is therefore clear that delivering good quality return interviews and support has numerous benefits.

"If I'd have had that there I would have definitely used it cause I wasn't in a position to be like I can do this all by myself. I was in a position that I want help but I don't know where to find it."

A young person when asked whether they would have used the Runaway Helpline if they had known about it before they went missing

The English Coalition for Runaway Children (ECRC) is a coalition of England-based organisations that work with children and young people who run away or go missing from home or care. It exists to ensure that these vulnerable members of our society are safeguarded from harm through effective policy and appropriate services at both national and local level.

The ECRC's vision is that every child is safeguarded from the risks experienced by runaway and missing children through prevention, targeted services and effective crisis responses. Its mission is to ensure that the needs of these children and young people are comprehensively met at a local and national level through campaigning, sharing good practice and partnership working.

Coalition members who support this document are:

Missing People
Railway Children
Barnardos
NSPCC
The Children's Society
St Christopher's Fellowship
NWG
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Brighter Futures
ECPAT
Safer London

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*All names mentioned in the included case studies have been changed to protect the children and young people's anonymity

