

# Expectations

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 22 November 2016 Updated 22 December 2023

Written by College of Policing

11 mins read

## Police role and responsibilities

When a person is reported missing the police's primary responsibility is to safeguard the missing person. Careful investigation is required to ensure that the risks of harm are fully explored and assessed, and that police resources are then appropriately assigned, if that is necessary.

The police should seek to make people safe. A failure to investigate a report of a missing person properly may lead to:

- individuals being put at risk
- the loss of opportunities to reduce potential harm
- the police service being vulnerable to a legal challenge under either the Human Rights Act 1998 or the civil law relating to negligence
- reputational damage for the police force concerned

It is important that the [Risk principles](#) and the [national decision model \(NDM\)](#) are considered and applied to any missing person investigation.

For further information see [Code of Ethics](#).

## Legal expectations

The [European Convention on Human Rights \(ECHR\)](#) places a positive obligation on police officers to take reasonable action, within their powers, to safeguard the rights of individuals who may be at risk.

The ECHR Articles which may be relevant to missing persons are:

- right to life ([Article 2](#))

- right not to be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment ([Article 3](#))
- right to prohibition of slavery and forced labour ([Article 4](#))
- right to respect for private and family life ([Article 8](#))
- right to freedom of expression, including freedom to receive information ([Article 10](#))

There is a balance to be struck when considering human rights requirements. Often, considerations will concern rights not to suffer harm, as covered by articles 2 and 3. However, where a person chooses to go missing or decides to leave a situation, article 8 rights to privacy may be engaged, limiting the actions that police should take to trace the individual. The rationale for taking, or not taking action, should be recorded.

## Positive action

When a person is reported missing the police should risk-assess and safeguard the individual when necessary. Safeguarding actions may be undertaken by the police or others, and must be clearly documented with the rationale. An initial risk assessment will provide the basis for an appropriate and proportionate response according to the level of risk to the individual and others.

It is also important to consider whether the person has a particular vulnerability that may increase their risk, such as:

- having a disability or illness
- being a looked after child or at risk of exploitation
- having any other protected characteristic (defined by the [Equality Act 2010](#)) which may require a particular response or consideration

A person may be vulnerable for a wide range of other reasons, these might for example relate to their immediate environment or mental wellbeing, difficulties within their life or challenges that they have that affect their behaviour or ability to communicate or seek help.

For guidance on proportional response using the continuum of risk see [Risk assessment and response](#).

## Governance and strategic direction

Effective governance structures are important elements in supporting delivery of high-quality service to missing persons, their families and those who may be responsible for their care.

Police forces should have nominated (suitably senior and easily identifiable) strategic and tactical leads for missing person investigation work with clearly stated roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability. Professional experience suggests that where this occurs, the force will be more effective in dealing with the challenges posed by missing people and in encouraging innovative solutions.

Missing persons coordinators fulfil important responsibilities and can assist the force in understanding the challenges associated with this work.

Appropriate performance assessment to support safeguarding work for missing people should be in place within each police force. Performance data should be used to build understanding of the nature of problems and drive improvements in services.

Police forces should, where possible, have integrated recording and intelligence systems that support those involved with the risk assessment in missing persons cases to make informed decisions. (The integration of such systems will also reduce double-keying by staff and prevent officers having to repeat unnecessary questioning.)

## **Strategic leadership**

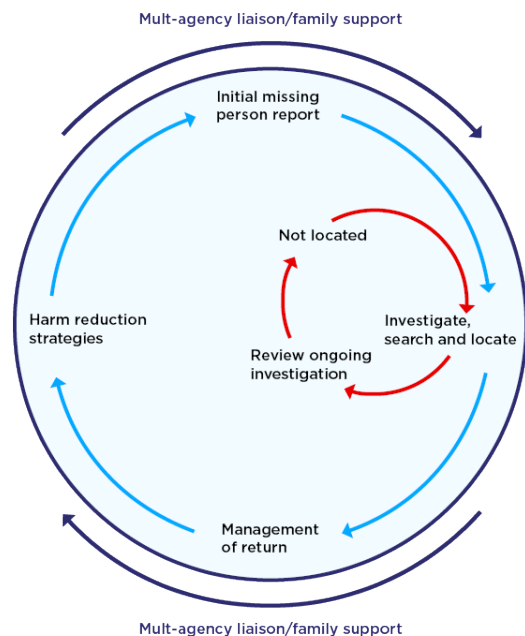
It is common for the strategic lead for missing persons to have a senior role in leading the force response to dealing with vulnerable people. Senior leaders are responsible for building and developing partnerships through MASA and Local Safeguarding Adult Boards, together with other statutory and non-statutory partners.

A senior officer in this role is required to develop an understanding of how the investigation and response to missing persons cases links to other areas of safeguarding work. Senior leaders should be prepared to hold partners to account and be held to account themselves for any shortfalls in service delivery, and must make the pathways that support a transparent and effective response.

## **The investigation cycle**

Missing person incidents should not be dealt with in isolation. An investigative approach that is cyclical rather than linear will enable the police service to work effectively with other agencies. Multi-agency processes should be based on a problem-solving approach and should include a review process that enables appropriate decisions and further enquiries to be made where appropriate.

## Investigation cycle diagram



## An indicator of harm

There is always a reason for a person to go missing. Understanding the circumstances will allow the police and other relevant authorities to tackle any potential causes of harm and identify intervention and safeguarding measures that can stop or minimise further episodes. Going missing may be a symptom that something is wrong in a person's life. This can often be described in terms of push and pull factors that push people away or pull them towards something, for example, being pushed away by abuse or financial problems, or being pulled towards exploitation.

## Categories

There will be circumstances where a person's whereabouts are not known but police involvement may not be required, for example, where a family has split up following a relationship breakdown and contact has been lost with a family member. Policing should focus on reducing harm or the risk

of harm – the police are not to be used solely to trace people. Appropriate action might include a referral to other agencies that can provide assistance.

The model for assessing risk can assist police officers to determine how the matter should be dealt with.

The [national decision model](#) and [risk principles](#) can be especially useful in relation to these more complex cases, and police officers should ensure that the situation is risk assessed then reassessed and evaluated in the light of new information and intelligence throughout the investigation.

## Wanted/missing

There will be occasions when people may be reported as missing who are wanted in relation to:

- their suspected involvement in a criminal investigation
- an outstanding warrant issued by a court
- having absconded from lawful custody/care – being absent without leave (AWOL)
- having entered the country without appropriate authority (see immigration cases)

Police should evaluate each case on an individual basis and respond appropriately, according to the priority that should be given in that case. For example, if a person is wanted for a minor matter but the missing persons risk assessment indicates a high risk, then it may be appropriate to deal with the case as a missing persons enquiry. Conversely a low risk missing person wanted for murder may be more appropriately dealt with as a wanted person and the correct investigative approach applied. The guiding principle is to adopt an approach that will bring both matters to the safest, most efficient conclusion.

Forces should seek to avoid duplicating the investigation and record keeping. The investigating or supervisory officer will need to consider and decide which response and investigative approach to take based on a risk assessment and should be guided by the national decision model.

When completing this risk assessment, decision makers should consider both the prevailing risk to, and vulnerability of, the missing person and public, as well as the requirement to pursue the individual, detain them, and ensure that they are subject to criminal justice processes. The views of the reporting person should be taken into consideration and the rationale for deciding on whether to

treat the person as 'missing' should be discussed with them. Officers making decisions should be particularly mindful of the risks associated with children and vulnerable adults. It is important for decision makers to decide how they wish to involve the person reporting the missing person in the investigation. The reporting person may be a source of information to assist in tracing the missing person, they may, however, be acting with dishonest motives. Investigating officers must decide on the most appropriate approach, balancing the needs and risks of the investigation with the duty to keep people with a valid interest in the missing person updated on progress.

A missing person report may be closed or marked as 'inactive' while a 'wanted' investigation continues.

For further information see:

- [APP on AWOL patients](#) (Guidance on the management of patients that have absconded from a hospital or inpatient care)
- National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). (2023). [Advice to Police Forces on Restricted Patients under S37 and S41 Mental Health Act 1983 who Abscond.](#)
- [NPCC. \(2023\). Flow Chart for Police Forces on Restricted Patients under S37 and S41 Mental Health Act 1983 who Abscond.](#)

## Tracing a lost relative

The police service is not a tracing agency and there are specialist organisations that are better placed to assist an individual who wishes to locate a lost relative. See [UKMPU](#) for more information.

If, however, it is suspected that the person may be at risk of harm, such as someone who is drug dependent or at risk of sexual exploitation, abuse or harm, an investigation should be commenced to make the missing person safe.

For further information see:

- [Initial response to suspected parental abduction](#)
- [Initial response to honour-based violence](#)

## Concern for welfare

Command and control systems have '[concern for welfare](#)' or similar incident categories. There have been several cases where the police service has been criticised for misusing this category when the correct one was missing person.

Call handlers should make careful enquiries of callers and seek advice from their supervisors to ensure that, as far as possible, incidents are correctly classified as 'missing person' if the information from the caller, when probed, indicates that this is the correct classification.

If the initial classification is correctly assessed to be 'concern for welfare' but subsequently turns out to be a missing person, the process for a missing person should be followed.

**It is unacceptable to use the 'concern for welfare' categorisation to avoid a full missing person investigation.**

Any such action may leave a vulnerable missing person at risk of harm.

## Children not receiving a suitable education

A child is deemed to not be receiving a suitable education if they are children of compulsory school age who are not:

- on a school roll, and
- not receiving a suitable education elsewhere, (for example, at home, privately, or in alternative provision)

A child may fail to attend school for a number of reasons, however their absence may indicate that the child is at risk of harm. The education authority should make reasonable enquiries to ascertain the child's circumstances before reporting them as missing to the police.

Investigating officers, school staff and social care professionals should be aware of the risk that a child may be absent from school due to cases of abuse that may include (but are not limited to) modern slavery, forced marriage, or female genital mutilation. Such cases may involve a trip abroad.

For further information see:

- [Department for Education \(2015\) Children missing education](#)

- [Ofsted \(2010\) Children missing education](#)
- [FCDO Forced Marriage Unit](#)

## Truancing

Truancing is not normally something that should be dealt with as a missing person investigation. Reporting all such cases would place an impossible burden on the police service.

Police officers should consider the circumstances behind any report of truancing to determine if there are any indications that an investigation is warranted.

Unauthorised absences could indicate that a child or young person may be at risk and any concerns should be shared among partners and investigated where appropriate.

Officers should be aware that there have been child exploitation cases in which children have missed school and exploiters have returned them to school before the end of school day.

## Tags

Missing persons