

Missing person investigations

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

First published 22 November 2016 Updated 1 February 2024

Written by College of Policing

39 mins read

Where an adult or child is categorised as 'missing', an investigation must be initiated that is appropriate to the level of risk.

The investigative process

All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from very low risk through to high-risk cases that normally require immediate, intensive action.

The following minimum actions should be taken as an initial response to all missing person reports.

- The incident will be recorded.
- A risk assessment will be conducted.
- An agreement will be made on the initial steps which should be taken to trace the missing person.
- A time will be set to review the decisions which have been taken.

Every possible reason/scenario for their absence should be considered, keeping an open mind.

For further information see [Definition of 'missing'](#) and [Missing Person Publicity Guidance](#).

Note: the link is accessed via log in to the Knowledge Hub.

Hypotheses

Officers in charge of investigations into missing people should be careful not to confuse risk assessment with a hypothesis about the circumstances of the person going missing. For example, an elderly person wearing thin clothing who goes missing in winter is at high risk of harm, and this is the case even if the hypothesis is that the missing person has gone to see a family member.

Hypotheses can be improved by drawing on the knowledge of colleagues who have experience in the relevant area. Officers should avoid making assumptions.

Information that is collected from each missing episode must be recorded to provide intelligence for current or future investigations, as well as wider problem solving and safeguarding work. In cases of individuals who repeatedly go missing, professional expertise indicates that information about where they went and/or who they were with on previous occasions may be a useful indicator of future conduct.

Searching and multi-agency meetings are also an integral part of the investigative process.

First officer to attend

The initial investigating officer (IIO) should begin the investigation, conduct appropriate searches and reassess the level of risk. Judgements made at this point may have an impact on the effectiveness of the investigation.

The primary consideration for the IIO, and every other person managing the investigation, is the safety of the missing person.

A missing person report may be the first report of a serious crime or of a person being at significant risk of harm. If this is believed to be the case, a supervisory officer should be contacted immediately.

Although most missing person enquiries do not lead to a major crime investigation, where they do, early identification that this may be a major crime investigation is crucial to the investigation.

How the investigation is conducted in the first few hours (see golden hour) after the report is made to the police may affect the outcome.

For further information see:

- [Golden hour](#)
- [Initial response to suspected parental abduction](#)
- [Initial response to honour-based violence](#)
- [Immediate actions in cases of suspected parental abduction checklist](#)

Religious and cultural considerations

Consideration should be given to the needs of the missing person and their families, including being sensitive to religious or lifestyle issues. While the police will take reasonable steps to be sensitive to cultural, religious or other needs, these do not have priority over the requirement for the police to make the missing person as safe as possible.

Responsibilities

The first officer deployed to attend a report of a missing person should carry out the following actions. Note: some of these may not apply if the missing person has been classified as very low risk.

- Establish the facts and keep accurate records of what was said and by whom.
- Make an assessment of the circumstances of the disappearance in order to judge the risks to which that person and the community are likely to be exposed.

All information and evidence gathered, and decisions and actions should be recorded. Where relevant the risk assessment should include the rationale for any actions taken.

- Notify a supervisor to ensure oversight – this should happen immediately in high-risk cases, and as soon as is practicable in all other cases.
- Gather sufficient information about the missing person to enable an effective and thorough investigation to be conducted – the depth of that information will vary according to the assessment of risk. Very detailed information and a lifestyle profile will be needed in high-risk cases.
- Consider taking a full statement from the person reporting the missing person as well as any other key individuals (for example, the last person to see them).
- Conduct initial searches of relevant premises, the extent and nature of the search should be recorded (see [Search](#)).
- Consider seizing electronic devices, computers, and other documentation, (for example, diaries, financial records and notes) and obtain details of usernames and passwords.
- Obtain photos of the missing person – these should ideally be current likeness of the missing person and obtained in a digital format.
- Obtain details of the individual's mobile phone and if they have it with them – if the missing person has a mobile phone consider arranging for a [TextSafe](#)® to be sent by the charity, Missing People.
- Obtain details of any vehicles that they may have access to and place markers on relevant vehicles on the PNC without delay.

- Consider obtaining any physical evidence of identity such as fingerprints or DNA samples in accordance with [Code of Practice \(2009\) Collection of Missing Persons Data](#).
- Confirm if the person has taken their passport (consider prompt circulation if it is deemed likely the individual may leave the country). (This is particularly important where there are concerns that an individual has been radicalised and is intending to travel abroad, see [National Ports Office – Heathrow](#).)
- Make all immediate relevant enquiries and take immediate actions in order to locate the missing person
- Consider the need for specialist officers or resources, for example, force helicopters, dogs, financial investigation officers.
- Upload the missing person report.
- Circulate details of the missing person on local information systems and to relevant local partners, for example, hospitals, ambulance service, taxi and bus firms.

It is important for an individual (who has responsibilities/concerns for the missing person) to be identified who can act as the point of contact for the police. The police will agree with the individual/family when they will next be contacted. This person should be provided with a call reference number and given details of how to contact the police with any further information they have about the case or if they would like to receive an update.

An assessment must be made of the level of support required for the family, residential worker or foster carer and consideration should be given to appointing a family liaison officer. Information should then be provided regarding additional organisations that may be able to assist or support them.

Supervisory responsibilities

All cases must be subject to active and proportionate investigation with intrusive direction and control by a supervisory/managerial officer. Investigations, particularly in the early stages, must have a documented handover process which clearly details the managers/supervisors who have that direction and control, and a nominated OIC.

A missing person coordinator, or other person focused on the investigation of missing persons, at force and/or local level will assist in the independent oversight of cases. This specialist tier is not designed to remove responsibility from general patrol duties or routine supervision. Initial report and

as soon as practicable.

- Supervisors must ensure that the appropriate actions are taken to locate the missing person without delay.
- Consider the need for an early media release where appropriate and advise corporate communications departments. If the missing person is under 18 years of age and potentially at significant risk of harm, consider the use of [Child Rescue Alert](#). This link is accessed via the College Learn.
- Consideration should be given to involving a detective, police search adviser, senior management team and child-specific services. This is particularly important where serious crime or terrorism is suspected.
- Consideration must be given to the allocation of sufficient resources to pursue an effective investigation.
- Consider the need for a multi-agency response involving partner organisations in the investigation.

An immediate and longer-term investigation plan may be set by a supervisor or investigating officer. Any plan should take account of staffing levels and must be recorded. Such entries must be timed, dated and signed by the supervisor.

The investigation plan should document the risk assessment guiding the actions being set and any hypotheses. Supervisors must ensure these are revisited as new information is received or circumstances change.

The next duty supervisor must be fully briefed to ensure continuity of the investigation. The [tasking and coordination](#) group should monitor missing person investigations, ensuring that they are being managed effectively with appropriate levels of resources.

Ownership

The appropriate level of ownership of the investigation should be considered in all cases.

If a case is risk assessed and there is very low risk, ownership may remain within the control room or contact centre.

In all cases assessed as: low; medium or high risk there should be a nominated IO at one of three levels:

- an officer allocated from patrol duties and handed over to subsequent shifts
- in more serious cases an IO allocated whose sole or primary role is to investigate this incident
- an SIO, where the seriousness of the case warrants this

A supervisor should ensure the case is reviewed and the risk reassessed at regular intervals, taking account of any new information. If new information becomes available which indicates that there is an increased level of risk of harm to the missing person, the ownership may transfer from the control room to a response officer, IO or SIO as appropriate.

The time that has passed since the previous review should also be taken into account within each risk assessment.

Daily management meeting

Where appropriate, cases should be reviewed at the daily management meeting. These meetings provide a forum for determining the level of resources and supervision that cases require.

Cases that have moved beyond initial actions to trace the missing person may be managed through more routine supervision processes. It is important that, whatever the mechanism to manage missing person investigations, there is regular review and supervision.

For further information see [National Intelligence Model](#).

Senior management team

While the daily responsibility for an investigation normally rests with other ranks, senior management have a responsibility to ensure that the needs of the investigation are met, policy is followed, and a thorough investigation is carried out.

An appropriate level of support must be given and sufficient resources made available to carry out an investigation. [IOPC reports](#) have shown that understaffing and a lack of appropriate recognition may have contributed to the failure of missing person investigations in the past.

Family support

One of the considerations the police need to address during a missing person investigation is how best to support the family and carers of the missing person.

While it is practical for the police service to manage these investigations within the uniform response area, this may not always satisfy the needs of families and carers. Rotating ownership of the investigation through a 24-hour shift pattern may not allow for a consistent point of contact. It is therefore important that in the early stages of an investigation, at every shift change a nominated person is available to the family or carers of the missing person and that they are told about this. In protracted investigations, a single point of contact (SPOC) should be nominated to maintain appropriate contact with the family.

For further information see:

- [Working with victims and witnesses](#)
- [ESRC \(2013\) Families living with absence: Searching for missing people](#)
- [Family support – Missing People](#)

Police actions in relation to support for families

The trauma associated with a missing person investigation may place families under immense pressure and stress. Investigators are likely to require them to provide detailed information and there may also be public and media interest

The information required by families and carers of those reported missing will depend on the circumstances of the case, however police officers or staff with responsibility for investigating a missing person report are able to support their needs by:

- providing a SPOC (that is realistic for them to make contact with) and provide regular updates
- informing them of support services – this information may be provided as a leaflet or similar that includes details of the role of the Missing People charity
- listening and responding to any concerns that they may have about the investigation (recognising the importance of the incident and investigation to them)
- managing their expectations by giving realistic updates on what is being done and how an investigation is being conducted, (including any limitations that may be placed on it)
- ensure that they are made aware of any media releases/press conferences (before they take place)
- maintaining contact in long-term cases and informing them of reviews
- providing a family liaison officer (in appropriate cases)

- discuss with the family social media aspects – whether social media could be effective in taking the investigation forward and whether this will leave a difficult and unwanted footprint

For further information see:

- [Factsheets for families](#)
- [Experiences of reporting missing people](#)
- [Family support - missing people](#)

Family liaison officers

A family liaison officer (FLO) may be assigned to support a family, their primary purpose is to assist the SIO with the exchange of information between the SIO and the family members.

FLOs are not routinely assigned to missing person enquiries, however, they may be used in some cases.

For further information see [Working with victims and witnesses](#).

Managing affairs

When someone goes missing, families can experience additional stress associated with the practical difficulties resulting from their disappearance. Where the person has been missing for some time, or the circumstances indicate the person may have died, a family may wish to resolve their relative's affairs using presumption of death legislation. The charity [Missing People](#) is able to provide advice and support to families considering this, and has produced [guides to assist](#).

Where a family is going to make a presumption of death application, forces must ensure that they have completed all reasonable lines of enquiry and considered all opportunities to locate the individual (alive or dead). The force should contact the [UK Missing Persons Unit \(UKMPU\)](#) to review the case, ensure that no unidentified bodies or remains have been located and provide reassurance to a court that the person subject to the application is no longer alive.

The missing person case review process

Reviews should take place regularly, the frequency of which will be determined by the circumstances of the case. A detective supervisor should conduct case reviews as they have the

investigative expertise. In high-risk cases this should be done as soon as possible. In all other cases this review should be conducted no later than 48 hours after the report is made to the police. The reviewing officer's rank should be no less than that of a detective inspector.

Assumptions should be avoided, and any uncorroborated details should be challenged to ensure enquiries are not based on inaccurate information.

When urgent and immediate actions are required and investigative lines which require more time to achieve or resolve are taking place, early decisions should be taken to ensure that the missing person case is reviewed at appropriate intervals.

The purpose of each review is to:

- review the level of risk, including information from social care and other sources when appropriate
- check for any outstanding and incomplete actions
- quality assure actions already taken
- set new actions and enquiries in order to bring the investigation to a successful conclusion
- make recommendations about the management and ownership of the investigation
- set future review date(s) as appropriate

All of the aforementioned points should be recorded as policy decisions within the report. Examples of review checklists developed by police forces are available from the [UKMPU community](#) (requires log on to Knowledge Hub).

Long-term case reviews

In most missing cases, the person will be found or will return in a fairly short period of time. Some cases will, however, take much longer to resolve and police activity may be less visible to the family or carers. It is important that in these long-term cases, the family and carers are kept up to date with developments and reassured that enquiries are continuing.

Family and carers should be given reasonable expectations about ongoing contact during long-term cases. They should be told about the review process and when the next review is due, and updated on the outcomes.

When discussing these matters police officers should ask family members and/or carers how and when they would like to be contacted and should consider the impact that the review process might have on them at each contact. Expectations in relation to the review process and its potential outcomes also need to be managed, see [Case closure](#).

Search

A search of the place where the individual has gone missing from and/or the home address should be conducted in all cases unless there are specific reasons why this should not happen. The reporting person may be asked to conduct this search on behalf of the police (as appropriate and proportionate to the circumstances of the disappearance).

The extent and intrusiveness of a search will be dictated by the circumstances of a case and officers should consider the purpose of the search. All searches should be fully documented. This documentation should include the reasons for, and extent of, the search so that accurate information is available should further searches be required. It is also important to record what has not been searched.

Searches should be conducted with compassion towards the needs of the family and local communities affected.

Search strategy

The IO should consider seeking advice as necessary from a PolSA when developing the search strategy. Although non-police search resources (for example, volunteers or search and rescue teams) may be used overall responsibility for managing the search aspect of an investigation remains with the police.

The search strategy and planning for missing people should be guided by [Missing person search APP](#).

An e-learning package is also available from [College Learn](#) that provides guidance on the techniques required when searching for a missing person. (Please note that access to this APP page and College Learn is restricted. PNN or GSi email users will be asked to login or register to access this content via the links above.)

Legal powers to search on private premises

The majority of missing person searches are conducted with the consent of the owner or occupier of the premises. Where this is not the case however, if, when responding to a call to a private address, an officer has information to suggest that there is an imminent risk to the life (or limb) of a person inside then the officer may enter to save that person (the [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 section 17](#), see also [Police powers to enter and detain](#)).

In all other circumstances police officers will require a warrant to enter and search a private premises without permission (See [Warrants](#)).

Open-door and intrusive searching considerations

Open-door searching entails searching all spaces within premises where it is possible the missing person could be. Where there are relevant suspicions, it may be necessary to conduct a more intrusive search, but this should be done under the supervision of a PoISA.

The purpose of this search would be to look for the missing person or anything that might give information that could lead to their discovery, such as diaries, notes, computers and phones.

Additional resources to support the search for missing people

Guidance on the search for vulnerable missing people (children and adults) and the investigation of suspicious missing person cases is available within the [Specific investigations APP](#) page.

The Fire and Rescue service

Early consideration should be given to the resources required to conduct effective searches. Under a national protocol agreement, the fire and rescue service are able to assist the police in searches for high-risk missing persons.

Volunteer search teams

Volunteer search teams may provide valuable assistance.

The police will retain overall responsibility for the search, and a coordinator to assist with the management and direction of any volunteer teams should be appointed where appropriate.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Although the police are recognised as the authority which coordinates the response to an incident on land. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has responsibility for the initiation and coordination of civil maritime search and rescue (defined as being the area below the high-water mark) and will assist the police on request. The MCA may also assist further inland and this can be coordinated via the Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC).

The Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre

The Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC) for the UK and territorial waters is based at Kinloss Barracks and controls helicopters and other aircraft from a number of RAF stations. They are usually called by the MCA for assistance in sea-based incidents but are also available for land-based lifesaving operations.

Additional information that may inform or assist in the search for a missing person is available via the following links:

- [Working with victims and witnesses APP](#) – taking effective witness reports
- [Investigation process APP](#)
- [Financial investigation APP](#) – electronic, financial and communications enquiries
- [Media relations APP](#) – sightings provided as a result of publicity
- [AWOL patients APP](#) – arrangements for the return of hospital inpatients
- [ESHR \(2014\) Geographies of missing people: processes, experiences and responses](#)

Public sightings

Sightings must be carefully managed to ensure that they are properly considered in the context of the overall investigation. The reliability of any sightings received should always be assessed and attempts made to corroborate the information.

Professional experience has shown that the public will contact the police with sightings of persons who are being sought, particularly when there has been significant media interest. For a number of reasons, however, they are often mistaken and rarely, but occasionally, deliberately wish to mislead the investigators. This is an issue that can present difficulties, and investigations in high-profile cases can become overwhelmed by the volume of sightings.

All sightings should be recorded. The method of recording investigative progress and enquiries should be appropriate to the seriousness of the case and force policy and may involve using either a missing persons database/application, the force command and control incident log, and/or it may extend to using the HOLMES system for more complex cases or serious crime investigations.

Enquiries should be undertaken to determine if there is any means of corroborating the sightings, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV), financial transactions or telephony which also place the missing person in that area. Adding sightings to a map with the date and time the person was seen can highlight where a cluster of sightings have been reported, which can be further investigated.

Sightings should be evaluated alongside other information gathered as part of the investigation, actions taken and the rationale should be recorded. Where a significant volume of sightings is received, a means of grading and summarising them should be employed to assist prioritisation.

For further information see [Information management](#).

Rewards

Support from the public can be encouraged when rewards are offered to the public for information and this can be beneficial in order to reinvigorate media attention in the missing person's case. However, careful consideration should be given to accepting any offer because of the number of resources that may be required to manage the response, as all information will need to be assessed.

Forensics

Early consideration must be given to obtaining identification material as required by the [Code of Practice](#). Acquiring this in a timely manner ensures that:

- opportunities to obtain it are not lost
- families do not have to be revisited at a later date, which may cause additional distress
- individuals can be promptly eliminated or matched to any unidentified remains which may be found

Timescales for collecting samples

The timescales for taking samples reflect the need for proportionality against the perceived risk to the missing person. Failure to collect the samples reasonably quickly reduces the opportunity for gathering them. The following timescales have been derived as a result of professional expertise.

- High-risk missing person – samples to be obtained within 24 hours.
- Medium and low-risk missing person – in relevant cases samples to be obtained within seven days. 'Relevant' means where obtaining the samples is, or could become, relevant to the investigation.

When a missing person case is escalated from very low risk, consideration should be given to obtaining samples.

The samples should be retained and submitted to the relevant database for all long-term cases (those not returned within 28 days). Where there is an investigative need, the samples should be submitted as soon as that need becomes apparent.

The following table shows the range of suitable identification samples and describes which database should be used to store them.

Identification samples

Type of sample	Database
DNA	Missing Persons DNA Database *Requires UKMPU HERMES reference
Fingerprints	Ident1
Palm prints	Ident1
Footprints (plantar impressions)	Ident1

Dental charts	Hard copy and electronic copy retained by the UKMPU
---------------	---

Consideration should be given to obtaining as many different forms of identification as possible. Although fingerprints or dental records may be sufficient to identify a body found, in some instances only partial remains may be recovered and DNA may be the only means of identifying the individual. Similarly, where a body is recovered from water or in an advanced state of decomposition, it may be difficult to obtain a DNA profile and dental records may identify the remains.

For further information see [Identification evidence](#).

Lifestyle information

Information known about the individual and their lifestyle should guide the investigation, contribute to risk assessments and assist with identifying the possible reasons (or hypotheses) for the person's absence. Further enquiries may challenge or establish the validity of the hypotheses. It is important to build up a comprehensive picture of the person's family, friends, behaviour, hobbies and habits (or 'lifestyle') as soon as possible. Within major crime investigations, this is often referred to as '[Victimology](#)' and is generally the responsibility of the FLO.

Computer-based investigations

Computer-based enquiries are an important aspect of a missing person investigation. Information gathered about the person's online activity may provide crucial clues about their intentions and possible destinations while missing, but the police do not always have the legal right to access this information.

Individuals have the right to privacy and do not have to inform their families and friends about their whereabouts. Police officers must consider the rights of a missing person and respect their private and family life. Careful consideration should be given to the necessity and proportionality of any action (such as investigations into personal data) given the intrusive nature of such enquiries. Access to such data may often be justified based upon safeguarding concerns, or in order to determine if or what crime has occurred. It may be necessary to apply for authority to recover communications and other data under the [Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000](#).

For further information see:

- [NPCC \(2020\) Internet Intelligence and Investigations Strategy](#)
- [NPCC \(2020\) Internet Intelligence and Investigations Guidance \(Covert Profiles\)](#)
- [NPCC \(2020\) Internet Intelligence and Investigations Guidance \(Overt Profiles\)](#)

Accessing computer-based information

Where there are concerns that the individual may be a victim of crime, their computer/internet-enabled devices should be accessed only by someone trained to do so. Accessing a device ((for example, turning on someone's smart phone) cannot only alter the information on it, but is likely to be regarded as an unlawful intercept if a message is received during access and appropriate authorisation has not been obtained.

The procedures for collating computer-based information should follow those of any other criminal investigation. If there is no suspicion of criminal involvement and the individual has access to a shared computer, consent from the owner may be sufficient in order to gain access to identify further lines of enquiry. If in doubt, the principles of collating [computer-based evidence](#) should be adhered to.

Social media/open source enquiries

Although no legal authority is required to view information that an individual has made publicly available on a social media site, regularly reviewing and recording a person's information may be deemed to be surveillance, and could require Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) authorisation.

Investigators should be aware that viewing such information can be traced back to the computer used, and personal equipment such as smart phones should not be used to conduct online enquiries. Where involvement in criminality is suspected, advice should be sought before any online work is undertaken.

For case-specific advice, or where direct access to a missing person's social media profile is being considered, even with consent of the next of kin it is recommended that advice is sought, urgently if necessary, from the force or agency communications data SPOC, control room, Covert Authorities' Bureau (CAB) or the [NCA Major Crime Investigative Support](#) (telephone 0345 000 5463).

When social media is identified as being relevant to a missing person investigation, it is recommended that contact is made with the social network provider (via the force/agency communications data SPOC) and that the assistance of the social network in question is sought wherever possible.

For further information see:

- [NPCC \(2020\) Internet Intelligence and Investigations Strategy](#)
- [NPCC \(2020\) Internet Intelligence and Investigations Guidance \(Covert Profiles\)](#)
- [NPCC \(2020\) Internet Intelligence and Investigations Guidance \(Overt Profiles\)](#)

Passive data enquiries (CCTV/ANPR)

Passive data can be an important aspect of a missing person investigation. Early capture of [CCTV](#) around the home address, last known location, and/or place the individual is missing from can be crucial to identify relevant lines of enquiry and develop the search strategy. Images obtained from CCTV may also prove valuable for media purposes, especially where a recent photograph of the individual is not available.

Where applicable, data from [ANPR](#) and vehicle and phone satellite navigation systems can be used to build up a picture of the missing person's lifestyle and habits. If the IO is able to understand where the missing person has travelled recently or during previous periods of absence, this may provide clues to their possible location.

For further information see [Passive data generators.](#)

Financial and telephone enquiries

Where there is a concern for a person's welfare, the following financial and communication data (which is accessed with appropriate authority) can provide information about an individual's lifestyle, location and indicate if they are alive:

- communications data
- bank accounts
- loyalty cards
- pensions / benefits claims

An accredited financial investigation officer (FIO) will be able to offer the IO advice on how this information can be accessed and used to support the investigation and develop an effective investigative strategy (see [Using financial information](#)).

It may also be possible to obtain previous bills or bank statements during the search of the home address in order to build up this understanding.

Where there is significant concern regarding the person's wellbeing, consideration should be given to accessing live-time communications data, (for example, cell site (see [Passive data generators](#))).

Proof-of-life enquiries

There are various government and private organisations which may hold information relevant to the investigation. These may include:

- the Department for Work and Pensions
- the DVLA
- the Passport Office
- GP and hospitals
- vehicle recovery services, (for example, the AA and RAC)
- car rental companies

Checks with these organisations can assist in establishing if the person has chosen to disappear or if harm has come to them. The extent to which these enquiries are pursued will vary, depending on the circumstances of the case. Enquiries with these organisations should be proportionate, based on a realistic assessment of the circumstances of the disappearance.

While they may be crucial in [no-body murder investigations](#), a standardised approach is not likely to be beneficial or necessary in many cases.

For further information on how to conduct these enquiries see:

- [Suspicious missing person investigations](#)
- [Computer-based evidence](#)
- [Information management APP](#)
- [Financial Investigation APP](#)

Partial remains found

If partial remains of a body are found and they are believed to be that of a missing person a decision may be taken to discontinue the investigation. In such circumstances the missing person record may remain open to allow for the recording of any information concerning further remains that might be located in due course.

If there is no likelihood of matching the person against a found person or body, the missing person case should remain inactive until authority to discontinue has been made by senior management. Authority to discontinue is likely to be granted when all potential lines of enquiry have been explored. Further advice can be sought from the [UKMPU](#).

For further information see [Investigation of found remains/people](#).

Case analysis

Case analysis is an analytical technique used to examine an incident in order to support the investigation of a serious crime, and should be considered in appropriate missing person cases. It can assist evaluation of the hypothesised reason for the disappearance.

Information gaps should be identified, enabling enquiries to be undertaken to fill these gaps and ensure a comprehensive picture of the individual's lifestyle has been gathered. Analysis can then be used to highlight where concerns for the individual's wellbeing may be founded, whether they are a victim of crime or may have come to harm through their own actions. A [subject profile](#) will assist in this process.

A sudden cessation of all habitual activity undertaken prior to the person's disappearance may provide cause for concern and can be used to substantiate requests for information from other agencies. However, the level and extent of analysis undertaken should be proportionate to the circumstances. Although initial circumstances may indicate this is not necessary, the decision should be reviewed as the investigation progresses.

Contact from people claiming psychic powers

High-profile missing person investigations can attract the interest of people who claim to have psychic or extrasensory powers. They can create pressures for searches to be concentrated in certain areas. There is no evidence people who make such claims have positively contributed to an

investigation.

Media

It may be necessary and appropriate for police investigators to engage with, and manage, the media during missing person investigations for the following reasons.

1. To respond to media requests for information.
2. To enable the use of the media for appeals for information in relation to suspects, offenders and witnesses.
3. To obtain information on police communication methods.
4. To build public confidence.

In the case of points 1 and 2, it is important that accurate information must be given with regard to descriptions, clothing, vehicles and last sightings. Any photographs must be recent or accompanied by supporting information to describe when they were taken.

Media strategy

A **media strategy** should be developed in all high-profile cases, and where the family have instigated their own media appeal. The objectives of the media strategy will be to generate information and public awareness to assist the enquiry and to control speculation.

It will not be appropriate to use the media in every case, but when it is used consideration should be given to the purpose of using publicity, the associated risks, and what types of appeals are best suited to aid the investigation.

When determining the media strategy the impact on the community must be considered. A missing person **critical incident** is different from other incidents and will require additional considerations. This is because the nature of the investigation is likely to generate public interest over a number of days.

Careful management of the media will help to ensure they obtain newsworthy material, and that any interference with the investigation is minimised.

If the police wish to use the media as part of an investigation, the missing person's family or carer should be consulted. The use of publicity may still be considered when consent has not been

provided, however the IO must ensure that:

- the decision is made with consideration for the [Human Rights Act 1998](#), Data Protection Act 2018 and UK General Data Protection Regulation
- any publicity is carried out proportionately
- actions taken are in the best interests of the welfare of the missing person

For further information see:

- [Missing person media appeals](#)
- [Missing persons media and online publicity](#)

Looked-after children

Particular care should be taken in relation to media engagement for looked-after children. Some addresses will be confidential and there will be times when birth parents do not know where their child is living. Development of the media strategy must be carried out in partnership with the local authority and all risk factors explored.

In addition to using local media contacts, the charity Missing People has extensive local and national opportunities to assist forces with publicity. Even if it has not been involved in the publicity, many people contact the charity with important and relevant information, particularly where there is widespread media coverage.

It is important, therefore, that forces establish communication links with the Missing People charity to ensure that missing person case information is shared and can be managed.

Family initiated media campaigns

Investigators should also be aware of the possibility that families or friends may involve the media directly in well-intentioned efforts to find the missing person. If an investigator considers that such publicity would adversely affect the investigation, this should be explained to family and friends.

Even where media engagement and publicity is not deemed appropriate, the corporate communication department should be made aware of the investigation in case family members choose to go ahead and engage with the media.

Family and friends may choose to mount their own media campaign, particularly using social media accounts. Police officers should support the family by advising them of the type of information to post. It is also important that the flow of information displayed on social networking sites is monitored to avoid negative or incorrect messages. Management of this should form part of the police media strategy.

The charity Missing People is also available to [support and advise families considering private appeals](#). The NPCC lead for missing persons may be able to advise on appropriate measures available.

For further information see:

- [Missing Persons Bureau \(n.d.\) Has someone you know gone missing? Coping with practical issues](#)
- [Missing People Charity – Our Publicity appeals help find missing people](#)

Management of return

Effectively managing the return of the missing person should be considered as part of the investigation. The investigation cannot be concluded until the full circumstances of going missing are explored and appropriate safeguarding measures put in place. Understanding the reasons why they went missing can help to reduce future missing episodes and/or provide information to assist their location, should they go missing again. Effective management of a person's return is important because the person:

- may have been the subject of crime or otherwise been at risk of harm
- may have gone missing in order to harm themselves or take their own life
- may have been unsafe or at risk owing to their inability to look after themselves properly due to age, incapacity or other reasons
- may have been the perpetrator of crime

The approach to managing the return will be determined by the risk assessment but the following points may need consideration.

- Should a multi-agency consultation or strategy meeting be held to decide what will happen next?
- What is the best engagement process when the person is found and who should talk to them?

- Where will they be accommodated?
- Are any further interventions or support needed? (see sources of support)
- Who is the person best suited to conduct the return interview and when? For example, arrangements for children based in accommodation out of force area who won't be returned to the original force who recorded them missing.

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

Accommodation

Early consideration must be given to whether it is appropriate to return the missing person to their home address or other place they went missing from. Consideration of what actions will be taken when the missing person is located should take place before they are found. Waiting until they have returned may lead to lost opportunities to prevent them going missing again. Strategy discussions should include alternative accommodation where necessary and appropriate levels of supervision put in place as necessary.

Children and young people

Finding suitable emergency accommodation for children can be difficult, however police stations are not appropriate places to accommodate children. Where a child or vulnerable adult is in care, there should be a risk assessment on the care setting (see [Indication of exploitation or harm](#)).

For looked-after children, the local authority will be responsible for making the decision about whether they should be returned to their placement, although in some instances they will do that following consultation with police officers and other professionals (see [Care planning on return](#)).

Provision of services for children in need, their families and others

[The Children Act 1989](#) places a duty on local authorities to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need in their area.

[Section 17 of the Children Act 1989](#) states that it shall be the general duty of every local authority to provide a range of appropriate services to children in need. In some cases emergency care placements may need to be used to cover the initial period following the return of the missing person. Each force should have an appointed lead officer for issues relating to safeguarding

children.

Further guidance on the management and protection of children

- [Concern for a child APP](#) (including [Police protection](#) and [Suitable accommodation](#))
- [HM Government \(2018\) Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)
- [Welsh Assembly Government \(n.d.\) Safeguarding Children: Working Together Under the Children Act 2004](#)
- [Child Sexual Abuse: Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse](#)

Confidentiality

Police officers must be mindful that when an adult missing person is located, their whereabouts must not be disclosed to others if this is against their wishes. The police should inform the person who reported them missing that they have been located. It is possible that the person making the missing person report has an ulterior motive for submitting a report. The same considerations apply to children who may be at risk of abuse or harm.

Interviews

The prevention interviews and return interviews can provide an important opportunity to identify ongoing risk factors that may affect the likelihood of the individual going missing again, and should not be treated as simply administrative procedures to close a missing incident.

Prevention interviews are usually conducted by the police and are different to return interviews which are often provided by third sector partners. The learning points from any interviews need to feed into the police systems to improve the response to that individual if they go missing again.

For further information, see the NPCC (2023) [Advice to police forces on prevention interviews and independent return interviews](#).

Prevention interviews

The police have a responsibility to ensure that the returning person is safe and well. The purpose of the prevention interview is to identify any ongoing risk or factors which may contribute to the person going missing again. Prevention interviews should therefore be carried out in all high-risk cases, but

should also be considered for very low risk, low and medium cases. The interview provides a valuable opportunity to find out useful information that may indicate harm suffered by the returning person. It can also identify details that may help trace the person in the event of a future missing episode.

Chief officers may exercise discretion not to carry out prevention interviews for no apparent risk (absent) cases. To apply this discretion, however, an assessment of the circumstances of the case must be carried out to determine the value in visiting the returning person. This assessment requires an understanding of the circumstances in which the person went missing and anything known about what happened to the person while they were missing. There is also a need to consider the potential to gather information that might be of use in the event of a future missing episode.

The interviewer should check for any indications that the person has suffered harm, where and with whom they have been, and give them an opportunity to disclose any offending against or by them.

Forces should consider the most appropriate method to conduct a prevention interview, applying thought to necessity and proportionality. In many cases, the adverse impact of police attendance in person may suggest that someone other than a police officer might carry out the interview or that an interview can be conducted by video, telephone or other remote link.

When considering an external body to carry out an interview, it is important to ensure that all relevant information is passed back to policing so that risk of harm to that person or anyone else is addressed and to inform any future missing person enquiries involving this person.

In reaching a decision it is important to consider the full circumstances of the missing incident, the harm or potential harm and the impact of police involvement on the individual.

Timing of the prevention interview

A prevention interview should be carried out as soon as is practicable.

It is important to identify the right person with the right skills to complete this interview, in order to gather as much information as possible to inform any prevention work required. If information is disclosed indicating that the person has been harmed or is at risk of harm, appropriate action should be taken.

Professional experience suggests that missing persons, especially children, may be unwilling to engage in this process. If this is the case, it is important to record their demeanour, physical state, clothing and any other factors that may be relevant to any ongoing investigation of a crime, their care and safeguarding plans.

Further investigation may be needed in order to identify and address risks. Where it is identified that the person is likely to go missing again, a 'trigger plan' should be created in order to inform action should they be reported missing again.

Frequency of checks

Every effort should be made to visit young people on every occasion that they have been missing from home. Where a person goes missing frequently, particularly from a care setting, it may not be practicable to see them every time they return. An example of this may be where they go missing on several occasions each day and it would be more effective to see them just once in each day at a convenient time.

Young people missing from care are likely to have other people responsible for their welfare and there can be an understanding between the professionals involved on how this is managed. Checks should be taken to ensure that a child is not going missing to avoid something that may be happening in their care setting.

A joint decision should be made between police and those responsible for their care with regard to the frequency of prevention interviews. As mentioned previously, it is important that the right person with the right skills is involved in carrying out the prevention interview.

Return interview

Forces should establish a process for providing return interviews where adults are deemed to be vulnerable and/or at risk of harm.

Following the return of the missing person, individuals should be offered the opportunity to engage in a more in-depth interview in order to:

- identify and deal with any harm they have experienced, including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the police prevention interview (any medical conditions should be discussed and any need for medical attention assessed)

- understand and try to address the reasons for the disappearance
- try to prevent it happening again

The information gathered from the interview helps professionals to understand the reasons why the person went missing and to take action to prevent future missing episodes. It is important that a process exists to share information gathered from these interviews with partners (see [Multi-agency protocols](#)).

For further information see [Department for Education \(2014\) Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#).

Responsibility for independent return interviews

Police forces should work with local authorities to ensure independent return interviews are always offered to children who have been missing. Although in England the legal responsibility sits with the local authority, it is expected that police forces will work with their partners to ensure these are completed and information is shared.

Where available, the independent return interview should be provided by a professional from an independent agency (which could be an independent advocacy service or specialised runaways' project) who is:

- trained to carry out these interviews
- able to follow up any actions that emerge with the authority responsible for the individual's care

Timing of return interviews

The return interview should take place without undue delay and preferably within 72 hours of the person being located or returned.

Delays in return interviews may result in:

- the retraction of statements and disclosures
- a loss of evidence
- a loss of confidence in police response

Information and intelligence supplied by parents and carers, such as details of telephone calls or messages on mobile phones, can be very relevant and should be recorded.

Indication of exploitation or harm

Any indicators that the individual has come to harm or may be the victim of crime should be noted and escalated for further investigation as relevant.

Where evidence is identified that the person may have been exploited, radicalised or otherwise harmed by a third party, referrals should be made to the appropriate specialist team for investigation and pursuit of suspects.

Additional concerns

The following guidance has been developed to support investigators in cases where it is suspected that a child may be at risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation, abduction, forced marriage or radicalisation.

- [Indicators of concern for a child](#)
- [Risk identification](#)
- [Action in urgent or serious cases](#)
- [Child sexual exploitation](#) APP ([Definition of CSE](#), [Risk factors](#), [Warning signs](#))
- [Forced marriage and honour based violence](#) APP
- [Kidnap and extortion](#) APP (GPMS Restricted)

Care planning on return

For looked-after children and some vulnerable adults, reviewing their care plan is an important element of managing their return from a missing episode. Although this is not the responsibility of the police, it is important for police officers to share any information with partners which may influence the care plan.

Care planning involves a comprehensive assessment of the individual's needs and takes into account their wishes, feelings and aspirations for their future. The care plan should be used to decide which placement (for example, foster care or residential home) will be most appropriate.

Case closure

It will not usually be appropriate for missing person cases to be closed without the individual being seen by the police or a relevant professional. It is important that the appropriate closing code (for command and control systems) is used to identify the incident as a missing person.

In circumstances where the missing person has been located, but it is impractical to see them owing to their present circumstances, (for example, they are abroad or are deliberately making themselves unavailable to police, the case can be closed provided that a member of the senior management team authorises this.

Not found

Where the missing person has not been found, decisions will be taken by the IO as to whether the case remains an active investigation and the subject of review. Decisions will be based on the investigation and circumstances of the case. For example, it may be considered that the person has left home or lost contact of their own accord.

Long-term cases

A senior officer who has been trained as an SIO should review long-term cases (those open for 28 days or longer). Reviews should normally be completed at the latest after 28 days, three months, six months and 12 months, then annually thereafter. If significant information comes to light, this should trigger an immediate review. Consideration may also be given to cold case reviews of outstanding missing person cases.

Cold-case reviews

Advances in forensics, technology and information sharing capabilities mean that cold cases should be reviewed in order to determine the potential for further investigation which may resolve the case. The extent and timing of any review will necessarily depend on the circumstances of the case. Advice and support can be obtained from the [UK Missing Persons Unit \(UKMPU\)](#).

In unsolved missing person cases that are over a year old, forces should seek to process and retain records of as many of the available forensic identification samples as possible. Any reasons why a forensic sample is not available should be documented. Where an individual has been missing for a number of years and a direct DNA profile from belongings or medical samples is not available, consideration should be given to obtaining profiles from family members.

Tags

Missing persons