Strategic responsibilities

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Missing persons strategies and responses should be focused on multi-agency working and should be focused on preventing people from going missing. It is important to understand the reasons why individuals go missing. A greater understanding will enable more effective prevention strategies to be implemented. By applying a preventative approach at a strategic level police forces may be able to help safeguard vulnerable people, as well as reduce the number of missing person incidents.

Partnership working

By working together, sharing information and having a common understanding of processes, police forces and partner agencies involved with health, social care and safeguarding are able to support the proper management of missing person cases.

The police missing persons coordinator role is vital in supporting multi-agency working. They underpin understanding the risks associated with missing people, both as an individual missing person, but also the risk and demand that missing people place on the force.

Missing person coordinator role

The missing person coordinator role helps to ensure that forces respond effectively and are able to undertake relevant safeguarding responsibilities in relation to missing reports. It is, therefore, important that chief officers ensure that a coordinator, or someone performing this function, is present in all police forces.

The role of the missing person coordinator is to:

- collate information relating to missing reports to identify indicators or patterns of absence which raise concern that the individual may be at risk
- identify safeguarding priorities/considerations

- assist in the independent oversight of cases at force and/or local level
- act as a point of contact for partners, and ensure an effective working relationship is maintained, encouraging the two-way exchange of information
- liaise with other agencies and care providers to ensure that protocols are in place and are being applied by all parties
- assist the force to understand the nature of risk and demand associated with missing people

Missing person coordinators should ensure proactive engagement occurs with adult care homes and children care homes and healthcare establishments to help promote a better understanding of the role of the police in missing person cases. They can also help to identify potential issues and risks surrounding missing persons at an early stage. This work may be complemented by neighbourhood policing.

Assisting investigations

The **coordinator** should not be involved in investigating cases. Their experience and knowledge should be used to support ongoing investigations, but further involvement may impede the time that they have available to focus on more strategic problem solving with partner agencies.

The Coordinator should ensure that investigations are complying with force and national policies and make sure that appropriate and timely actions are taken.

Shared responsibilities

Investigating matters that are recorded as missing person reports is the responsibility of the police, but those involved in the care of children and vulnerable adults also have a safeguarding duty. For further information see **Adults at risk APP**. The use of multi-agency safeguarding hubs (or similar structures) may assist forces to facilitate joint working. Senior police officers at force and, where appropriate, local level should encourage the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (MASA) and local safeguarding adults board (LSAB) to establish effective local procedures to prevent people going missing and, when they do go missing, take effective steps to find the individual before they suffer further harm. Collectively, agencies should consider making arrangements for the following:

Developing risk management and reporting strategies

Promoting the use of a risk management approach where all partners:

- adhere to an agreed reporting and investigation strategy when someone is missing,
- are able to contribute to a risk assessment that considers both the safety of the missing person and others

Missing people who fail to return from authorised absence

Procedures should be established to deal with situations where a person fails to return at an agreed time as this does not necessarily mean that they are at risk. The situation should be evaluated and, where appropriate, the leave can be extended to allow them to return. This will usually apply to people who are deliberately or carelessly absent, for example, deciding not to return because of family pressures or missing the bus back, (see **APP on AWOL Patients**).

If the location of a person is known, they are not missing and other measures should be implemented to safeguard the person's welfare.

Defined responsibilities

It is important that all parties understand their respective responsibilities. Senior officers should ensure that protocols are established which clearly define areas of responsibility for the different organisations involved and establish mutual expectations.

Multi-agency training

Multi-agency training sessions should be used to build understanding between partner agencies and help break down issues faced by the different organisations involved. The MASA is responsible for multi-agency training in relation to safeguarding of children.

Multi-agency protocols

Senior officers should ensure that protocols are in place to support any situation where individuals are looked after, and should set out each organisation's responsibilities and processes in relation to someone being absent or going missing. Collaborative development and implementation of protocols may also facilitate better relationships between agencies.

The protocols should include:

- an agreed definition of a missing person and an unauthorised absence

- an agreed inter-agency framework for classifying the degree of risk when an individual goes missing
- details of actions to be taken when an individual goes missing (including whose responsibility it is to search for the missing person), informed by the risk assessment
- guidance on the threshold for referrals to social care
- details of which local authorities should be involved in referrals in instances involving multiple local authorities
- procedures to ensure other police forces are notified if a person who goes missing repeatedly moves to another area
- details of which partner will carry out an assessment of the individual's needs (for children the **Common Assessment Framework** may be used) and how this information should be shared
- which agencies will offer return interviews (as required within the **Department for Education (2014) Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care**)
- effective reporting and information sharing arrangements between the local authority, the police and other agencies
- measures to support preventative approaches

It is important that the effectiveness of any protocol is reviewed on a regular basis. Review groups should be established comprising representatives from all relevant agencies – senior officers should take steps, for example through relevant safeguarding boards, to ensure that the effectiveness of protocols are effective in driving multi-agency cooperation and reducing the risks associated with people going missing.

The multi-agency response for adults missing from health and care settings: A national framework for England is a national framework document to assist local partnerships in developing agreements to support responses to missing adults.

Preparing for missing incidents

Organisations responsible for looking after individuals are required to complete an assessment of the likelihood of people in their care going missing, as well as any associated risks. Police officers should ask local authority care establishments and carers to gather the following:

- next of kin details
- places the missing person might frequent

- a recent photograph
- any other information that might assist in finding the individual or assessing the level of risk when missing

The information should be collated using an established pro forma which can be shared with the police. Information should be recorded in an easily retrievable way. Many forces are using the Philomena Protocol to guide their actions in relation to relevant cases.

Referrals to social care

An individual should be referred to social care when there is concern that the person requires extra help from social services, beyond those services routinely available to the general public. Multi-agency protocols should agree a threshold for when referrals should be made by the police to social care.

People going missing is an indicator of risk and there may be a range of underlying causes. Some forces find 'reported as missing three times in a rolling 90-day period' is a helpful indicator in some cases. Other forces use a 'recency, frequency, gravity' driven approach. For those using the 'reported as missing three times in a rolling 90-day period' approach, the following apply.

- The individual is a 'repeat missing person' (reported as missing three times in a rolling 90-day period).
- The individual has experienced, or is likely to experience significant harm.
- For children, the parent or carer appears unable or unwilling to work to support and meet the needs of a child that has gone missing.

The **All Wales Practice Guide: Safeguarding children who go missing from home or care** also recommends that there is very close working between children's social care and policing to ensure that all investigations are undertaken efficiently and without duplication of effort. Where appropriate, a multi-agency strategy meeting is convened to consider the evidence for any additional safeguarding issues.

While standard thresholds for referral may be useful, senior officers will want to be sure that a process is in place to ensure cases are recognised which may require a greater safeguarding response before the threshold has been reached. For example, individuals reported missing for the first time where significant risks have been identified should be referred immediately for multi-

agency support, without requiring further reports.

For further information, see **HM Government (2018) Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.**

Prevention and intervention strategies

Collecting and analysing data about cases will help the police and other agencies to understand whether there are any patterns related to missing persons incidents. The results of routine data analysis should be shared to inform the development and review of prevention and intervention strategies. Missing Persons Coordinators are vital for this information analysis and sharing.

Interventions might include, for example, the use of **Child Abduction Warning Notices**, or referrals to support services. It is important that such interventions take place in appropriate circumstances and are not used as a single response when a person is at risk of harm, but form one strand of a more comprehensive approach.

Regular liaison between neighbourhood policing teams and children's and adults' care providers may enable relationships to be developed between police officers, the staff of care establishments, and individuals who are looked after. These relationships may then support effective police intervention and the speedy resolution of cases.

For lessons from other cases, see **IOPC Learning the Lesson.**

Understanding the reasons for going missing

Understanding the reasons why an individual went missing may help to prevent future harm to those individuals. The officers in charge of local areas should have clear plans on how they intend to reduce the number of people who go missing in their area. These plans may include education about the dangers that young people face when they run away (probably delivered through the personal, social, health and economic education curriculum in schools) and targeted work with those thought to be at greater risk of going missing. The police may have a specific role that includes work with communities under the 'Prevent' campaign to address concerns related to extremism.

Forces will also want to develop problem profiles to identify places from where people go missing and where they are most often found. The problem profile will need to be linked to other intelligence

products such as those for child sexual exploitation and modern slavery. Missing Persons Coordinators are vital to developing problem profiles and a more general understanding of the nature of demand and risk associated with missing people.

Multi-agency meetings

Where there is concern for an individual's welfare, a multi-agency meeting should take place in order to establish a joint intervention strategy to ensure the safety of the person. A multi-agency meeting may be triggered when the threshold for referral is met (see **Referrals to social care**).

Multi-agency meetings bring together the individuals in agencies who have responsibility for the missing person. The meeting is also an opportunity to share information which could help identify what may be causing the individual to run away. Where possible, having the person who is the subject of the meeting there should be considered as their presence may add significant value to the outcomes.

Voluntary sector support

Intervention strategies to safeguard the individual and prevent future missing incidents should include referrals to relevant voluntary sector agencies in order to provide specialist support and assistance to the missing person. Local partnerships with voluntary organisations should be established which will detail the thresholds for referral and the nature of the support to be provided.

Care planning

While care planning is the responsibility of the local authority, effective multi-agency partnerships ensure that relevant information about the person is considered and shared when drawing up their care plan.

Local authorities have a responsibility to inform other local authorities when a child who has a history of going missing is moved into their area and care facilities. This information can then be used within their care planning and included in a pre-missing assessment, which should be documented in their placement information record (PIR). (The PIR is held by the local authorities and may be of relevance to police officers working with partners to consider safeguarding matters).

For further information see:

- **Department for Education (2014) Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care**
- **Out of Area Children in Care Notifications England**
- **Out of Area Children in Care Notifications Wales**

Child Abduction Warning Notices

Previously known as Harbourers' Warnings, Child Abduction Warning Notices can be an effective disruption strategy to sever contact between children and individuals who may wish to exploit them. It is vital that careful consideration is given to the issuing of a **Child Abduction Warning Notice (CAWN)**. For example, a CAWN must never be issued where prosecution is a more appropriate course of action. Often a CAWN will be one of a number of actions to safeguard a child.

Vulnerable adults

Adults in residential care and those who are cared for at home can be particularly vulnerable if they become lost or go missing. Ensuring relevant up-to-date information is available to the police can ensure an effective investigation is quickly instigated.

Elderly individuals may be at risk of wandering (for example, those with dementia/Alzheimer's). Proactive measures to safeguard individuals may include commercially available tracking systems, used by carers, that can assist in locating people if they are missing.

For further information see:

- **Home Office. (2021). The multi-agency response for adults missing from health and care settings: A national framework for England**
- **Multi-agency protocols**

Learning from previous incidents

When an individual is located, it is important that information from the prevention interview, and any return interviews (conducted by the partner agencies) is collated in relation to their actions while missing. This information must be recorded and made readily available in case they are reported missing again in the future and may inform both the risk assessment and investigation. Where necessary, intelligence reports should be submitted to assist investigations into criminal activity such as exploitation and trafficking.

Senior officers should ensure that there are procedures in place to identify good practice and lessons learned from previous incidents and that they are disseminated across the police force and with partner agencies where relevant.

Trigger plans

Where it is assessed that the individual is at risk of going missing again, the police officer in charge of the investigation should ensure that information gathered is recorded to assist in creating a plan outlining key actions to be taken if the person is subsequently reported missing. This 'trigger plan' may then be used to locate them as quickly as possible and ensure relevant partners are informed of the incident. Trigger plans should be reviewed following the conclusion of any subsequent missing incidents, and should be shared with other police forces if the individual moves to another area.

Information sharing

Information sharing is critical to effective safeguarding. The information being shared should be relevant and proportionate, but data protection concerns should not be used as an excuse to withhold information where there is a justified reason for sharing it.

Sharing of personal information may be considered legally proportionate if the processing is necessary to protect the vital interests of:

- the individual (in a case where the individual's consent cannot be given or reasonably obtained),
- or another person (in a case where the individual's consent has been unreasonably withheld)

Information sharing agreements with partner organisations should form part of the framework of protocols to manage relationships between police and partner organisations. These agreements can underpin swift information sharing without the need to negotiate access to information on an individual case-by-case basis.

For further information see:

- **Mental Health Act 1983 codes of practice protocols**
- **Part 3, Data Protection Act 1998**
- **Guide to the UK General Data Protection Regulation**
- **Statutory obligation to share information**

Information sharing is critical to effective safeguarding. The UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018 controls how personal information is used, however, this supports you sharing information where it is necessary, proportionate and ethical to do so. Forces should take into consideration the **ICO guidance on law enforcement processing** and **data sharing** to ensure that disclosures are compliant with legislation.

All disclosures of personal data must be necessary and proportionate, and decisions should be justified and documented, with an appropriate lawful basis identified for disclosing the information. This should be done on a case-by-case basis to ensure that data protection compliance is considered and the necessity and justifications for each disclosure are documented.

It is good practice to have Information Sharing Agreements with partner organisations where there are reciprocal, repeated, regular sharing of personal data. Information sharing should form part of the framework of protocols to manage relationships between police and partner organisations. These agreements can underpin swift information sharing without the need to negotiate access to information on an individual case-by-case basis.

More specific guidance on information sharing can be found in the **Information Sharing APP.**

Local data sharing

The **Department for Education (2014) Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care** expects police forces to regularly share details with their local authority all reports of a child or young person reported missing. Similar information should also be shared with relevant agencies regarding vulnerable adults missing from care. Senior officers should ensure that these procedures are formalised under the multi-agency protocols referenced above.

The protocols should detail the:

- information to be shared
- timeframes within which this will be provided
- responsibility of each partner in relation to the provision and response to this data

Local authorities are responsible for sharing information which relates to children who are placed in their care from out-of-area (see Care planning).

Protocols should ensure that care homes also share details of any unauthorised absences (those not reported to the police) with the relevant local authority(s) and police force(s) in order to establish a full pattern of missing/absence. This information may also assist an effective investigation to find a missing person in the event of a future missing episode.

Problem profile reports

In order to identify local priorities for strategic interventions and improvements, senior officers should ensure that their forces produce **problem profile** reports.

Information derived from the profile should help forces to:

- identify high demand locations, enabling multi-agency problem solving to reduce incidents of missing people
- identify if an individual who goes missing may be vulnerable or involved in criminal activity
- assess the impact of missing people for the force

Forces may use this information to measure the benefits associated with proactive intervention.

Sharing the results of any problem profiles can help local partners understand the scale and impact of the issue, as well as enable different agencies to work together to address problem areas (see multi-agency safeguarding hub).

Problem profiles relating to missing people should be shared with the **UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU)**.

Information sharing with regulatory authorities

As missing is an indicator of harm, information relating to how a home responsible for the care of individuals is managed, and how well it responds to reports, is an important consideration for the authorities which regulate these care providers. Where there are concerns about safeguarding activities performed by a care home, consideration should be given to sharing information with relevant care regulatory bodies (see list below) in accordance with **APP on Information management**, the Common Law Police Disclosure Provisions, and any information sharing agreements or memorandums of understanding that may be in existence at the time.

Regulatory bodies

Ofsted

Ofsted has a statutory responsibility to inspect the accommodation and care provided by children's homes or supported accommodation in England. Any concerns about a children's home, supported accommodation or local authority can be raised with Ofsted by calling the helpline: 0300 123 4666 (8am to 8pm, Monday to Friday).

Care Quality Commission

The **CQC** is the independent regulator of health and adult social care services in

England. They ensure that the care provided by hospitals and care homes/home-care agencies for adults meets government standards of quality and safety. Like Ofsted, the CQC has the power to impose restrictions, issue penalties and can, in extreme circumstances, apply to close the home.

Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales

The Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales is responsible for inspecting social care and social services in Wales, for both children and adults' services.

Care Inspectorate

The **Care inspectorate** was formerly known as Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland, it is the independent scrutiny and improvement body for care services in Scotland.

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

The **Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority** is the independent body responsible for monitoring and inspecting the availability and quality of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. It registers and inspects a wide range of health and social care services, including nursing, residential care and children's homes.

National information sharing

Although local information sharing is an essential aspect in responding to and reducing missing incidents, forces also have a responsibility to ensure relevant information is shared nationally.

Police National Database

Many individuals, especially children will move across the country and may continue to go missing. The above strategic partnerships should assist with ensuring that, where a pattern of going missing has been established, relevant information is shared with partner agencies in their new location. However, consideration should also be given to creating intelligence reports in relation to repeat and vulnerable missing individuals, using information from return interviews where available, in order to make this intelligence available to other forces directly via the PND.

As it is not currently possible to upload missing person information directly to the PND, an intelligence report should be specifically created where a child or adult has been identified as being exploited. This enables forces to use the intelligence to build up a broader and more complete picture of the risk to individuals within their force area. Forces should follow local procedures on how to access PND and how to create a local intelligence report,

UKMPU returns

Police forces are required to share information relating to their missing reports with the UKMPU annually.

For further information see **Missing Persons Data Code of Practice: Guidance for the completion of quarterly returns.**

Retention and weeding of reports

Senior officers should ensure that their force has clear guidelines within their policies to address the issue of retention of missing person records and their destruction.

Relevant information management policies should dictate retention periods and include keeping records of locations where missing persons have been and who they associated with. This can be important in future criminal investigations. It is a legitimate purpose to retain missing person reports for the following reasons:

- people often go missing on more than one occasion
- people who go missing more than once often return to the same location
- closed reports usually contain information that will be of benefit to future investigations

- persons with health issues such as Alzheimer's are known to return to places known to them in their past

All unresolved cases should be retained indefinitely.

For further information see **APP on Information management**.

Tags

Missing persons