

Partnership working

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

First published 22 November 2016 Updated 3 July 2026

Police forces and partner agencies involved with health, social care and safeguarding are able to support the proper management of missing person cases by:

- working together
- sharing information
- having a common understanding of processes

The **missing persons specialist** role is vital in supporting multi-agency working. This role underpins understanding the risks associated with missing people, both:

- as an individual missing person
- the risk and demand that missing people place on the force

Shared responsibilities

Investigating matters that are recorded as missing person reports is the responsibility of the police. However, those involved in the care of children and vulnerable adults also have a safeguarding duty.

The use of **MASH** (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 arrangement (MASA) and local safeguarding adult board (LSAB) to:

- establish effective local procedures to prevent people going missing
- take effective steps when they do go missing, 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 (go to [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 in place that clearly:

- define areas of responsibility for the different organisations involved
- 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.

Missing persons specialist

The missing persons specialist role helps to ensure that forces respond effectively and can undertake relevant safeguarding responsibilities in relation to missing reports. It is, therefore, important that chief officers ensure that a specialist, or someone performing this function, is present in all police forces. For further information, go to the [Missing persons specialist professional profile](#).

Assisting investigations

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

Multi-agency protocols

Senior officers should ensure that protocols are in place to support any situation where individuals are looked after. These protocols 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 when to report a person as missing to the police
- 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 that 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 and how this information should be shared
- which agencies will offer return interviews (as required within the Department for Education [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 protocols are effective in:

- driving multi-agency cooperation
- 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 safeguarding partnerships are using the [Philomena Protocol](#) to guide their actions in relation to relevant cases. The Philomena Protocol supports police responses when children and young people go missing by providing a standardised, pre-prepared record of essential information. This can be shared with officers, reducing delays in the early stages of an investigation.

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 public. Multi-agency protocols should agree a threshold for when referrals should be made by the police to social care.

The [All Wales practice guide: Safeguarding children who go missing from home or care](#) also recommends very close working between children's social care and policing. This is 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.

Standard thresholds for referral may be useful. However, senior officers will want to be sure that a process is in place to ensure cases are recognised that 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, go to:

- [Working together to safeguard children](#)
- [Adults at risk APP](#)

Prevention and intervention strategies

Collecting and analysing data on missing person incidents helps the police and partner agencies to identify patterns of vulnerability and harm. The results of routine data analysis should be shared to inform the development and review of prevention and intervention strategies. Missing persons specialists are vital for this information analysis and sharing.

Interventions might include, for example, the use of [child abduction warning notices](#) (CAWNs), or referrals to support services. Such interventions should be used as part of a wider, coordinated safeguarding and investigative response, particularly where there is a risk of exploitation or ongoing harm. They should not be used as a single response.

Regular liaison between neighbourhood policing teams and children's and adults' care providers may:

- support early identification of risk
- strengthen professional relationships
- assist in identifying patterns linked to exploitation or repeat missing episodes
- contribute to more effective intervention and the timely resolution of cases

Where missing incidents raise concerns about abuse or exploitation, officers should also consider relevant guidance in APP on [child abuse](#) and [modern slavery and human trafficking](#).

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)
- 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 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 (go to [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 that 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.

A copy of the [Philomena Protocol](#) should accompany the child when they move placements and should be updated to reflect new risks and safeguarding information. This supports police and partner agencies by ensuring that accurate, current information is available if the child goes missing.

For further information, go to:

- [Department for Education: 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 (CAWNs)

CAWNs 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 **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.

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 neither:

- on a school roll
- 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. These 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, go to:

- **[Department for Education: Children missing education](#)**
- **[Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Forced Marriage Unit](#)**

Unauthorised absence from school

Unauthorised absence from school 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 to determine if there are any indications that an investigation is warranted. Go to the NPCC **[Advice to police forces on the levels of intervention model and the identification of risk](#)**.

Unauthorised absences could indicate that a child or young person may be at risk. 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.

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 that an effective investigation is quickly instigated.

Older persons may be at risk of going missing due to conditions such as dementia or Alzheimer's. Proactive safeguarding measures may include the use of the [Herbert Protocol](#) and the [Forcer Protocol](#). Care-led measures may also include the use of commercially available tracking systems to assist carers in locating people if they are missing.

For further information, go to:

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

There are examples of force interventions to safeguard individuals with dementia on the College of Policing [practice bank](#).

Learning from previous incidents

When an individual is located, it is important that information about their actions while missing is collated from:

- the prevention interview
- any return interviews (conducted by the partner agencies)

This information must be recorded and made readily available, in case they are reported missing again in the future. It 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. These should be disseminated across the police force and with partner agencies where relevant.

For lessons from other cases, go to [Independent Office for Police Conduct \(IOPC\): Learning the lesson](#).

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 gathered information is recorded. This will assist in creating a plan that outlines 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 that relevant partners are informed of the incident. Trigger plans should be reviewed following the conclusion of any subsequent missing incidents. They 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. However, data protection concerns should not be used as an excuse to withhold information where there is a justified reason for sharing it.

Under the [General Data Protection Regulation \(UK GDPR\)](#) and [Data Protection Act 2018](#), the police may disclose personal information where there is a lawful basis for doing so. This includes protecting the vital interests of the individual or another person. Forces should ensure that all disclosures are necessary, proportionate and appropriately documented, with clear justification for the decision to share.

Information should be shared on a case-by-case basis, taking account of the purpose of the disclosure and the risks involved. Where information is routinely exchanged with partner agencies, information sharing agreements are good practice. Information sharing agreements support timely and consistent information sharing. They form part of the wider framework for managing relationships between the police and partner organisations. Forces should consider the

Information management APP to ensure that disclosures are compliant with legislation.

For further guidance, go to:

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

Local data sharing

The Department for Education **Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care** expects police forces to routinely share details of all missing children with their local authority. Similar arrangements should be in place for vulnerable adults missing from care. Senior officers should ensure that these processes are set out in local multi-agency protocols.

Protocols should specify:

- the information to be shared
- the timeframes for doing so
- responsibilities of each partner agency

Local authorities should share relevant information about children placed out of area. Care homes should share details of unauthorised absences (those not reported to police) with the appropriate local authority and police force. This helps to establish a full picture of missing episodes and supports effective safeguarding and investigation.

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. It can also enable different agencies to work together to address problem areas (go to [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

Being missing is an indicator of harm. Important considerations for authorities that regulate care providers include:

- information relating to how a care home that is responsible for the care of individuals is managed
- how well that care home responds to reports

Where there are concerns about safeguarding activities performed by a care home, consideration should be given to:

- sharing information with relevant care regulatory bodies in accordance with [APP on information management](#) and the [Common Law Police Disclosure Provisions](#)
- any information sharing agreements or memorandums of understanding that may be in existence at the time

Forces should also remain alert to unregistered care settings. Officers should share information with the relevant regulator if they become aware that:

- a child or adult is being housed in an unregistered provision
- a provider appears to be operating outside its registered remit

The relevant regulator may include [Ofsted](#) for children's residential provision or the [Care Quality Commission](#) (CQC) for adult settings. Appropriate action can then be taken to safeguard the individuals living there.

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 (CQC)

The **CQC** is the independent regulator of health and adult social care services in England. They ensure that the care provided by hospitals, care homes and home-care agencies for adults meets government standards of quality and safety. Like Ofsted, the CQC has the power to impose restrictions and issue penalties. It can also, 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 that relevant information is shared nationally.

Police National Database (PND)

Many individuals, especially children, will move across the country and may continue to go missing. The strategic partnerships outlined in earlier sections should help to ensure 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. This will make this intelligence available to other forces directly via the PND.

It is not currently possible to upload missing person information directly to the PND. Instead, 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. Go to [Collection of Missing Persons Data: A code of practice for the police service on collecting and sharing data on missing persons with public authorities](#).

Tags

APP Missing persons