The Children's Society

Making Connections

Understanding how local agencies can better keep missing children safe

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By Hannah Chetwynd and Iryna Pona

Contents

Glossary

APPG – All Party Parliamentary Group
APP – College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice
ADCS – Association of Directors of Children's Services
COMPACT – A case management system used by the police to manage the investigation of missing persons cases
CSE – Child Sexual Exploitation
DfE – Department for Education
FOI – Freedom of Information
LSCB – Local Safeguarding Children's Boards
NCA – National Crime Agency
NPCC – National Police Chiefs Council
ONS – Office for National Statistics
RHI – Return home interview
RMFHC – Runaway and Missing from Home and Care

Executive summary

When children go missing it is a sign that things are not well in their lives. They may be running away from neglect at home, and there is a risk that they may be hurt or exploited whilst missing. The reported number of missing children is rising year on year, and in 2015/16 police forces across England and Wales recorded 148,050 incidents of children and young people missing from home or care, with many running away repeatedly.[1] Police and children's services must work better together to protect children who go missing.

The last decade has witnessed a considerable shift in understanding the vulnerability of children missing from home or care, largely driven by the introduction of a statutory duty for return home interviews (RHIs). Additionally, we have a better knowledge of the links between going missing and child sexual exploitation (CSE), and a greater focus on children missing from care.[2] Encouragingly, in many areas improvements in practice have followed improvements in understanding (see timeline on page 10–11).

Yet progress has not been consistent across all geographical areas and all agencies with responsibilities for missing children. The need to improve the use of the resources available to the police and social services has contributed to local practices and national policy changes. This includes the introduction of separate 'missing' and 'absent' categories[3] (see Box A) that resulted in some children being left without the adequate response (sometimes for unacceptably long periods of time) and becoming at high risk of abuse or exploitation.

Previous research identified that inappropriate initial and ongoing risk assessment when a child is reported as missing[4], poor information sharing between the police and children's services[5], and lack of opportunities for children to share their experiences and worries with an independent professional through the return interview[6] are all areas in need of improvement. For children looked after by local authorities, being placed out-of-area creates additional barriers to getting a timely and appropriate response when they go missing.

The findings presented in this research confirm that these issues remain key. We found that two-thirds of police forces do not have access to information from children's services at the time of the initial risk assessment. Moreover, based on an estimated rate of missing incidents per local authority we found that there was a large range (from 1% to above 80%) in the percentage of missing incidents resulting in a RHI. For looked-after children who are placed out-of-area, approximately two-thirds of local authorities do not share risk assessments with the local police force.

Running away is a child's cry for help. A timely and good quality response may not only send a message to the child that someone cares, but can also prevent things from getting worse in a child's life, improving future life chances.

For agencies responding to missing children there is a strong economic argument to getting the response right. Responding to missing children is a high cost activity for police. Research from the Centre for the Study of Missing Persons[7] estimated the cost of a medium-risk missing person case to be £2,415.80 (based on case studies carried out in 2011). Given this figure we can estimate responding to missing children could have cost the police around £358 million last year. Furthermore, when a child becomes the victim of crime, exploitation or criminal activity they may require intensive support from local services.

This report explores ways for children's services and the police to work together to share key information about missing

children to better inform risk assessment, and build local intelligence of places and adults that may pose a risk to children. The effectiveness of information sharing for looked-after children in placements outside their home local authority is also explored within this report.

This report is based on responses from 104 English local authorities and 37 English police forces to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent out in September 2016. Further evidence was gathered from interviews with practitioners from The Children's Society's services and police officers across England. It also includes some case studies from our practice.

Our report 'The Knowledge Gap: Safeguarding children in Wales who have been missing' comprises a separate analysis addressing the response to children and young people who go missing in Wales.

Box A. Definitions of 'Absent' and 'Missing'

In April 2013 the National College of Policing introduced new guidance on the management, recording and investigation of missing persons. A distinction was made between 'missing' and 'absent'.

A 'missing' child was defined as: 'Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.' Cases classified as 'missing' by the police receive an active response – such as deployment of police officers to locate a child.

An 'absent' child was defined as: 'A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.' Cases where the child is classified as 'absent' will be recorded by the police and risk assessed regularly, but no active response will be deployed.

In January 2017, the College of Policing replaced the definitions of missing and absent.[8] A new graded response ranging from 'no apparent risk' through to 'high risk' was given, based on a cumulative risk that the missing child faces.

A 'missing' child is now: 'Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed. All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high risk cases that require immediate, intensive action.'

A child at 'No apparent risk' is considered not to be at risk of harm to themselves or the public. Actions will be taken to locate the child and/or gather further information. A latest review time to reassess the risk will be agreed with the informant.

At the time of the FOIs that informed this response, the definitions of absent and missing from 2013 APP on missing were in place. Therefore, throughout this report these are the definitions we will use.

Key findings

■ Vulnerable children who run away are left at greater risk of abuse, harm and exploitation because important information about children is often not being shared between the police and local authorities.

■ Two-thirds of local authorities have no arrangements for sharing information with the police when a child is reported missing, leaving the police to assess the risks without crucial knowledge about a child's life and issues they might be experiencing – from exploitation by gangs to sexual abuse.

Understanding risks the missing child faces

■ Risk assessments made at the time a child is reported missing to the police are not fully informed by information that different safeguarding agencies have about the child. There are huge variations in what and how information is shared between the police and children's services.

■ Almost half of the local authorities that responded to our FOIs did not have an information sharing protocol agreement in place between themselves, the police and RHI providers for sharing information about missing children.

■ Through consultations with missing person coordinators in the police it emerged that having read-only access to children's service databases in real time could be a positive step towards making the risk assessment process safer.

However, only around 10% of police forces and local authorities were found to share information in this way.

■ In some cases children's services are able to place a flag or marker or request to flag a child as high risk on a police database. This allows them to bring a child's vulnerabilities to the attention of the police. However, a third of police forces did not utilise this procedure.

■ We also asked local authorities about the number of missing children who have been identified to be at risk either of CSE, involvement with gangs, being a victim of crime, at risk of suicide, trafficking or due to substance abuse. Two-thirds of local authorities could not provide us with information on how many children are at risk due to these factors.

Return home interviews

■ 99% of local authorities who responded to the FOIs stated that they offered RHIs to missing children. However, children categorised by the police as 'absent' (see Box A) from the family home or care placements are not always offered a RHI.

■ Only 82 local authorities out of 104 across England could answer our question about the number of RHIs conducted. Across the local authorities that responded, approximately 32,000 RHIs were conducted between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016. Of these local authorities, 60% completed RHIs

for less than 40% of the estimated number of missing incidents in their geographic areas.

Looked-after children in out-of-area placements

■ We know that looked-after children are proportionally more likely to go missing than children who grow up in a family home.[9] This issue is particularly prevalent when looked-after children are housed in placements in geographical areas away from their family and friends.

■ We found that under two-thirds (62) of local authorities that responded to the FOI do not share risk assessments with the local police for all looked-after children that they host. Although, when placing a child within the boundaries of another police force, just over a third (34) of local authorities that responded do not notify the local police force.

■ Based on responses from 41 local authorities we estimate that in 90% of cases host local authorities receive information about children placed within their boundaries either from placing local authorities or from the placement provider. This leaves 10% of cases where local authorities are not notifying, with some children coming to their attention only if they go missing or are criminally exploited.

■ Just under half of host local authorities did not offer RHIs to out-of-area children and young people.

Key recommendations

Understanding risks

■   In the Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation progress report (2017)[10], the Government committed to developing a National Missing Persons database. When developing this database the Government and National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) should consult with a wider range of stakeholders to ensure that vital information about missing children is shared between all relevant agencies to help keep children safe.

■   When a child is reported missing, the risk assessment needs to be created with the input of different agencies (such as police, children's services, schools and voluntary sector organisations) who have been in contact with the child and may hold vital pieces of information. This is particularly important where 'no apparent risk' or 'low risk' categorisation is made by the police (see Box A). The College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (APP) guidance should stipulate that lower risk categorisation, which usually results in delayed response to missing children, should not be made without information obtained from children's services.

■   The NPCC and The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) should review and standardise how the system of flagging/placing markers about vulnerable children should be utilised across police and children's services, and work with the Government to issue guidance on the subject. The guidance should cover a variety of risks including CSE, trafficking, criminal exploitation, gang involvement and mental health – not just those currently prioritised through national strategies.

Return home interviews

■   The statutory guidance on missing children should be revised to include guidance on information sharing from RHIs, and require local authorities to respond to and act on recommendations following a RHI.

■   The Government, with the involvement of ADCS and NPCC, should develop guidance on what proportionate information sharing from RHIs should look like. Local authorities and police should work in partnership with statutory partners* to invest in training on what good intelligence looks like. They should ensure that all partners are aware of the principles of good information sharing.

■   The new National Missing Persons database should include provision for local authorities, or RHI service providers commissioned by local authorities, to submit relevant information from RHIs to inform risk assessments and local intelligence on missing children.

Response to children missing from out-of-area placements

■   The Government should extend the duty to notify the area where the placement is taking place to cover foster agencies.

■   Ofsted should ensure that looked-after children inspections specifically look at the number of out-of-area placements, notification timing and the quality of information shared, as well as responses to children missing from out-of-area placements.

■   The Government should amend the statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care to require local authorities to notify the police force in the area they are placing a looked-after child.

■   Ofsted and other inspectorates should undertake a joint targeted thematic inspection with a focus on children in out-of-area placements, including responses they receive when they go missing.

■   The Department for Education (DfE) should collect local authority-level data on the number of children going missing from out-of-area placements, and the number of them being offered and receiving RHIs.

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*Following the Children and Social Work Act 2017, some areas may decide to reform LSCBs and replace them with local safeguarding arrangements with three mandatory local safeguarding partners: the local authority, the local NHS CCG and the local police force.

Methodology

This report is based on information obtained from three primary sources: freedom of information requests sent to all local authorities and police forces in England; the findings from structured interviews with missing persons coordinators from three different police constabularies; and consultations held with practitioners from The Children's Society's Missing Services across England.

Freedom of Information requests

The FOIs that we sent to every local authority sought to establish how much they knew about children placed in their area by other local authorities, and their information sharing practices – both in relation to information shared with the police and information shared with other local authorities. We sent out 152 FOIs to local authorities across England and 104 responses were received, giving a response rate of 68%.

We sent FOIs to 39 police forces within England and 37 responses were returned, giving a response rate of 95%. These FOIs sought to establish information sharing practices and the extent to which police receive information from RHIs from the relevant local authorities.

We asked the police questions on how and when they notify the local authority when they receive notice of a missing child or young person. We also asked what kinds of information they have access to from both police service and children's service sources.

Semi-structured interviews with practitioners and missing persons coordinators

A set of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners and missing persons coordinators. Practitioners from The Children's Society's services work with children and young people who go missing or run away from home or care. We used these sessions to explore how practitioners felt the information from RHIs is used, and shared any perceived and actual barriers to information sharing that they come across in their work. We also discussed any changes in practice that they thought would improve the response to missing children and young people. We have used quotes from these sessions throughout the report.

We interviewed missing persons coordinators working in police forces that use both COMPACT and Merlin missing persons databases. We asked about

practice around initial and follow-up risk assessments and the information that was made available to them from non-police services. We also discussed perceived and actual barriers to information sharing that they encountered in their response work to missing children. The key purpose of discussion was to establish what information is useful and how it should best be presented and shared.
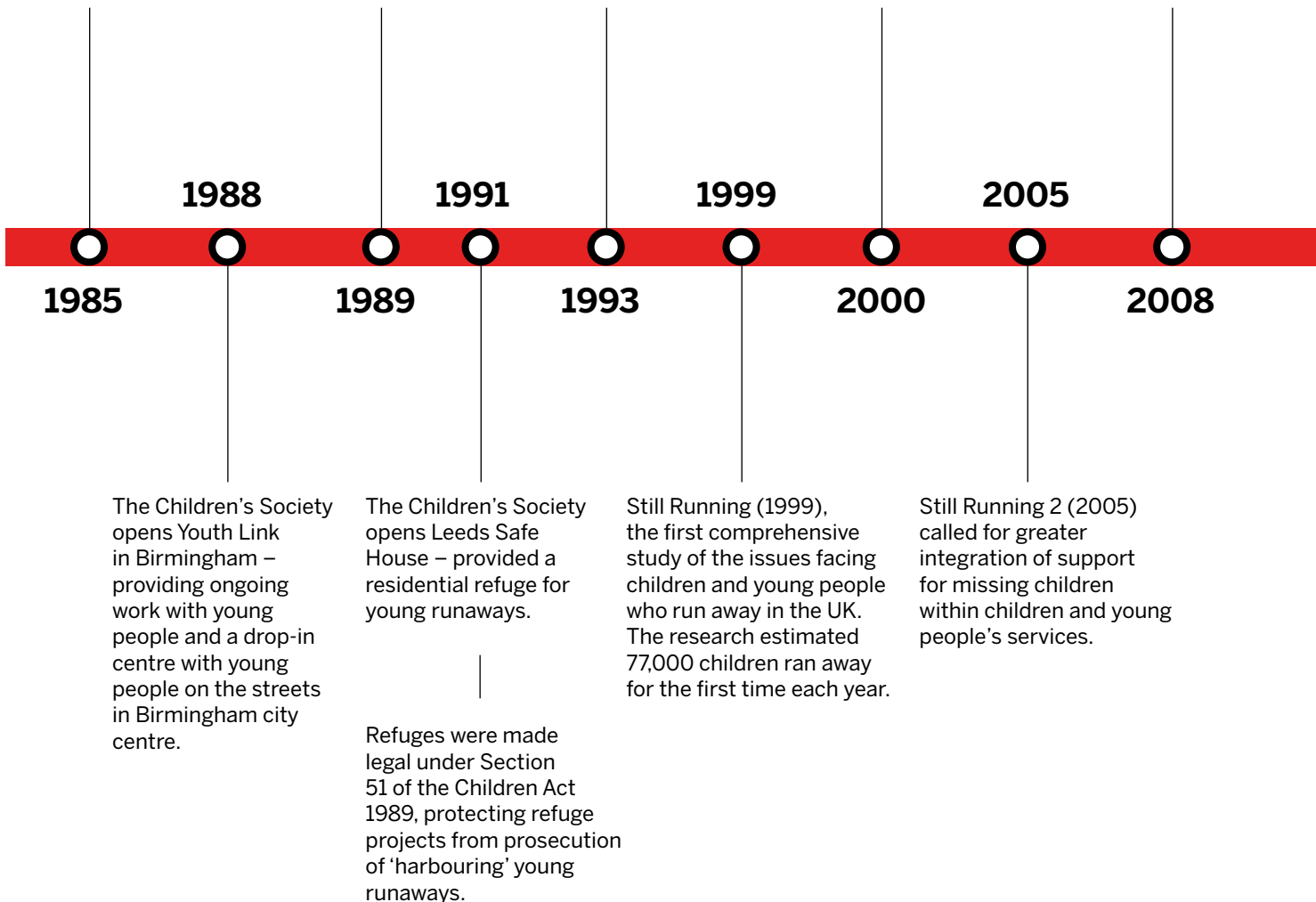
Timeline: our work with missing children

The Children's Society opened the Central London Teenage Project, the country's first refuge for runaways. Early refuges were technically operating outside of the law in providing short-term accommodation for under 16s but were supported by police forces and social services.
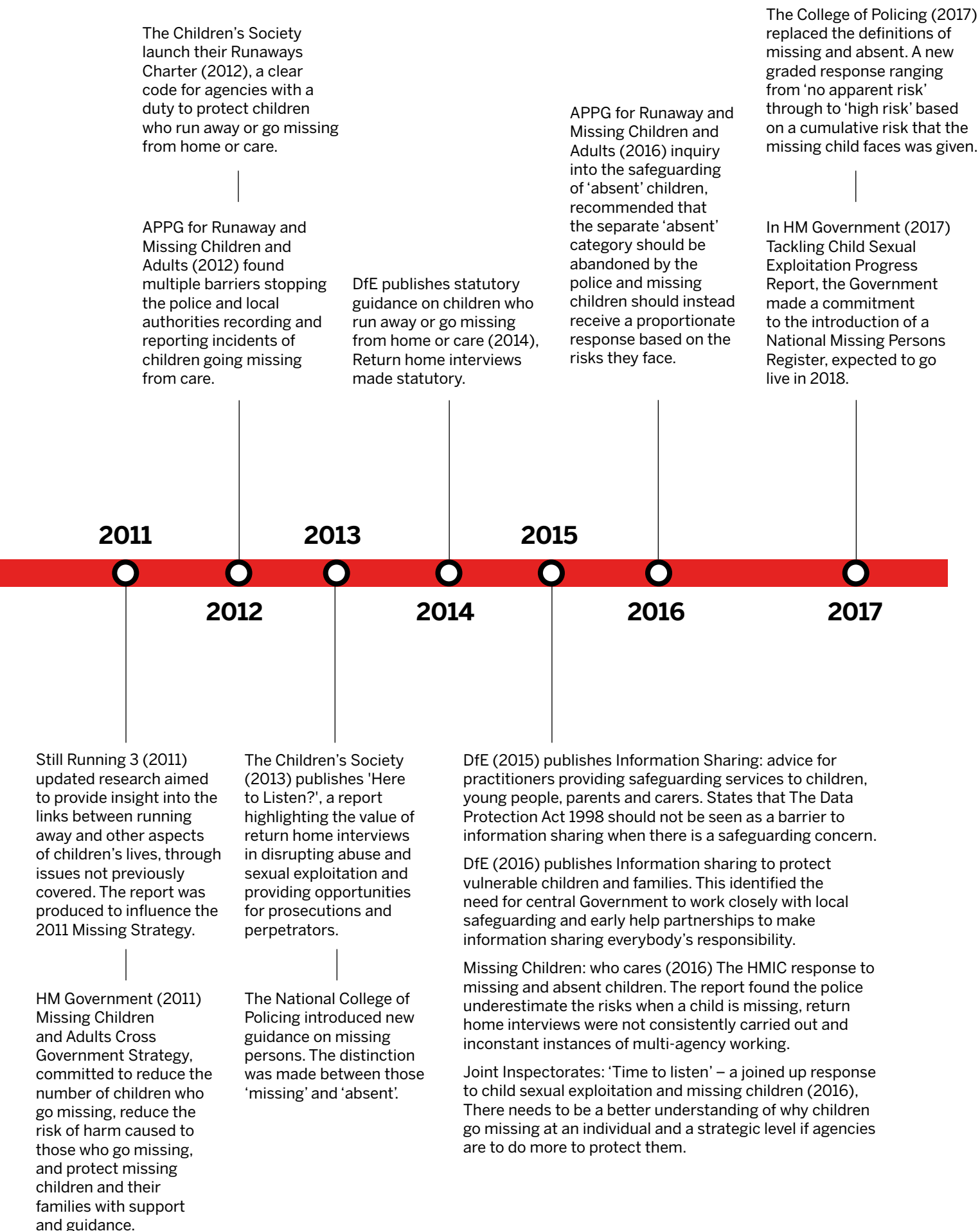
The Children's Society opens Southside in Bournemouth – providing refuge for young people under 18 and ran a drop in centre.

The Children's Society opens Porth Project in Newport – providing accommodation through a network of refuge foster carers linked by a central daytime centre-based team of staff.

Evidence from Still Running (1999) sparked Government interest in the issue of children and young people going missing. A consultation took place in 2001 and guidance was produced by the Social Exclusion Unit (2002).

HM Government (2008) published a Young Runaways Action plan and updated guidance.

1988   **1991**   **1999**   **2005**

1985   **1989**   **1993**   **2000**   **2008**

The Children's Society opens Youth Link in Birmingham – providing ongoing work with young people and a drop-in centre with young people on the streets in Birmingham city centre.

The Children's Society opens Leeds Safe House – provided a residential refuge for young runaways.

Refuges were made legal under Section 51 of the Children Act 1989, protecting refuge projects from prosecution of 'harbouring' young runaways.

Still Running (1999), the first comprehensive study of the issues facing children and young people who run away in the UK. The research estimated 77,000 children ran away for the first time each year.

Still Running 2 (2005) called for greater integration of support for missing children within children and young people's services.

The Children's Society launch their Runaways Charter (2012), a clear code for agencies with a duty to protect children who run away or go missing from home or care.

APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2012) found multiple barriers stopping the police and local authorities recording and reporting incidents of children going missing from care.

DfE publishes statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (2014), Return home interviews made statutory.

APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2016) inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children, recommended that the separate 'absent' category should be abandoned by the police and missing children should instead receive a proportionate response based on the risks they face.

The College of Policing (2017) replaced the definitions of missing and absent. A new graded response ranging from 'no apparent risk' through to 'high risk' based on a cumulative risk that the missing child faces was given.

In HM Government (2017) Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation Progress Report, the Government made a commitment to the introduction of a National Missing Persons Register, expected to go live in 2018.

2011   **2013**   **2015**

2012   **2014**   **2016**   **2017**

Still Running 3 (2011) updated research aimed to provide insight into the links between running away and other aspects of children's lives, through issues not previously covered. The report was produced to influence the 2011 Missing Strategy.

HM Government (2011) Missing Children and Adults Cross Government Strategy, committed to reduce the number of children who go missing, reduce the risk of harm caused to those who go missing, and protect missing children and their families with support and guidance.

The Children's Society (2013) publishes 'Here to Listen?', a report highlighting the value of return home interviews in disrupting abuse and sexual exploitation and providing opportunities for prosecutions and perpetrators.

The National College of Policing introduced new guidance on missing persons. The distinction was made between those 'missing' and 'absent'.

DfE (2015) publishes Information Sharing: advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers. States that The Data Protection Act 1998 should not be seen as a barrier to information sharing when there is a safeguarding concern.

DfE (2016) publishes Information sharing to protect vulnerable children and families. This identified the need for central Government to work closely with local safeguarding and early help partnerships to make information sharing everybody's responsibility.

Missing Children: who cares (2016) The HMIC response to missing and absent children. The report found the police underestimate the risks when a child is missing, return home interviews were not consistently carried out and inconstant instances of multi-agency working.

Joint Inspectorates: 'Time to listen' – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children (2016), There needs to be a better understanding of why children go missing at an individual and a strategic level if agencies are to do more to protect them.

Introduction: the scale of children going missing and policy background

A child going missing is recognised as one of the key indicators of risk in a raft of government guidance[11], strategies[12] and research.[13] For many children and young people running away is often a consequence, symptom or indicator of a problem rather than the problem itself. The most recent Cross Government Strategy into missing children and adults[14] indicated that over half of CSE cases involve a young person who has at some point been missing. It also highlighted how repeat missing episodes are often an indicator that a child may be at risk of other forms of exploitation.

Our direct work with children and young people confirms this; we know that once a child has run away they may be at increased risk of harm. Some of the risks related to children and young people going missing include becoming the victims of crime and association with criminal activity or getting involved in gangs.

Similar to missing cases involving CSE, when it comes to gang involvement coercion affects children and young people both overtly and more subtly. They may be running away to escape people who might harm them, or they may be running towards the promise of money, affection and status.

Our research shows that running away is most frequent amongst 'looked-after' young people living in residential or foster care.[15] The rates are higher if that young person is placed outside of the area they call home.[16]

Recent family breakdown or poor relationships, conflict with parents or carers, the experience of abuse and neglect and problems at school[17] have been shown to increase the likelihood of a child or young person running away.

Case Study A: Fiona's story*

Fourteen year old Fiona was referred to The Children's Society following missing episodes and her misuse of drugs and alcohol. She did not attend full time education and there were problems with alcohol misuse in her family. She agreed to receive a service which consisted of a return interview and a follow-up programme of activities but failed to attend her appointments. The project worker persevered and eventually met with Fiona and started building a relationship with her. Once the young person engaged with the service, the true extent of her risk taking became apparent. Fiona was associating with a number of older males, ranging from 16–63 years old, including a known drug dealer. She would often drink alcohol or party with these males whilst missing. She also made an allegation of rape against an extended family member and an allegation of sexual assault against a local shop keeper.

The information was shared with relevant agencies and allegations of rape and sexual assault were investigated by the police. The service undertook work and discussions with Fiona around risks, including drugs and alcohol, grooming and sexual exploitation, healthy and appropriate relationships and risky relationships. As a result, Fiona's missing episodes have greatly decreased and she says that she is no longer using drugs or alcohol. As requested by Fiona, the project worker who worked with her through the return interview and all follow up activities will also support her through the court proceedings relating to the alleged rape and sexual assault.

*to protect the young person's identify names have been changed

Despite consensus among agencies tasked with safeguarding children about the level of risk these children face – and progress from local authorities, Government and the police in recent years – there are still some significant gaps in data, knowledge and service provision for these children.

Data collected by the National Crime Agency (NCA), shows year-on-year across England and Wales there is an increase in the number of incidents of children and young people missing from home or care (see Figure 1).[18, 19] Although some of this increase may be down to improved recording techniques, the numbers are high and a cause for concern.

Many children run away repeatedly, with the number of missing incidents corresponding to approximately 60,000 individual children in 2015/16. Young people who have run away more than once are much more likely to have been harmed or had a risky experience whilst away.[21] Moreover, evidence suggests that the level of risk that a child or young person may face increases with the time they are missing.[22]

Adolescents make up the biggest group in missing children reports to the police. Of the total number of missing incidents, 93% were aged between 12 and 17 years old, with 66% (72,818) aged 15 to 17.

This figure may still be an underestimate of the true scale of children going missing. Our earlier research into missing children found that as many two-thirds of children who run away from home or care may not be reported as missing by their families or carers.[23] There is also an issue with how data about missing children is being recorded differently on police systems, resulting in incomplete data returns from the police forces to NCA.[24]

Figure 1: Recorded incidents of children 'missing' and 'absent' from home or care in 2014/15 and 2015/16[20]

Some of the inadequacy in responses to missing children has been an unintended result of national policy changes that were not conducive for development of good practice in relation to missing children – particularly those who were not on the radar of services prior to going missing, or those going missing repeatedly.

Scrutiny of the police use of missing and absent categories by HMIC inspectors and through the APPG inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children[25] shows how the inadequate guidance and cost reduction drive – combined with the lack of understanding of the risks to missing children – resulted in children reported as missing and categorised as absent being left without support till risks in their lives escalate.

The separate 'absent' category has now been replaced with a new definition of missing incorporating 'no apparent risk' level of response. This is a welcome step, but further safeguards need to be put in place to ensure that police and local authorities can work together and share information for initial risk assessment and from RHIs to prevent children slipping through the net in the same way they did with the 'absent' category.

The focus on information sharing

The high number of missing children, particularly children who go missing repeatedly, highlights the need to understand the reasons behind children's missing episodes and find interventions that can reduce the likelihood of a child going missing again. This can only be achieved if different agencies work together to understand the risks to individual children who go missing, and the risks to all children who go missing in their areas.

The sharing of information between different agencies is fundamental to the safeguarding of those missing from home or care. It informs police missing persons investigations, CSE and criminal investigations, risk mapping, local authority risk assessment and further support by children's social care services, and multi-agency safeguarding assessments.

In the most recent Working Together guidance on safeguarding children and young people[26] sharing information early was identified as the key to providing effective help.

However, clearly barriers to information sharing exist. The Home Office[27] identified some key issues surrounding information sharing in multi-agency models: a misunderstanding between professionals about what information can be shared and concerns around breaching terms of the Data Protection Act 1998. Some issues were raised in our interviews with both practitioners and the police.

'Sometimes just the words "data protection" put people's backs up, make them think twice before sharing information, as opposed to thinking that what is of the foremost importance is the safeguarding of the child.'

Missing from home coordinator

Multiple IT systems create additional barriers to information sharing. Having different computer systems in place across agencies was found to impede attempts by agencies to share information for risks assessments.

The Government has been seeking to improve information sharing between different agencies.[28] In their Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation report[29] they committed to removing barriers to information sharing to stop at risk children falling between the gaps. However, we found little evidence that there is consistent information shared about individual children and young people who go missing.

Despite recent Government guidance[30] which states everyone who encounters a child has a role to play in their safety and welfare, the APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults inquiry heard that when it comes to safeguarding children reported as missing there

are frequently examples of silo working and a culture of avoiding responsibility for supporting missing children.[31]

Better information sharing between the police, the local authority and voluntary organisations is vital. Information sharing is a golden thread running through this report. In this report we will consider three key areas where better and more timely information sharing may help improve the response to missing children:

- Risk assessments conducted by the police when a child goes missing
- The way in which information from RHIs is shared and acted upon
- Information sharing related to looked-after children and young people placed out-of-area

In these three areas of interest we found that information sharing remains inconsistent. In the absence of an agreed approach to information sharing about individual children and young people, different structures have been employed in different places, resulting in a system that often does not work well for children reported as missing.

Despite this, the importance of effective information sharing arrangements is increasingly being recognised and there are some emerging solutions and trends – as discussed further in this report.

Information sharing for risk assessments

Why understanding and assessing risk correctly is important

There were
24,000
high risk missing
incidents in 2015/16[32]

There were
33,000
'absent' children
reported in 2015/16
– suggesting no
apparent risk

Police forces use the
high-risk category
for between
6% to 39%
of missing incidents

In 2015/16 police
forces used the
'absent' category
for between
1 to 34
children and young
people **per 100**

Classification of risk is important for a number of reasons. As the APPG report on safeguarding absent children highlighted, children categorised as 'absent' do not receive an active police response and may remain missing for a long period of time without someone actively looking for them. They also receive less support – or even no support – upon their return.

The NCA data report highlights that three-quarters of children categorised as absent are adolescent boys. Given that more female (63,921) than male (52,232) teenagers are reported and categorised as missing, this highlights a noticeable bias towards assessing adolescent boys as being less at risk when they go missing. It also highlights the police and other local agencies not having an adequate understanding of risks children going missing in their local area face.

One of the issues of concern shared by practitioners and highlighted in reports is that certain risks are better understood and identified because there has been a national drive to tackle the issue. One example of this could be the increased awareness of the risk of CSE. This could, in part, explain the gender bias when it comes to categorisation of risk.

Other issues may not be picked up because there is a lack of awareness, or the risk assessment is not focussing on all issues missing children face. There is growing concern, for example, that the numbers of separated and trafficked children going missing from care is rising.[33] Furthermore, a concerning lack of consistency in the way in which local authorities work together to identify and record risk of trafficking has been found.[34] This suggests that the true number of trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing is likely to be far higher than the findings indicate. The same observations have been made in relation to children who go missing as a result of trafficking for criminal exploitation along 'county lines'.[35]

Huge discrepancy in how 'high risk' and 'absent' categories are used across police forces may suggest a diverse understanding of risk and/or diverse experiences of risk across England.

Police force use of the 'high risk' category ranges from 6%–39%. Spread in the use of the 'absent' category was observed, with police forces in 2014/15 using it for between 3%–72%.

This is concerning, given the different active police response deployed depending on the assessment of risk. It appears that the police force boundary in which a child goes missing could determine the response they get rather than the true risk that they face.

Research from the Centre for the Study of Missing Persons[36] explored the risk assessment process from the perspective of police sergeants. The study highlighted that the decision-making process is often regarded as subjective and inconsistent. This sentiment resonates with the findings from our consultations with police officers and practitioners.

'It's subjective, obviously. It's down to that individual sergeant on how he assess the information, but based on our guidelines it has the potential to be a fairly smooth process.'

Missing persons' coordinator

'We get a copy of the COMPACT, the initial missing report and assessment is quite basic, the quality varies depending on the officer who completes it. We need a more standardised approach.'

Independent RHI provider

The police rely on information from the person reporting the child as missing in order to make appropriate risk assessments and pursue any subsequent investigation. However in many cases (often for children living in care) this information is scant.

'We need one standard approach, at the moment it's a postcode lottery.'

Missing persons' coordinator

Through our consultations with both police officers and our practitioners, we heard of a lack of awareness of the vulnerability of missing children among the police staff.

'I do think that we still have a culture issue about children, in terms of when they are missing and when they are repeat missing, that we just think: "Oh 'Joe Blogs' has gone missing again – let's just go find him again, bring him home and tell him off." There is still a lack of vulnerability awareness and that to me is the major issue, not just in the police force but across the board.'

Missing persons' coordinator

It is very important therefore that the risk assessment at the time child is reported as missing is informed not just by thorough use of information about individual children available on the police systems, but also by information that other agencies may have about them. Through our FOI requests to the police and local authorities we set out to establish how information is currently shared across agencies and how it informs risk assessments.

The information available to the police at the time of risk assessment

A well-informed risk assessment carried out by the police call handler is vital if a missing child is to receive the police response they need. The risk assessment can be based on the information that is held on police database as well as any relevant information from the other agencies with safeguarding responsibilities. Through our FOI to police and local authorities we asked a number of questions to establish what information is at police disposal when making their initial risk assessments.

Own police information

From the FOIs sent to the police, we learnt that in 36 out of 37 police forces that responded, call handlers undertaking risk assessments for missing children have access to information that is stored on police systems, including information about earlier missing and/or absent episodes. Although, information about earlier cases is not uniformly available in all forces.

Information shared by local authorities

According to the statutory guidance on missing children, local authorities should work with police and other partners and have an agreed Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol in place for when children and young people run away or go missing in their area.

However, almost half of the local authorities that responded to

our FOI requests did not have any agreement in place between themselves, the police and any RHI providers in relation to sharing information about missing children. This finding is extremely concerning, as without robust intelligence sharing between agencies it is difficult to understand why children go missing and reduce the number of incidents through disruption and early intervention.

We used our FOIs to find out what information local authorities share with the police at the time of the initial risk assessment. Responses show that two-thirds of authorities that responded do not share information with the police at this time (Figure 2).

Through consultations with missing person coordinators within police forces, it emerged that having read-only access to children's service databases in real time could be a positive step towards making the risk assessment process safer.

However, only 10% of police forces and local authorities were found to share information in this way.

One of the issues highlighted in interviews was that – as information sharing is something that is decided locally – it depends on local decision-makers as to whether structures for information sharing are put in place and remain in place. We heard of examples where police forces

that had previously had read-only access to children's services information lost this access when a new head of service had taken over in their local children's services.

Information sharing between local authorities and police to inform risk assessments is important in cases of children going missing for the first time, as well as those missing repeatedly, whether from the family home or from care. In the majority of geographic areas initial risk assessment is done mostly on limited information. The importance of information sharing for risk assessments and how it happens in practice in some areas is explained in the example of best practice overleaf.

Markers for some high risk young people

In some cases children's services are able to place a flag or marker, as highlighted in Example A, or request to flag a child as high risk on a police database. This allows them to highlight the vulnerabilities of a child should that child come to attention of police, including when reported as missing. However, a third of police forces did not utilise this procedure. For those that did have markers or flags in place, just under half (11) of forces that responded could only use them for specific pre-agreed risks such as CSE – meaning certain vulnerabilities could be missed. The remaining forces (13) allowed their local children's services to

Example of effective practice A: Oldham – Risk assessment

Oldham council recognised it was receiving a high number of missing reports each month.

Through the work of their Phoenix CSE team, they had a good understanding of high-risk CSE missing young people. However, they felt their understanding of missing from home cases was limited.

They decided to redesign their missing from home service in collaboration with the police force. Integrated into the plan were mechanisms to share information to inform risk assessments at every step of the way. Following this change they have recorded a reduction in the number of reported missing children and young people in their area.

Oldham have monthly missing from home meetings attended by key partners such as children's services, the police, health, education, after care, the RHI provider and key workers.

They look at every child who has been missing more than three times in the last 12 months. Information about the young person is shared amongst partners and the package of support that they needed is discussed.

If information about the young person arises in between missing meetings, Oldham's children's services and police have access to, and can edit, each other's computer databases.

The team manager has direct access to the police database and is able place high risk flags on children they deem to be especially vulnerable. Additionally, they are able to add intelligence to the police database and add tasks to their task board.

Similarly, if the missing young person is already known to the Phoenix CSE and missing service, five of the police officers from the local force have access to Oldham's case management system (Framework I) and are able to obtain read-only information about the young person.

If the young person is not known to the Phoenix, the police can contact children's services directly at any time of the day. The individuals working in children's services are practiced in providing the police with all the information that they need.

Similarly, if the child is reported missing outside of working hours the same relationship exists with the emergency duty team.

For further information please contact: phoenix.oldham@gmp.police.uk

Figure 2: How local authorities share their data with their police at the time of the initial risk assessment (n=104)

Missing from home   Missing from care
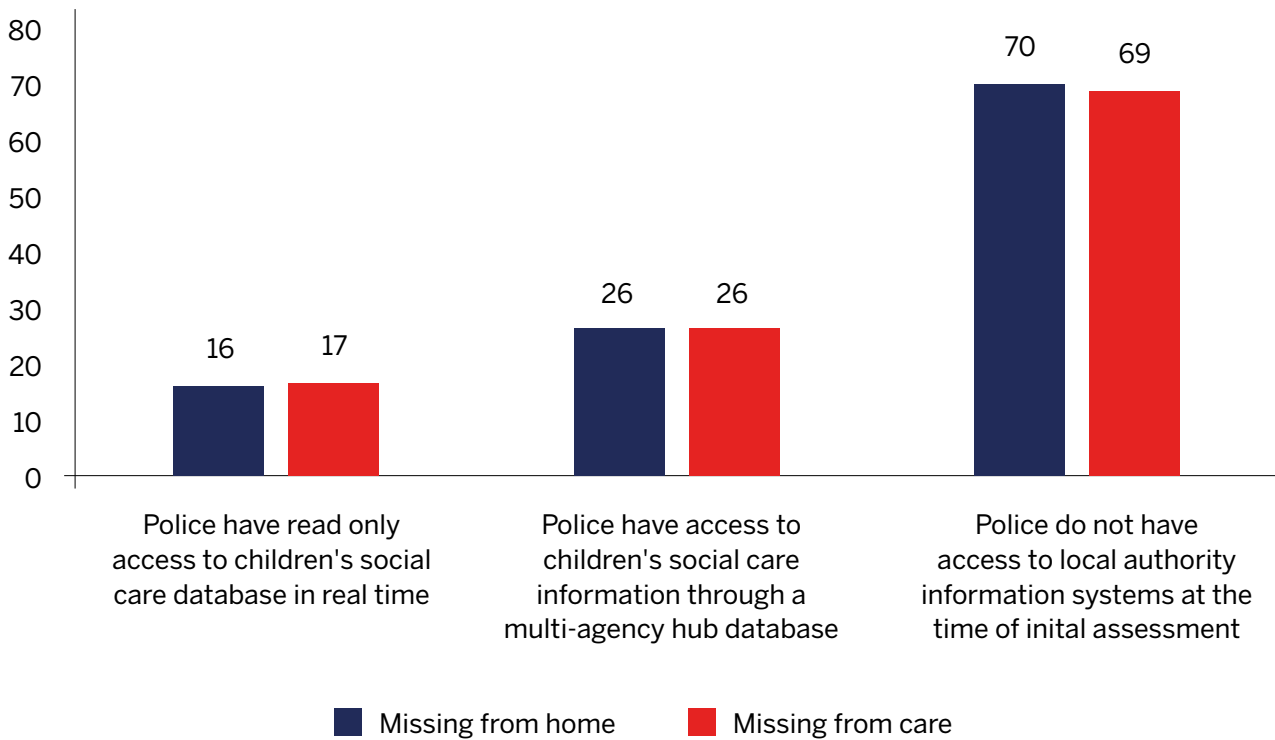
flag any and/or specified risks facing the child.

Only three police forces could share with us how many children have been marked as high risk as a result of a request from their local authority – their responses ranged from 16 to 330. Due to a very low number of responses it is not possible to draw any conclusions as to why there is such a spread in the number of children flagged. It may be reflective of needs and issues in specific geographical areas, but could be down to differences in how risks are understood and how consistently the flags are being used. Allowing vulnerable children at high risk of harm to be identified on the police

systems may be an effective and non-costly way to making them more visible to the police, and thus make the risk assessment process safer for missing children.

We also asked local authorities about the number of missing children who have been identified to be at risk either of child sexual exploitation, gangs, being a victim of crime, at risk of suicide, trafficking or substance abuse. This question yielded a low response (n=57). However, we were able to make some inferences about the national picture.

We calculated the rate at which each risk was identified based on what we know about the total

number of RHIs completed, compared to how many times each risk was highlighted. We then applied this rate to the total number of missing incidents of children in England recorded by the NCA.[37]

These figures must be treated with caution as they are estimates. However, we were able to make some suggestions about the national picture. The spread of answers is presented in Figure 3. It shows that risks relating to substance misuse (16,500) and child sexual exploitation (17,000) were most frequently identified as problems for children and young people whilst missing. Based on our estimations, both CSE and

Figure 3: Estimated incidents of children identified to be at risk across England
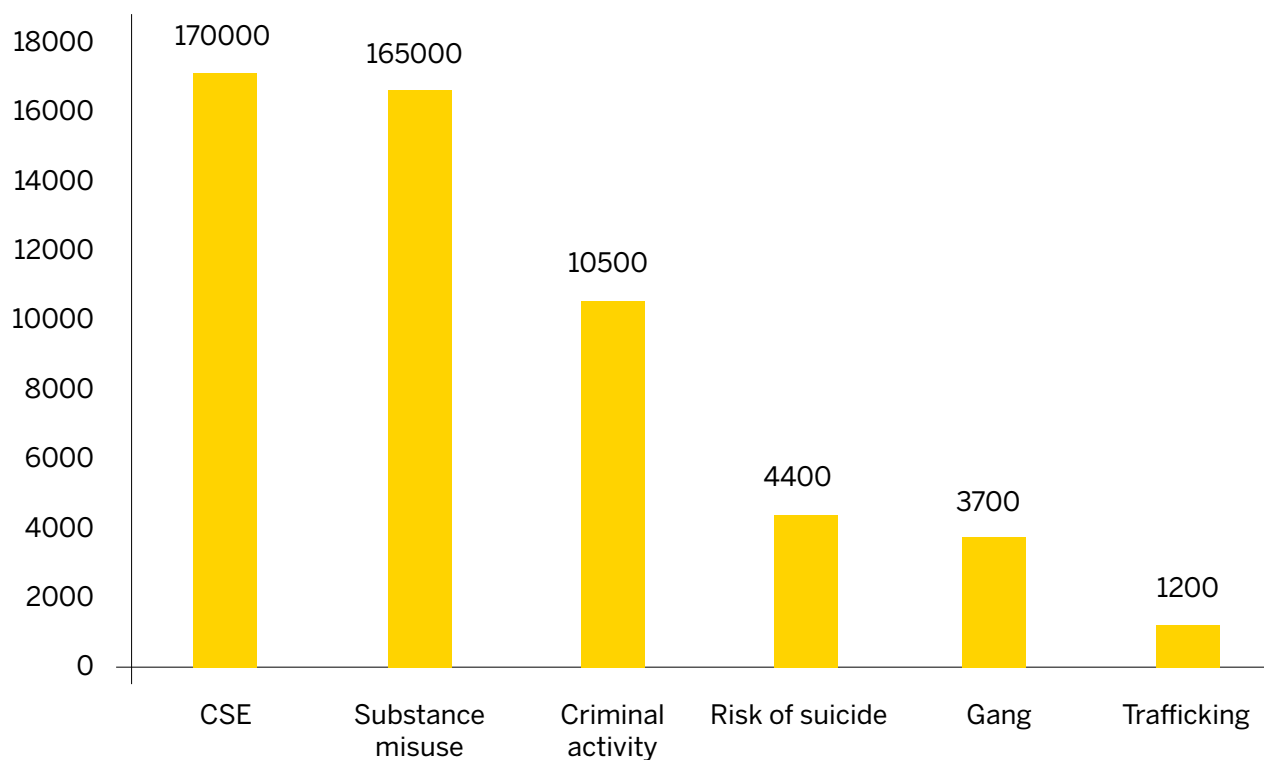
substance misuse were apparent in nearly half of all missing incidents. Risk of trafficking was identified least often, approximately 1,200 times across local authorities.

Information from return home interviews

To learn more about the initial risk assessment process, we asked all local police forces what information obtained from RHIs they could access to inform their risk assessment and investigations. Figure 4 presents the spread of responses. Encouragingly, the forces

indicated that almost three quarters of local authorities in their areas often or frequently share information from RHIs. This finding does not imply that in those areas information from all RHIs conducted will be shared with the police. It also leaves a remaining quarter of local authorities who never or rarely share information from RHIs with the police.

RHI intelligence may contain key information that could lead to the quick and safe return of a missing young person. For instance, the report may contain details about where the young person has run

away to in the past, or people that they tend to spend time with whilst missing.

Therefore sharing some information contained in the RHI report between the police and children's services could improve both the risk assessment and the missing investigation. Later in this report the issue of proportionality complying with data protection regulations is looked at.

Figure 4: How local police forces receive intelligence from RHIs from children's services shown as a percentage (n=118)
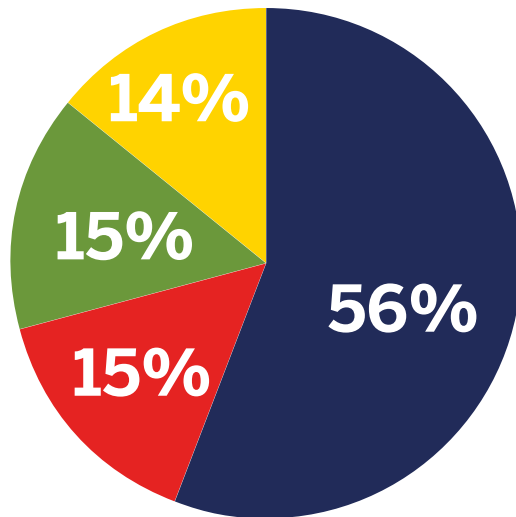
- We frequently receive information
- We often receive information
- On rare occasions we receive information
- We never receive information

Summary

The FOI responses we received from police forces and local authorities highlighted huge differences in what and how information is shared between the police and children's services to inform risk assessments for children reported as missing. The differences are primarily due to the variety of systems being used across police forces and children's services, differences in how risks are understood and interpreted, and the lack of understanding and guidance on best practice in this area.

All these issues have been acknowledged previously and some steps are being taken to address the issues. For example, in the Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation (2017) progress report[38] the Government made a commitment to the introduction of a National Missing Persons Database, a national police database which should allow recording and sharing of information about missing children. If designed well, information about previously identified risks, where young people go missing from and to,

and whom they go missing with could all be stored in one place. This would give police access to vital information that could lead to a child being found, rather than the child remaining missing for a longer period of time and increasing their risk of serious harm.

This is a welcome development that can become an effective way to share information about vulnerable children who go missing. It is therefore important the progress on the national database is not delayed.

Recommendations:

- Risk assessment at the time a child is reported as missing needs to be informed by different agencies who have been in contact with the child and may hold vital pieces of information, such as police, children's services and voluntary sector organisations. This is particularly important where 'no apparent risk' or 'low risk' categorisation is made by the police. The APP guidance should stipulate that lower risk categorisation, which usually results in delayed response to missing children, should not be made without information obtained from children's services.

- Police and Crime Commissioners and local authorities should work together to agree a system of placing flags/markers on vulnerable children on the police database. These flags should be used to determine if a child should never be marked as 'no apparent risk'.

- The Government and NPCC, in developing the National Missing Persons database, should consult with a wider range of stakeholders to ensure that it meets the needs of all agencies with safeguarding responsibilities towards missing children with regards to information sharing and use.

Sharing information from return home interviews

Why providing RHIs and sharing intelligence from them is important

In England the latest statutory guidance[39] requires that all missing children should be offered a RHI upon their return. The interview should be in-depth and aim to:

- Identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered either before they ran away or while they were missing
- Understand and address the reasons for running away
- Help the child understand that they have options and provide them with information on how to stay safe if they run away again

It should also be carried out by an individual who is independent of the young person, someone who is trained to carry out these interviews appropriately and is empowered to follow up any actions that emerge.

Providing an RHI is important for a number of reasons: they can help build intelligence around child sexual exploitation and other risks, provide evidence for prosecution, and can lead to financial savings for public services.[40] Research by Railway Children[41] estimated a potential saving of £2,415.80 per young person for police services (this figure is based on time saved where RHIs help to reduce or eliminate instances of going missing). Furthermore, they suggest RHIs can mitigate the need for additional counselling and support services in schools. It is estimated that this could save £400 per child (based on eight hours of support per young person at £50 per hour).

RHIs should place the young person's needs and experiences at the centre – if done by a person that the child trusts it can give them the opportunity to talk and be listened to, creating a safe space in which the young person can discuss their feelings and have their experiences taken seriously. A good RHI can allow practitioners to explore with a child where they

> **Case Study B: Jacob's story***
>
> Jacob was referred to our service as he was going missing regularly and had been assessed at 'medium risk' of CSE. Jacob was being reported missing by his family numerous times a week and was sometimes missing for weeks at a time.
>
> It was agreed that Protect would keep Jacob's case open, but that a named practitioner would complete the direct work with Jacob. They are now half way through the programme of missing work and Jacob has been engaging very well. Jacob enjoys the one-to-one time during sessions each week and is enthusiastic about completing the work. Jacob does still go missing from time to time, but the episodes have substantially reduced.
>
> It has been evident that Jacob is influenced by his peers and is associating with looked-after children who are also reported missing on a regular basis. Jacob has tried to distance himself from these peers recently, but finds it difficult, so work has been done around peer pressure and what makes a 'good or bad' friend. Additionally, work has been completed around the dangers of going missing, safe/unsafe places and people, CSE and grooming and family relationships. Jacob has also found it beneficial having us complete his RHI during his one-to-one sessions instead of having different professionals coming in and out of his life.
>
> When the practitioner asked Jacob what he likes about working with the service he said, 'I like seeing my worker because I get to talk about what I've been doing and we talk about going missing'.
>
> *to protect the young person's identify names have been changed

go and what happens during a missing episode (see Case Study B).

Through our direct work with children and young people who have been missing, The Children's Society knows that RHIs can help children understand if they are in exploitive relationships and enable them to disclose abuse. Information shared by young people during the RHI can also help with identifying 'hot spots': areas where children go missing to, and individuals who target them.

A good RHI can allow professionals to identify areas in which they can offer the child support as early as possible to protect them from harm and disrupt any risks, stopping them from escalating.

Moreover, there is a large financial and social cost attached to children going missing. Responding to missing children puts pressure on public services as mentioned previously.[42, 43]

Our practice demonstrates that an effective RHI and follow up support can reduce the number of missing episodes and in some cases might stop a child from running away altogether: Ofsted reported[44] a 30% reduction in missing children incidents in Worcestershire over a year as a result of RHI provision.

It is vital not to lose sight of the fact that the interview should always keep the voice of the child at its centre. The young person has the right to confidentiality, with the interview being seen as a chance to understand the reasons behind why that young person went missing and the support that may stop them from running away again in the future.

Findings

Offer of RHIs to missing children

Before looking at how information from RHIs is shared by children's services we will look at who delivers RHIs and how missing children are receiving this service. Previous research[45] on this subject showed that RHI provision for children who go missing remains patchy, which impacts on the quality and comprehensiveness of information from RHI in each area. The APPG[46] inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children found children missing from family home, children classified by the police as absent and children in out-of-area care placements are experiencing poor response and there is a lack of consistent RHI provision for these groups of children.

Our FOI findings show that RHI provision remains a concern. Figure 5 shows that children categorised by the police as missing – both from the family home and from care placements – are offered RHIs in nearly 97% of local authorities.

Children categorised by the police as 'absent' – both 'absent from the family home' and 'absent' from care placements – are not offered RHIs as frequently, with only 47% of local authorities offering RHIs to children absent from the family home and 54% to children absent from care. Opportunities to intervene early and offer help before risks become more serious may be lost, making these vulnerable children even more vulnerable.

Independence of RHI provision

The statutory guidance on missing children recommends that RHIs should be provided by someone a child trusts, someone who is independent and someone who is trained appropriately. There is no accompanying guidance to clarify the meaning of the word 'independent', and it has been noted throughout conversations with practitioners and with local authorities that the interpretation of this term differs from authority to authority.

In our FOI request we did ask local authorities about who delivered RHIs in their area. Figure 6 shows the distribution of the answers.

Figure 5: Number of local authorities offering RHIs to different groups of missing children (n=104)
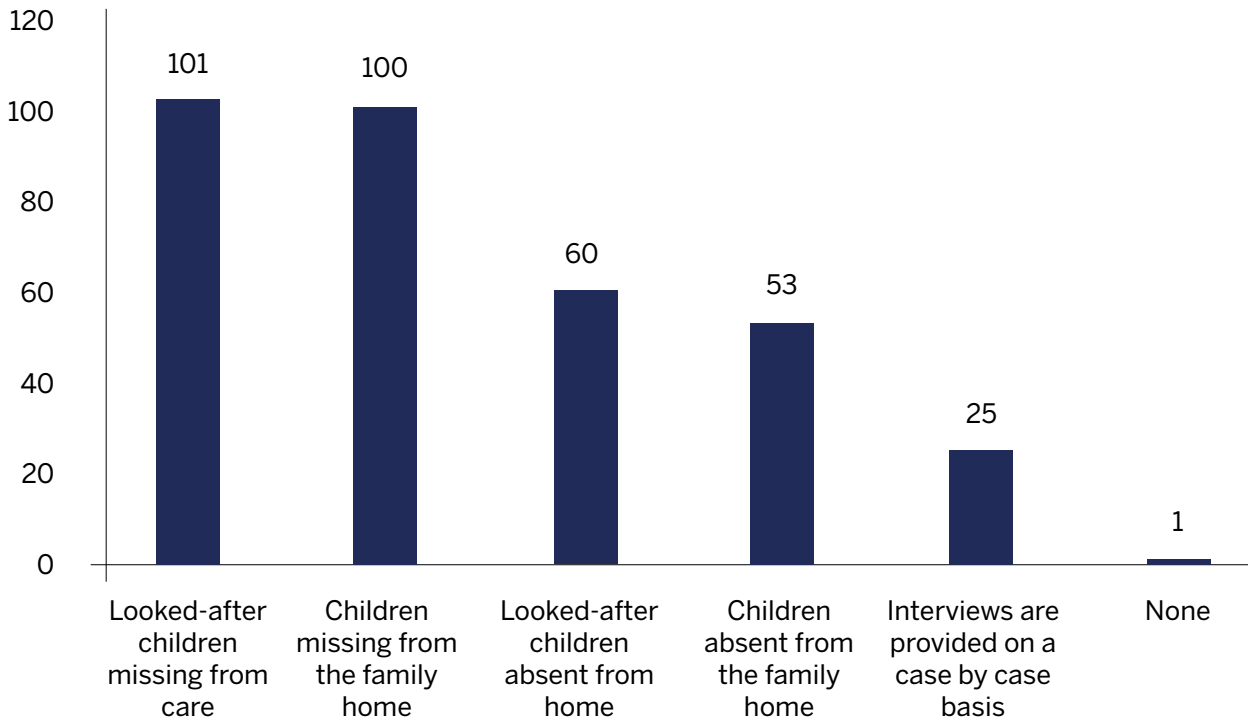
Figure 6: Who provides the RHI in each local authority by groups of young people (n=104)
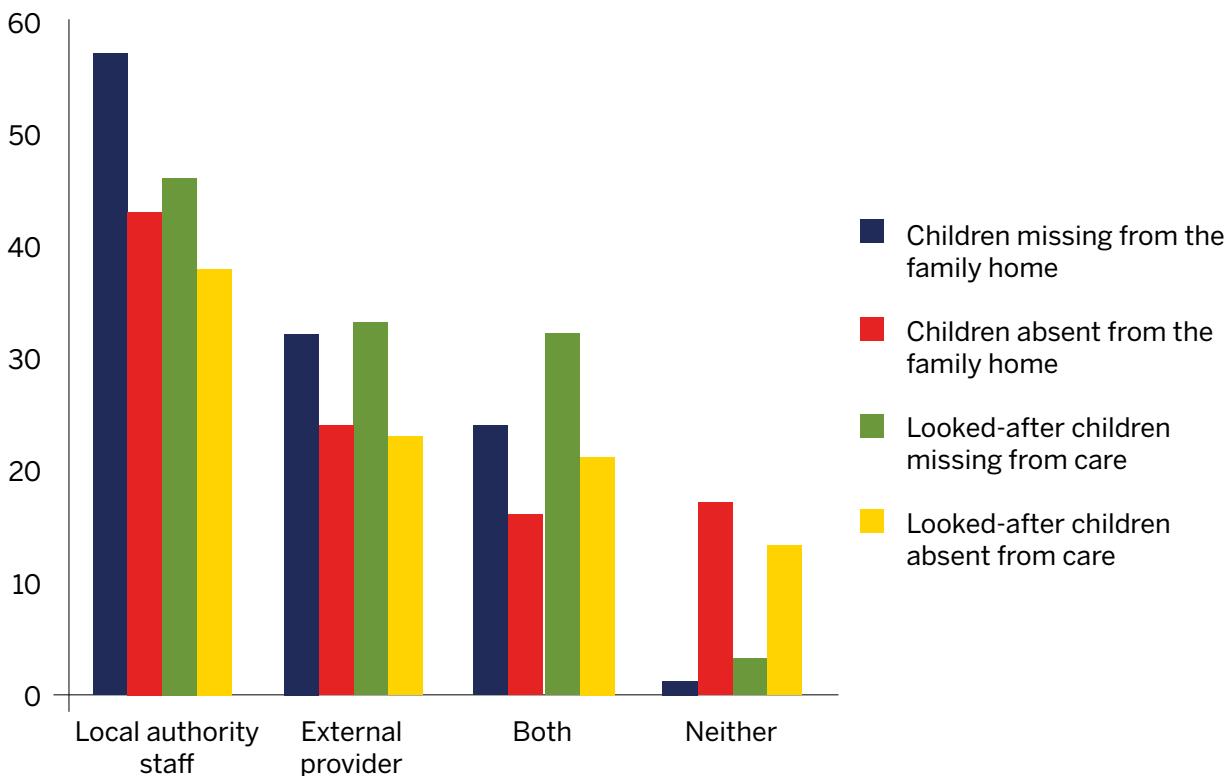
The data shows that in relation to all groups of children the most frequently cited provider of RHIs were staff from children's services, including for children who are looked-after by local authorities.

We know that one of the reasons for children missing from care is them being unhappy with the location or quality of their placement or other decisions made about their lives by children's services staff. Thus, it is vital that the local authority ensures children receiving an RHI feel comfortable discussing all issues that may have caused them to go missing.

It is very important that the RHI provides a meaningful and genuine opportunity for young people to discuss the reasons and experiences of going missing. Further research is needed into what kind of RHI provision best meets that objective and ensures that children can engage and take up an offer of interview.

Number of children receiving RHIs

The high availability of RHIs among local authorities that responded to our FOI is positive. However, it does not equate to high uptake of an offer. With FOI requests we set to establish the number of young people who received an RHI. We asked local authorities how many RHIs they or their external provider completed for missing children in the year April 1 2015 to March 31 2016.

Eighty two local authorities across England could answer our question about how many RHIs were conducted. Across these 82 local authorities the number given is approximately 32,000.

Although that number looks quite high, closer analysis of the data shows real discrepancy in how many RHIs are conducted relative to the estimated number of missing incidents in each local authority area.

The DfE does not store data on the number of missing incidents or individuals at the local authority level. Therefore, in order to get a better picture of how many children and young people receive a RHI after being missing, we estimated the rate of missing

Figure 7: Proportion of RHIs completed by local authorities based on estimated number of missing incidents per local authority (n=82)
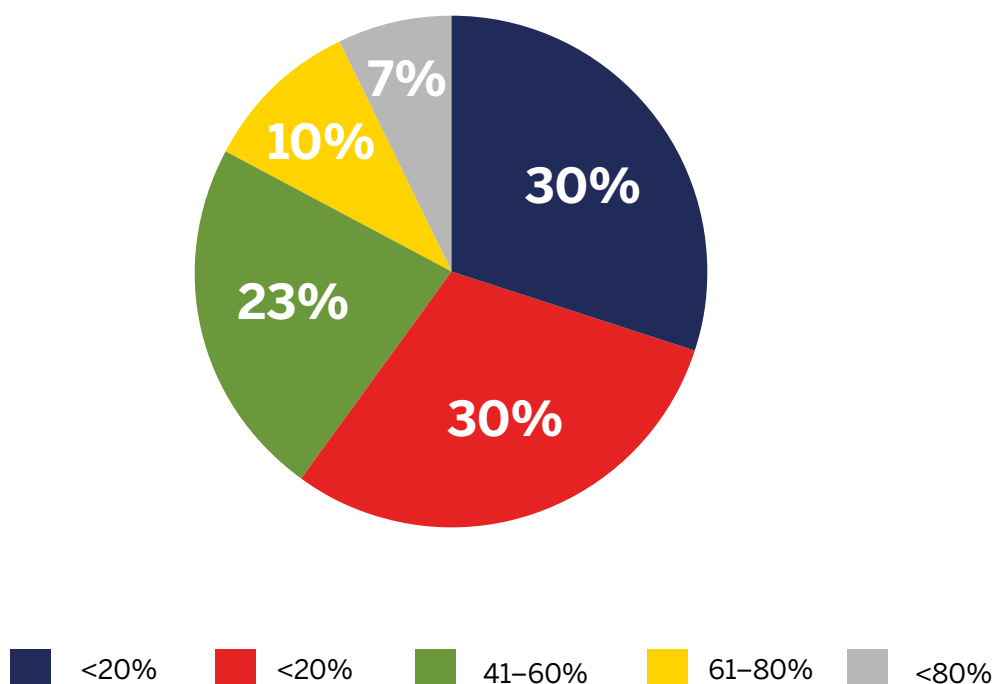
Legend:
- <20% (navy)
- <20% (red)
- 41–60% (green)
- 61–80% (yellow)
- <80% (grey)

incidents per local authority based on available data from the NCA about missing incidents per police force area and population data at the local authority level from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

As the findings are based on estimates made from two data sources they must be treated with caution. However, based on our estimates, we were able to approximate that in 60% of local authorities RHIs were completed for less than 40% of missing incidents. Moreover, 30% of local authorities were only able to provide RHIs for 0–20% of incidents of children or young people running away.

Given that every time a child goes missing they are statutorily entitled to a RHI, this figure seems quite low. It is vital that the Government allocate adequate funding to enable local authorities to provide RHIs to children and young people every time they run away or go missing from home.

Some local authorities appear to be providing RHIs to high percentages of children who go missing, with six authorities completing them in more than 80% of cases. Whilst this is positive, it highlights further the disparity in responses to missing incidents that children and young people receive from place to place. It is a postcode lottery.

Referral rates

In our FOIs we asked the local authorities: as a result of RHIs conducted between April 1 2015 and March 31 2016, 'how many children and young people have been signposted to further services or children's service intervention?' Only 13 authorities were able to provide us with this data.

Of those local authorities that did respond, a large gap exists between the numbers of referrals made compared to the number of RHIs completed.

In some cases this may have been down to problems with recording techniques. However, even for those authorities that could answer our question in full the percentages of referrals ranged from 6.6% to 100%.

This wide disparity clearly indicates that some local authorities are failing to acknowledge or respond to RHI recommendations, or refer children and young people on to services which could provide them with the support that they need.

What information from a RHI is gathered and shared?

Through conversation with professionals it is clear that the sharing of information from a RHI requires a balanced approach. This involves ensuring a child's wishes for confidentiality are respected while at the same time sharing with relevant safeguarding partners information that can improve protection of children. The importance of striking a balance between what is shared has also been highlighted in the Government's

advice on information sharing, which stipulates that information sharing should be 'necessary, proportionate, relevant, adequate, accurate, timely and secure'.[47] Through our FOI we aimed to establish how and what is shared between children's services and the police locally.

The responses range from 'external providers are co-located within the police to share information' to 'information from RHIs are not routinely shared with the police'. Two local authorities told us that they don't routinely share information from RHIs, whereas 48 share RHI forms without any redaction. Arguably, neither the former nor the latter correspond to the principles of proportionality and necessity as outlined in the guidance. Sharing via multi-agency hubs or structures and/or sharing of relevant summary with key bits of intelligence appear to be appropriate approaches.

It was clear from the interviews with practitioners that a lot more needs to be done to develop guidance on what good information sharing from RHIs would look like. Consultations showed that although the sharing of non-redacted forms from RHIs is seen as inefficient, concerns exist around how to ensure that staff in children's services understand what good intelligence for the police looks like.

Case study C: SCARPA, The Children's Society in Tyneside

For over 10 years SCARPA has been delivering services to children and young people on Tyneside who run away from home or are at risk of CSE.

SCARPA's Programme Manager works in partnership with children's social care, LCSB and Missing and Sexually Exploited and Trafficked groups, and Northumbria Police to ensure that intelligence from RHIs that might be useful in disrupting missing episodes informs the work of the local police and children's services.

A referral gap was identified following a review of the data from RHIs completed on Tyneside over the course of a year (see Figure 8).

The data highlights a clear disparity between the number of risk factors identified and the number referrals that were picked up by the local authority.

Over 65% of young people reported they had been at risk of harm whilst missing. However, only 40% were referred onwards.

Figure 8: Risk factors identified during a RHI compared to referral to, or current provision of, appropriate services
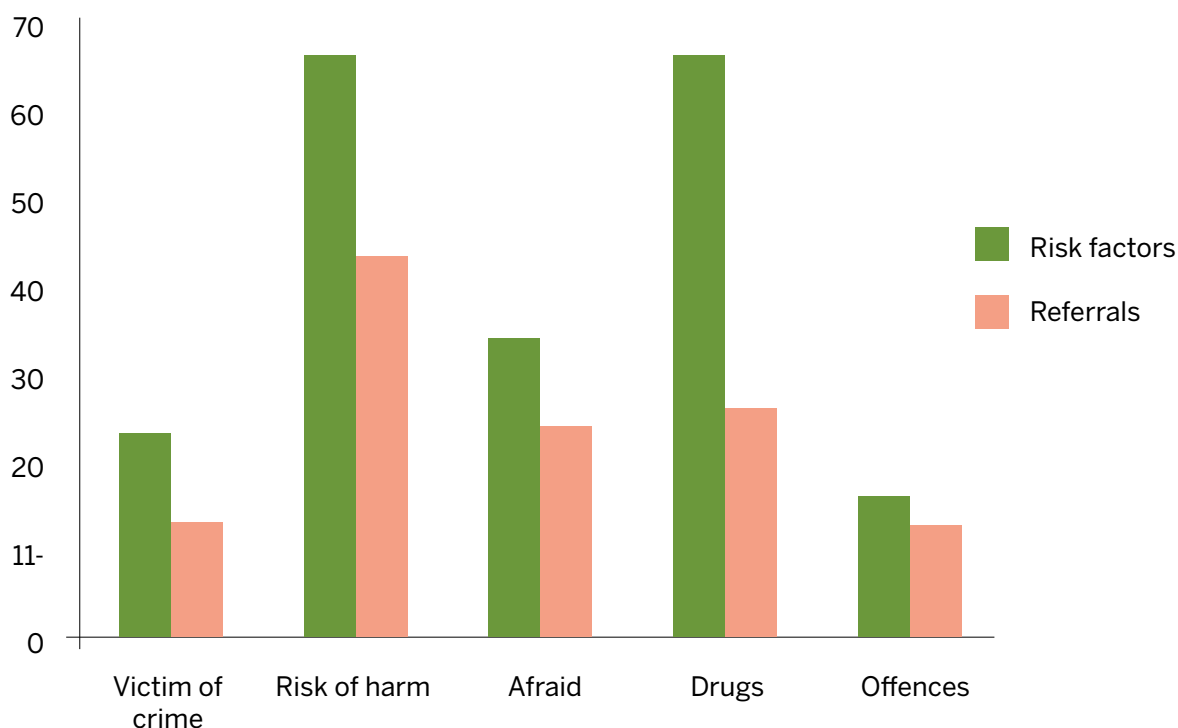
'There is a problem with the format that the data is shared, receiving the entire transcript is time intensive for the police to dissect, sometimes it contains no intelligence. However, when the LA summaries the report we cannot be sure they have gleaned all the intelligence. The RHI is conducted in different ways, by different people in each location, so we cannot be sure that all the useful intelligence has been gathered.'

Consultation with the police

What makes good intelligence?

Through consultations with missing person coordinators within police forces and with our practitioners, we noticed disparities between what each partner saw as useful RHI information to be gathered and shared.

While practitioners in services delivering RHIs primarily view it as an intervention focussed on the child's needs, police staff highlighted the intelligence building opportunity of RHIs.

Our practitioners see the RHI as a chance to understand and begin to tackle push or pull factors that may have led to the young person towards going missing. Moreover, it is a chance to signpost young people on to services that could help disrupt missing episodes in the future.

Figure 9: Percentage of local authorities that share information from RHIs with the police (n= 97)
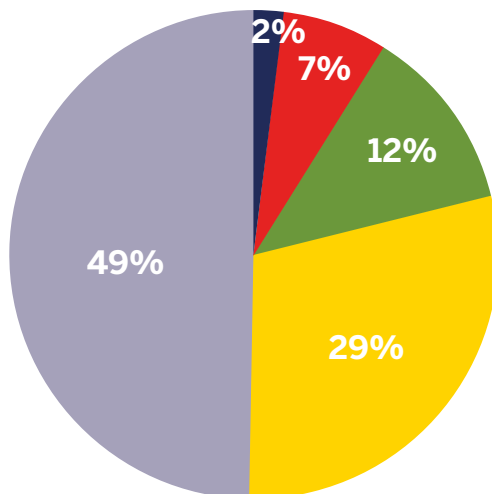
- Information from RHIs are not routinely shared with the police
- The external RHI provider passes on information to the police
- External RHI providers are co-located within the police to share information
- Individual practitioners pass relevant information according to professional judgement
- LAs automatically RHI forms with the police, no redaction

'We take a very young person-centred view when conducting the RHI, we don't want to simply be collecting intelligence for someone else. There can be pressure from the police to find out who they were with and where they were going, but it's about what the young person wants to tell us at the end of the day.'

The Children's Society in Torbay

However, the police staff we spoke to saw it as an intelligence-gathering tool. They highlighted that what they consider useful intelligence could differ from the RHI provider's perception. The police expressed they were not confident in the ability of other agencies to extract all intelligence from an RHI. This issue must be addressed; further research is needed to develop training for external providers and children's services in how to identify and collate vital intelligence from RHIs.

Examples were also shared from work happening locally where police and RHI providers seek to understand each other's requirements. In Stoke-on-Trent, the children's services, their RHI provider and local police force have worked together to best understand how to gather and record good intelligence. They

highlighted that they did not wish to make the interview too police-focused but they recognised the importance of understanding interview techniques for gathering specific information. Furthermore, the councils RHI service provider has been provided access to add intelligence onto the police COMPACT system.

Summary

Provision of RHIs and timely and accurate sharing of information gathered from those interviews are vital to safeguarding of missing children. Information we gathered for this report shows that both the provision of RHIs and information shared are not yet adequate and need to improve.

The RHI should be a starting point for intervention from missing from home services. The process of recounting what happened

whilst they were missing may be traumatic for the young person. Therefore, it is important that the process is demonstrably worthwhile for the individual.

Independent RHI practitioners expressed frustration that there were no guarantees they will receive a response or acknowledgement from children's services that their report has been received and read, at least.

'The biggest barrier to us is once the information goes to children's services we don't know what happens to it. That can be frustrating because we don't always know the outcome.'

Independent RHI practitioner

'It's inconsistent as to whether the social worker reads the RHI. We've had times where we know that they haven't read it as they have rung us for information that was contained in the RHI – but other times they call us to discuss information contained within the report.'

Independent RHI practitioner

We heard that many young people do not see the value of the RHI – they consider it just another process imposed on them and do not believe it will make any difference to their day-to-day lives.

Our practitioners explained how they frequently have to persuade the children and young people that they work with to engage in the process. This is only fair to the child if the RHI leads to help being provided to the child or his/her family.

'Sometimes we make safeguarding referrals off the back of RHIs and it goes nowhere, that's a constant theme.'

Independent RHI practitioner

Where information is shared it is not always used. Our practitioners stated they frequently felt that information from RHIs is effectively shared with children's services. However, when it comes to utilising that information the problems begin.

'Information from RHIs seem to be shared effectively and appropriately, but it is not well utilised. So when we've done an RHI we'll send a professional feedback form to the social worker. What we've noticed is that most of the time, social workers aren't uploading it to the young person's file, they're not using our professional recommendations.'

Independent RHI practitioner

In order to achieve the best outcomes for the child it is important that the interviews gather the right information to enable the best course of action to be planned for the young person.

Recommendations:

■ The statutory guidance on missing children should be revised to include guidance on information sharing from RHIs and require that local authorities respond to and act on recommendations following a RHI.

■ Local authorities should develop local systems to record key information from RHIs to share with the police. The lessons from this local practice should then be fed into ADCS and NPCC with a view to later developing national guidance.

■ Local authorities and the police, perhaps through the PCC, should work in partnership with statutory partners to develop a programme of work around what good intelligence collected from RHIs looks like. This programme should be mandatory for anyone carrying out RHIs and for those that collate and share information with the police. This information can then be shared with other agencies to flag concerns about risk to the child and best disrupt the causes of missing episodes.

■ The new National Missing Persons Database should include provision for local authorities or RHI services providers commissioned by local authorities to input and store relevant information from RHIs, to inform risk assessments and local intelligence on missing children.

Increased risks facing children missing from out-of-area placements

Why better information sharing is needed for children placed out-of-area

In 2015–16 approximately 28,260 looked-after children lived in placements outside their local authorities boundaries: equivalent to 40% of all looked-after children. Of those children and young people 4,230 are in children's homes with 19,610 living in foster placements.[48] Children in out-of-area placements are particularly at risk of running away and being targeted by people seeking to exploit them – therefore it is extremely important to ensure that these children are provided with appropriate protection.

DfE guidance[49] places a duty on the local authority to minimise the risk of a child going missing from their placement when housing them.

For some children and young people, being placed away from the area they call home may be the safest option. It may put them at a distance from people trying to exploit or traffic them. However, for many children and young people placing them out of the area of their home local authority area can greatly raise the risk of them going missing.

An APPG inquiry[50] into children who run away or go missing from care identified particularly concerning data and information sharing practices for out-of-area

children, highlighting how these children are often specifically targeted by those who seek to exploit them. Moreover, it highlighted how children in out-of-area placements find it more difficult to secure help. These children often slip through the net due to lack of communication between agencies in different local authority areas. Out-of-area placements can be further complicated when the young person is not just placed out of local authority area but out of the police force boundary too.[51]

The inquiry demonstrated that many local authorities were not informing the receiving local authorities of a looked-after child being placed there. In 2015, the DfE revised The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations: Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review[52] requiring local authorities to notify other local authorities if they place a child in care within their area. Under the same guidance, children's homes are to notify their host local authority when another authority places a child with them.

Further guidance from the DfE on out of authority placement of looked-after children[53] requires the local authority to:

- Consult and share information before placing children in out-of-area placements
- Have the Director of Children's Services (DCS) approve out-of-area placements.

Currently, the guidance does not require the local authority to also notify the relevant police force when they place a child in their area.

'We are not always certain that information relating to high risk children and young people is shared with everyone, especially the police outside of Birmingham. So often they don't have that crucial information that they need to be aware of to try and put into place planning to help keep that young person safe.'

Return home interview practitioner

The issue of information sharing about children in out-of-area care placements has been recognised as an important one. Last year The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) trailed a project with the College of Policing that encouraged local authority staff to notify the relevant police force (as well as the local authority) when a child is placed out-of-area[54] – the learning from this pilot has yet to be shared. However, analysis of our FOI data demonstrated that in most cases this is not being done (see Figure 8).

During our consultations with practitioners working in local authorities across England we learnt that there is frequently a lack of good and timely support available to children missing out-of-area both whilst they are missing and when they are found.

'When children are placed out-of-area everything just seems to fall apart for them. No one wants to take responsibility for them whilst they are missing or when they are found.'

Independent return home interview practitioner

'Cross border there is always more vulnerability, as in my experience local authorities don't always talk to each other. There is then a knock-on effect of this, if the child is a looked-after child and the placing authority have only given a scant amount of information about where the young person is, then the information won't be as good as it should be.'

Independent return home interview practitioner

It is vital that systems are put in place to ensure that local authorities and police forces in different geographical locations communicate with each other and share information for children placed out-of-area.

Findings on the provisions in place to share information when a looked-after child is placed outside of their home local authority

Through our FOI requests, we sought to ascertain how information is currently shared across agencies when looked-after children are placed out of the area of the local authority responsible for them. Moreover, we wanted to establish the procedures that were in place for providing RHIs to children placed out-of-area.

We asked local authorities how many looked-after children they were aware of that were placed in their area by other local authorities. Given the difference in sizes of the authority areas, the number of children's homes in any particular area, as well as a number of different other factors, we expected to find a large spread in the number of children placed in each area by other local authorities. Indeed, the numbers ranged from 0–1,816 children. However, it is important that whatever the number of out-of-area children living in each local authority, the level of care that they receive when being placed away from home should always be

Figure 10: How local authorities received notification of a looked-after child placed in their area
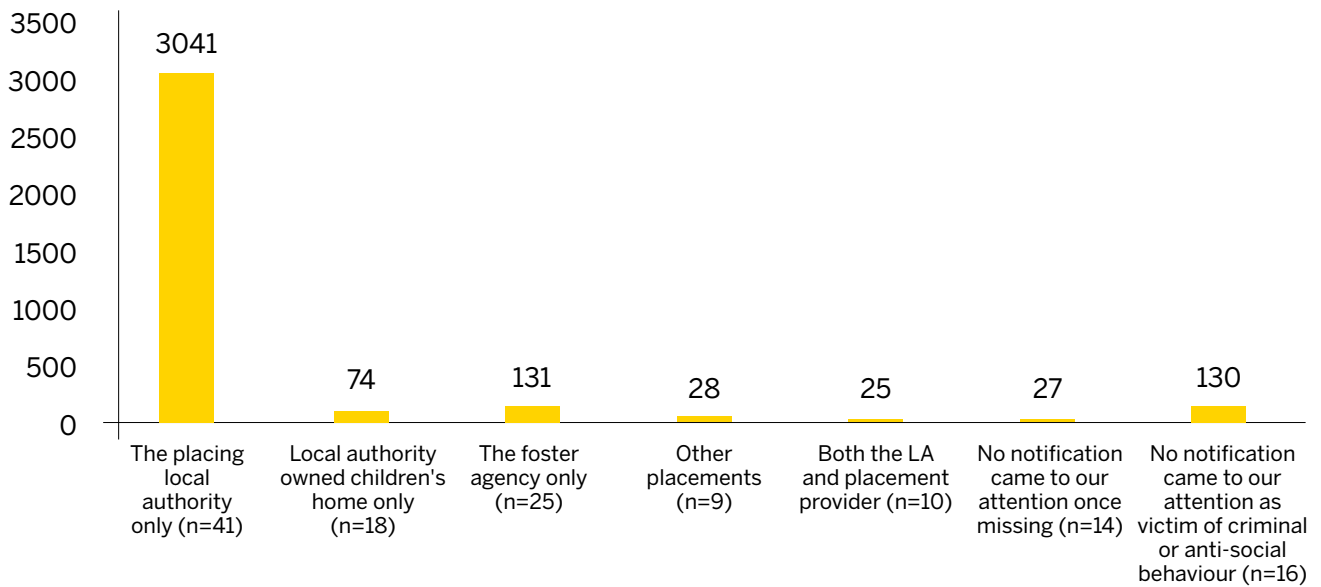
appropriate to ensure that they are kept safe.

Ensuring that the receiving local authority, as well as the police, are aware of a vulnerable child living in their area is paramount for good safeguarding. A good information-sharing protocol and procedure should ensure each local authority receives notification about each child placed in their area by another local authority irrespective of the number of out-of-area children that it houses, as stated in the statutory guidance.

Local authorities' awareness of children placed in their area

We obtained responses from 97 local authorities on the number of looked-after children they were aware of who were placed in their area by other local authorities. This amounted to 13,935 children across England.

We then asked how each looked-after child, placed out-of-area, had come to the attention of the local authority in which it was placed. Forty one local authorities were able to provide us with this data for all the looked-after children placed in their areas, accounting for 3,454 (24%) of the total.

The placing local authority and children's home both have statutory duty to notify the new local authority when they house a looked-after young person within their area.

The majority of notifications – 3041 (87%) – were made by the placing local authority only, 74 (2%) by the children's home only and 28 (1%) from both the local authority and placement. This equates to 90% of notifications coming through agencies with statutory duty to do so, meaning agencies with the statutory responsibility to do so failed to notify the receiving local

authority in 10% of cases. In 2015/16 the DfE reported[55] 51,850 looked-after children being placed in foster placements, with 19,610 of these being placed out-of-area. An additional 7,600 children were placed in secure units, children's homes and semi-independent living accommodation. Of this figure, 3,650 were placed outside of area.

Without statutory guidance requiring all agencies that receive looked-after children from other local authority areas to notify both new local authority and police force of the placement, there is a risk that children placed in foster and other alternative placements will slip through the net, and be at increased risk of harm if they were to go missing.

Within the 41 local authorities that we were able to examine, 157 young people who had been placed out-of-area only came to the attention of the authority that

they had been placed in after they had gone missing or become a victim of criminal or anti-social behaviour. This number is likely to be higher as only a small number of local authorities responded to our request. Moreover, there may be other children who have not come to the attention of the receiving local authority yet. To ensure the safety of a looked-after child placed out-of-area, it is not enough for local authorities to be engaging in good practice in silos. A local authority's response to missing children relies on notification from all other authorities when they place a looked-after child in their area.

Local authorities notifying police

We asked local authorities two questions regarding the way in which they share information with the police. Firstly, when they receive a looked-after child from another local authority in their area and secondly about when they place a child within the boundary of another local authority.

We found that only a third of local authorities who responded to the FOI shared risk assessments with the local police for all looked-after children that they receive in their area.

Of these, just 22 do so for all out-of-area children – the remainder only notify the police for those they deem to be high risk. In many instances children and young people have been placed out-of-area specifically because they are vulnerable, ie at high risk of being sexually and criminally exploited. Moreover, we know that children in out-of-area placements are at high risk of going missing.[56]

All children in out-of-area placements can be considered to be at high risk in case they go missing.

When placing a child within the boundaries of another police force, just over a third (37) of local authorities do not notify the local police force. The remaining two-thirds of authorities do so only in some circumstances. However, once again for just under half (30) of these cases it is only for those children that are deemed to be of particularly high risk.

There are evidently substantially different information sharing and notification systems existing between local authorities across England. This has resulted in outcomes for missing children and young people depending on protocols of the authority with responsibility for them.

Figure 11: The number of local authorities that provide risk assessments to the relevant police force when placing a looked-after child in their area
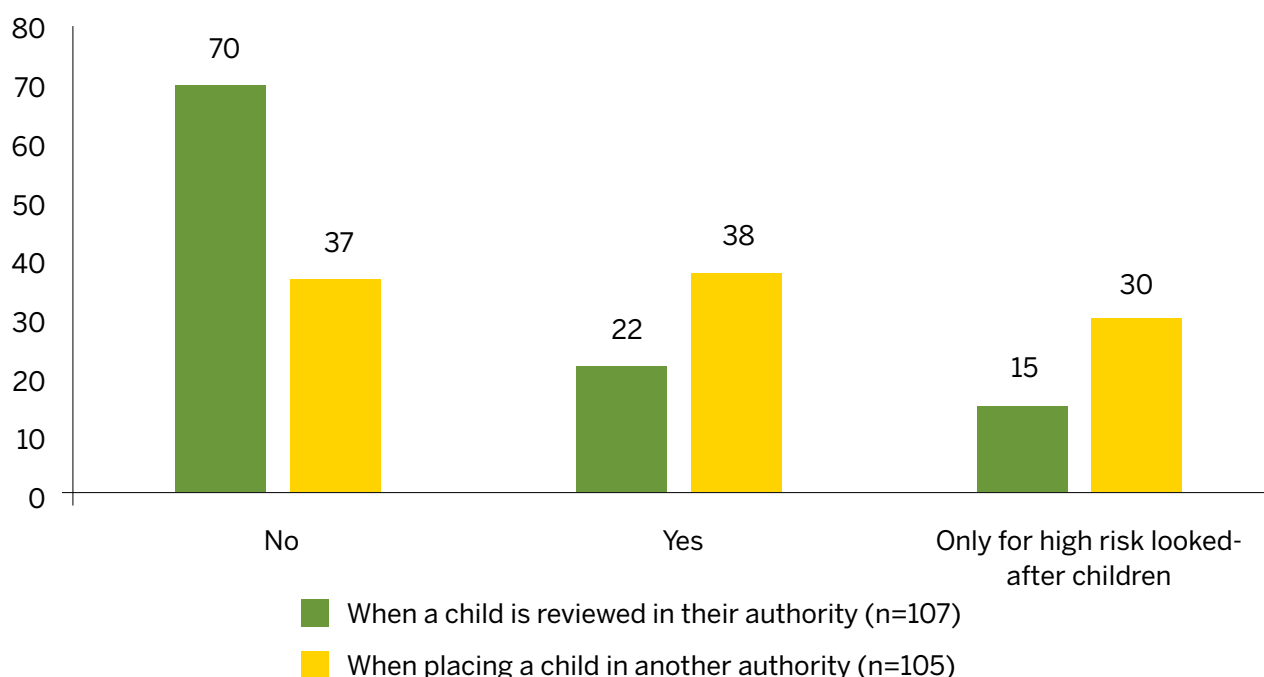
Legend:
- When a child is reviewed in their authority (n=107)
- When placing a child in another authority (n=105)

If we are to effectively safeguard some of the most vulnerable children residing in our care system it is imperative that there is a more standardised approach to sharing information with the police when placing looked-after children out-of-area.

RHIs for those placed out-of-area

We asked local authorities if they had arrangements in place to offer RHIs to looked-after children living in their area that had been placed there by another local authority (see Figure 12).

Almost half of local authorities did not offer RHIs to out-of-area children and young people. Moreover, less than a sixth offered a spot-purchasing service to conduct the interview on behalf of the responsible authority. An Ofsted inspection of Stoke-on-Trent stated that their procedure for this is good (see Example of best practice B).

We know from our consultations with practitioners that out-of-area placements can cause disruption to the RHI process. We heard evidence that even when local authorities requested spot purchase RHIs from other agencies for their out-of-area children, these requests were frequently denied.

Figure 12: Number of local authorities that have arrangements in place to offer RHIs to looked-after children placed out-of-area (n=98)
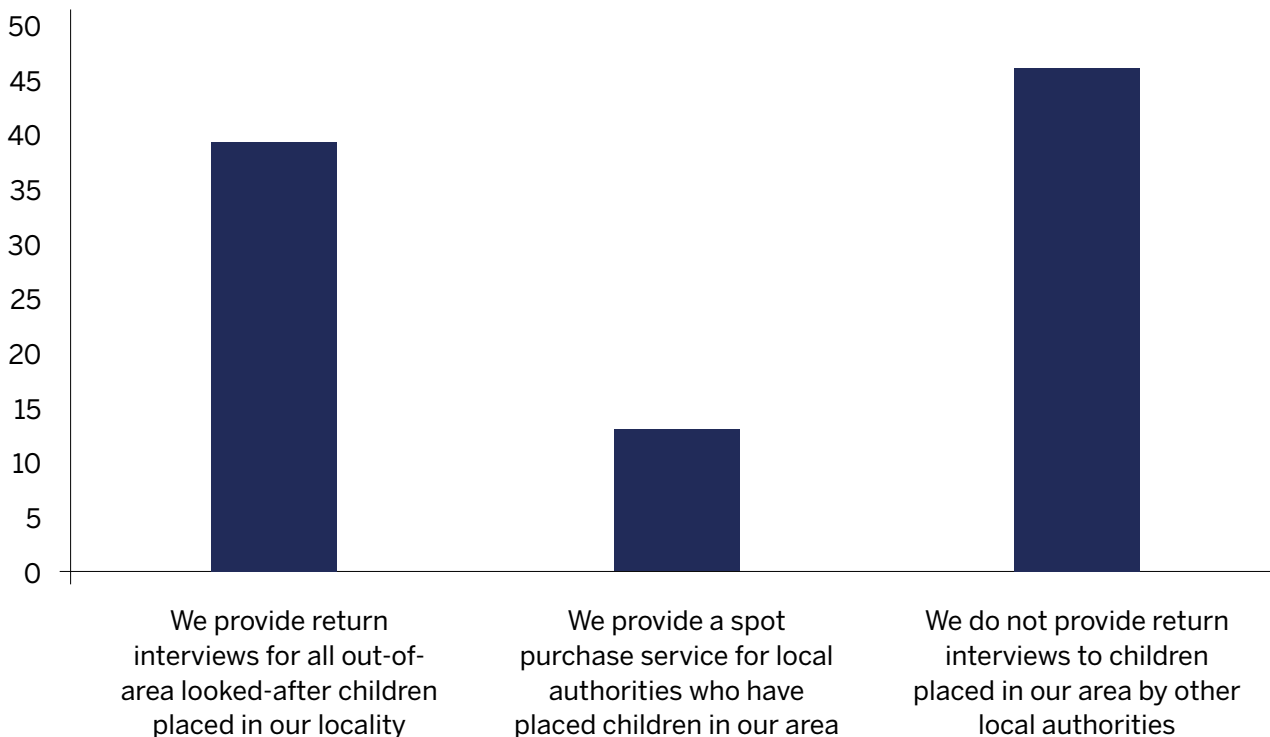
Example of effective practice B: Stoke-on-Trent, out-of-area placements

We spoke to the missing lead in Stoke-on-Trent children's services about measures they have in place to protect their out-of-area children as well as those placed within their boundaries by other local authorities.

They commented that it is impossible to be sure about the number of children that they have placed in their area by other authorities as often other authorities do not notify them of a placement. However, they provide full support to all children who go missing in Stoke who were placed there by other local authorities.

They told us any child placed within their area, irrespective of which local authority is responsible for them, will get an RHI from their external provider which Stoke pay for.

The local authority who is responsible for the young person will receive a letter notifying them that they have gone missing and offering them the chance to have a copy of the RHI.

They recognised the importance of having a complete picture of missing children in Stoke.

'We don't want to just be looking at our own children because we know that children from care from other local authorities will soon link up with Stoke children. We want to see the patterns and see who is missing together and gather all of the intelligence around that.'

When they place a child out-of-area they provide the placing authority with a risk assessment and, in CSE cases, a trigger plan. Additionally, if the young person has been missing before and the police have been involved this information will be shared.

If a child they place out-of-area goes missing, they log the missing episode on their information system. If they are placed in Staffordshire, Stokes RHI provider will go and conduct an interview with that young person but if they are placed elsewhere, they spot purchase through the local authority in question's provider.

If this is not possible, the child's social worker will conduct the RHI – Stoke recognise that it would be better for the interview to be conducted by someone independent to the young person but they consider it more effective for the interview to be done by the social worker than not at all.

Stoke have seen a reduction in the number of repeat missing episodes. Moreover, in their latest report, when talking about children placed out-of-area, Ofsted highlighted:

'Children placed further afield are visited regularly and receive high quality specialist therapeutic support when needed.'

'There are thorough and effective procedures for children missing from care and at risk of child sexual exploitation, with well-coordinated multi-agency responses to reduce risk, including for children placed out-of-area.'

'Missing episodes is improving (65 in 2013–14 reduced to 55 in 2014–15). For children placed out-of-area, return interviews are offered as a bespoke service.'

For further information, please contact: CW@stoke.gov.uk

'We only deal with young people who are looked after by the local authority in this local authority area, so if they're looked after by a different local authority we don't do their RHI. They could do spot purchase but they don't. This also means that we are not doing young people from the area who are placed elsewhere.'

Independent return home interview practitioner

Furthermore, it is likely that the information sharing practices of the police further disrupted this process. Half of the police forces who responded to our FOIs indicated they do not notify the local authority with responsibility for the young person when they find them within their force boundary.

If the local authority is not made aware that a young person that they are responsible for has been missing then it further reduces the chances of that young person being offered and receiving an RHI.

Summary

The evidence suggests that looked-after children and young people placed out-of-area are not receiving support to which they are entitled. This is both in terms of ensuring that the receiving local authority is aware of them being placed in their area and aware of the level of support and care they need, and following a missing episode. This will greatly impact on the placing authority's ability to keep the child's care plan up to date. Any decisions made in relation to the young person's welfare will lack key information, and any chance of early intervention and prevention work with that young person may be lost.

Children in care are some of the most vulnerable in society. It is unacceptable that when they are placed out-of-area – away from their family and friends and at increased risk of going missing – that the response they get (from a range of different agencies) is poorer than for those who go missing in the area of their home local authority.

As no national police database currently exists to share information about missing children, the failure of local authorities to notify the relevant police force when placing a child within their boundaries could impede the risk assessment and future police investigations and safeguarding work.

Statutory guidance already recommends this process takes place. However, clearly the system is not working. There is the need for national notification system to hold local authorities to account when placing a looked-after child into the boundaries of another local authority.

Recommendations:

- As many of the looked-after children in the out-of-area placements live in foster care placements the duty to notify the area where the placement is taking place should be extended to cover foster agencies.

- Ofsted should ensure that looked-after children inspections specifically look at the number of out-of-area placements, notification timing and quality of information shared, as well as responses to children missing from out-of-area placements.

- The Government should amend the 2014 statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care to require local authorities to send notification about children they are placing outside the local authority boundaries to the police force where the placement is located.

- Local authorities should share relevant information about risks to, and vulnerabilities of the child, with local police forces upon placing a child out-of-area in another police force area.

- Ofsted and other inspectorates should undertake a joint targeted thematic inspection with a focus on children in out-of-area placements, including responses they receive when they go missing.

- Local authorities should collect data on the number of children going missing from out-of-area placements and being offered and receiving RHIs, to ensure accountability for the current lack of provision and to facilitate good practice in this area. We would suggest as a starting point that scrutiny committees at the local level may wish to investigate this issue further.

Conclusion

When children and young people go missing it is often a cry for help. In recent years local authorities, the Government and the police have made much progress in their responses to missing children. However, as this report shows, there is still work to be done to ensure that children and young people who run away or go missing get the response that they deserve.

Keeping young people who go missing safe relies on multiple agencies working across organisational and administrative boundaries to understand the reasons and experiences behind those missing episodes, respond promptly to ensure the child is safely recovered, and work together to ensure the young person doesn't feel the need to run away again.

Accurate, timely and pertinent information sharing is key. This could range from information contained in a looked-after child's risk assessment, intelligence gathered in a previous RHI or knowledge about the child's physical and mental health. Different agencies hold different information, making it vital that they work together to build the whole picture of the vulnerabilities facing those young people when they are missing.

What has become clear from this research is that local responses to missing children differ greatly. We

have particular concern about the response that looked-after young people placed out area receive both before and after they go missing.

An offer of a RHI became statutory in 2014 – a significant step forwards – but many children and young people are missing out on them, with crucial intelligence from others not being shared with key agencies with safeguarding responsibilities. However, children and young people who go missing in Wales, where social care is devolved, still don't benefit from this key policy change. This issue will be explored further in our separate report which explores the response to children and young people who go missing in Wales, set to be published in summer 2017.

In England there is pressure for providers of RHIs to complete them 72 hours after a child returns home. However, our analysis revealed frustration amongst practitioners that there are no guarantees they will get a response from children's services, with information shared not being used or even acknowledged. These are important opportunities that young people cannot afford us to miss.

From the responses to our FOIs to both the police and local authorities we identified significant differences in the content of, and way in which,

information is shared between children's services and the police. We found evidence of multiple systems being used to gather and share information and it became clear that the risks and vulnerabilities that face missing children and young people are not universally understood.

We have identified various examples of good practice throughout this report. However, considering that we know effective multi-agency working can make a great difference to the life of a vulnerable child, it is concerning that in numerous areas across England agencies are not always working together as effectively as they could.

Small changes in the way that agencies work together can have a big impact on a young person's life.

While we have come a long way, it is the responsibility of all relevant agencies to continue this progress to ensure the response to missing children continues to improve. Our recommendations, if implemented, would help to ensure that children and young people are better protected from the risks of running away and would ensure a safer response if they do so. Children and young people who go missing are asking for help; we need to make sure they receive it.

Key recommendations for national Government:

■   The Government and NPCC, in developing the National Missing Persons Database, should consult with a wider range of stakeholders to ensure that vital information about missing children is shared between all relevant agencies to help keep children safe.

■   With the involvement of ADCS and NPCC, the DfE should develop guidance on a standardised system to record key information from RHIs.

■   The statutory guidance on missing children should be revised to include guidance on information sharing from RHIs and require that local authorities respond to and act on recommendations following a RHI.

■   DfE should collect data from local authorities on the number of children going missing from out-of-area placements and being offered and receiving RHIs, to ensure

accountability for the current lack of provision and to facilitate good practice in this area.

■   As many of the looked-after children in the out-of-area placements live in foster care placements, the duty to notify the area where the placement is taking place should be extended to cover foster agencies.

Other national agencies

■   The APP guidance should stipulate that lower risk categorisation – which usually results in delayed response to missing children – should not be made without information obtained from children's services.

■   Ofsted should ensure that looked-after children inspections specifically look at the number of out-of-area placements, notification

timing and quality of information shared, as well as responses to children missing from out-of-area placements.

■   Ofsted and other inspectorates should undertake a joint targeted thematic inspection with a focus on children in out-of-area placements, including responses they receive when they go missing.

■   The NPCC and ADCS should review and standardise how the system of flagging/placing markers about vulnerable children should be utilised across police and children's services and work with national Government to issue the guidance on the issue.

Key recommendations for local audiences:

- Local authorities should develop local systems to record key information from RHIs to share with the police. The lessons from this local practice should then be fed into ADCS and NPCC with a view to later developing national guidance.

- Local authorities should collect data on the number of children going missing from out-of-area placements and being offered and receiving RHIs, to ensure accountability for the current lack of provision and to facilitate good practice in this area. We would suggest as a starting point that scrutiny committees at the local level may wish to investigate this issue further.

- Local authorities and the police, perhaps through the Police and Crime Commissioner, should work in partnership with statutory partners to develop a programme of work around what good intelligence collected from RHIs looks like. This programme should be mandatory for anyone carrying out RHIs and for those that collate and share information with the police. This information can then be shared with other agencies to flag concerns about risk to the child and best disrupt the causes of missing episodes.

- Local authorities should share relevant information about risks to, and vulnerabilities of, the child with local police forces upon placing a child out-of-area in another police force area.

- Police and Crime Commissioners and local authorities should work together to agree a system of placing flags/markers on vulnerable children on the police database. These flags should be used to determine if a child should never be marked as 'no apparent risk'.

As a follow on from this report we would like to work with local areas to co-design an information sharing arrangement between key local agencies, including the local authority, police force and RHI provider, to take forward the recommendations in this report. If you would be interested in working with us on this joint programme please get in touch with Tom Redfearn on **thomas.redfearn@childrenssociety.org.uk**

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It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect. Too often their problems are ignored and their voices unheard. Now it is time to listen and to act.

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local services, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable, and have nowhere left to turn.

We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future.

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