

# Working with the Police

## Introduction

If you are at all concerned about the safety and wellbeing of the person who has disappeared, you should contact the police straight away.

When someone close to you goes missing there could be any number of reasons why he or she has disappeared. The person who has gone missing may be fine but just out of touch and you simply don't know where they are. On the other hand they could be lost, or they may have intended to go missing because they could no longer cope with personal issues. In rare cases they may have been abducted or be the victim of some other crime.

As the circumstances surrounding a disappearance can differ so much, so the role of the police can differ, and it is difficult to know what to expect, what questions to ask, or whether, and how, you should help in the search. In the following guidance you will find information on reporting someone missing to the police, what you can expect of them and what you can do to help.

This guidance was produced with the kind assistance of the National Missing Persons Bureau (NMPB). The NMPB also provides a series of factsheets relating to various aspects of a person going missing. This guidance can be accessed [here](#).

## Contents

<a href="#">1. When and How do you Report Someone Missing?</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">2. What Happens After you have Reported Someone Missing?</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">3. How do I Make a Complaint Against the Police?</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">4. Checklist for your Meeting with the Police</a>	<a href="#">12</a>

# When and How do you Report Someone Missing?

## How do you report someone missing?

You can:

- contact your local police station (in person or by phone); or
- in an emergency, dial **999**

You can find your local police station online at: <http://www.police.uk>, or by using your local phone directory or ringing a directory enquiry phone number such as **118 118** or **118 247**. Alternatively, many police forces now use the number **101** for non-emergency calls; if the call handler believes the report should be made to **999** they can transfer it immediately.

You can report to YOUR local police station even if the missing person lives in another part of the UK – if they need to the police will pass the details on to the relevant police force.

## When do you report someone missing?

You can report to the police immediately – you do NOT have to wait until 24 hours after a disappearance.

If you think the missing person could be in danger, or he or she is vulnerable in some way (for example if they have dementia, could be suicidal, might have been abducted or their disappearance is out of character or worrying), you should report them missing to the police straight away.

If you don't think the missing person is in immediate danger, you might not be sure what to do. You might be feeling upset, angry, guilty or panic stricken and it may be difficult to think clearly. Before contacting the police you might want to visit the missing person's home or where he or she was last seen, or check texts, emails, voicemail, Facebook, or ask family, friends, colleagues or school friends if they have heard from him or her.

If you are unsure what to do you can ring Missing People on freephone number **116 000** or email [116000@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:116000@missingpeople.org.uk) and we can discuss the situation with you and advise you. One option could be to ring the police to discuss what has happened – they may advise you to make a formal report, or they may suggest that you wait for a while to see if the situation resolves itself.

It can be a difficult decision to report to the police, especially if you are a family member left behind, but it can be a relief to report someone missing, to feel that you are confronting the situation and taking steps that hopefully will lead to a formal investigation and search.

## **If you make a report what information will the police ask for?**

### **If the missing person is at risk**

If you contact the police to make a report they will assess whether the missing person is at risk of harm. A police officer may come to see you and ask you for information relating to the disappearance.

If you meet the police, be prepared for them to ask lots of questions. Many of these will be personal to you and/or the person you have reported missing and you may feel uncomfortable answering, but the police will need this information to start a search. They will probably need to know, for example:

- the missing person's full name, date of birth, and physical description (including the clothes/jewellery they were last wearing, if known, and any tattoos, scars, etc)
- the missing person's address and email address, and home, work and mobile phone numbers
- details of the clothing, money or other personal belongings which have been taken
- details of the missing person's school/employment
- what might have caused the missing person to disappear, for example: family or relationship problems, employment or money issues, school or college problems, bullying or harassment, mental health issues such as depression, misuse of alcohol or drugs
- any physical or mental health conditions
- factors which might put the missing person at risk, for example, previous threats of suicide or an attempted suicide, previous self-harming, medication needs, drug or alcohol dependency, or a previous history of going missing
- any unusual behaviour
- suspected abduction or harm

The police may also ask for items belonging to the missing person such as:

- a recent photo
- any diary, laptop computer, or mobile phone
- any bank or credit card details
- other bank account details

The police may also want further details such as:

- the registration details/make of any car, motorbike or other vehicle the missing person owns
- places the missing person went to regularly or lived in previously
- email accounts, social networking sites, blogging sites, online document storage sites
- the missing person's doctor and dentist
- close friends or family members who might have relevant information

You may have information about yourself, your family, and/or the person you have reported missing which you are unsure about giving to the police; for example you may be concerned that they will pass the information to someone else. You should raise any issue you have about the confidentiality of information with the police directly, and discuss it with them.

If you meet with the police or speak with a police officer on the phone there are various questions you should ask them. Our [checklist](#) provides a list of the questions you should ask – keep this and the answers to your questions safe for future reference. The checklist also includes useful questions to ask yourself when you speak with the police.

The police may want to search the missing person's home or last place of residence to check for information which might be of use to their investigation. If you also live at this address they can only do this if you agree. You may feel that searching the house is unnecessary, but the police need to conduct their own thorough checks and sometimes items found in the house can help the police in their search for your loved one.

The police may want you to limit access to the missing person's room or home, and ask you not to wash or clean any room or personal possessions – if the search continues the police may need to look for further evidence, and personal items such as a toothbrush, hairbrush, clothing or bedding may provide vital DNA evidence. If the police don't mention this and you think it might be relevant you should raise the matter with them.

In some instances the police may ask to collect a DNA sample of the missing person, in high risk cases they may do this immediately, in medium or lower risk cases police may wait a number of days before collecting a sample. This is standard police practice and in the unlikely event that a person remains missing for a prolonged period, DNA samples will be submitted to a police database. The samples allow for matching against the body of an unidentified person and will be removed as soon as the missing person is found. Dental records and fingerprints for the missing person may also be collected at the same time.

## If the missing person is not at risk

The police may not ask you for detailed information if they do not consider that the missing person is at immediate risk, on the basis of what you have told them, or if you have lost contact with him or her over time. They may think it best to wait for a few days at least to see if the missing person re-appears, or they may tell you that they are not prepared to investigate the disappearance at all.

It is not within the police's responsibility to investigate lost contact cases, these are cases where a person is not missing or at risk of harm but you have lost touch with them over a period of time.

If you are not happy with the situation you can contact Missing People on freephone number **116 000** or email [116000@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:116000@missingpeople.org.uk) and we can advise you what to do. It might be appropriate for us to contact the police on your behalf to discuss matters further with them. Alternatively, we might suggest that you use our Lost Contact Family Tracing Service, or put you in touch with another organisation which might be able to help you with your search.

# What Happens After you have Reported Someone Missing?

## What the police will do

Once you have made a report, what the police do will depend on the circumstances of the disappearance and to what extent the police consider the missing person to be at risk.

If someone has gone missing recently and unexpectedly the police will usually investigate. They will assess the level of risk for the missing person by considering his/her age, the circumstances of their disappearance, whether this is out of character, and whether he/she needs medication or treatment.

If the police assess that the missing person is at risk, and they continue to be missing, the police will make some enquiries, which may include:

- a search of the missing person's home, or last known address
- a search of the area where the missing person was last seen
- attempts to make contact with them by phone, if they have a mobile
- checks on his/her mobile phone/ computer
- house to house enquiries
- checking local hospital admissions
- review of CCTV footage
- land and air searches, particularly in high risk cases
- co-ordinating any media coverage
- issuing a press release to the local media appealing for help from the public

If the missing person has not been found after 3 days, the police must notify an organisation called the Missing Persons Bureau which will then also help the police in their investigation. The police may also put the missing person's details on their Police National Computer database (sometimes referred to by the police as PNC) for circulation nationwide. If police in any part of the country need to identify a person, these records on the PNC can be helpful. From time to time, when police discover an unidentified person who is no longer alive, they will need to involve a coroner.

The police won't usually investigate if you have lost contact with someone over time, or if they consider that the missing person is not at risk of harm. The police may also wait for a few days before taking further action if the missing person is not thought to be at immediate risk of harm. This is because most people who are reported missing return within 48 hours.

If a child is kidnapped or abducted the police can launch a Child Rescue Alert which uses the media to raise publicity. If a child has gone missing abroad, or been abducted, the police and other organisations can help – see our guidance on [Missing Abroad](#).

## Keeping informed

The police may provide the family or carer of the missing person, or otherwise the friend or interested person who has made the missing report, with the name of a specified contact person within the police. However in smaller forces the case may be dealt with by the response team so the person dealing with the incident may change from shift to shift, and as such a single named contact cannot be provided.

Ensure that you make a note of the unique reference number the police will have created. If you have difficulty getting hold of the named contact or department who are investigating your case you can ring the switchboard and quote this number, they will then direct you to the best person to speak to.

## What you can do

If a search is underway the situation may be overwhelming, but it is important to look after yourself, and seek emotional and/or practical support if you need it. You also shouldn't feel that you must be part of the ongoing search – you have done the most important job by reporting to the police, and they are the right people to be searching for the person who has gone missing.

However if you do want to do more, and it helps you to keep focus, ask the police what you can do to assist the search. Try to agree with them what you will do and what they will do so there is no duplication. You could, for example:

- continue to contact friends and family to find out where/when they last saw the missing person and whether they have any new information
- think about giving other people the contact details for the police – someone may have useful information to give to the police which they would rather you didn't know about
- contact places the missing person may be (for example, homeless shelters, hostels, hotels, hospitals), or places where they have been found if they have gone missing before
- keep a diary of who you speak to and when, and what they say: this may be useful for reference

If you do get new information, or if the person who is missing returns or makes contact, let the police know as soon as you can as this will affect their search.

## Family support

Unfortunately the police can't provide direct family support to the families of every missing person. If they can't help, seek support from the people you would normally go to for help, such as friends or family. If you need practical help with anything, don't be afraid to ask them for it, or it may help just to talk through how you are feeling. Missing People are always at hand to offer emotional support and can be contacted on **116 000** or [116000@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:116000@missingpeople.org.uk)

The police may appoint a Family Liaison Officer to help with the investigation and to support the family if someone has gone missing in suspicious circumstances and it is thought that they may have come to harm. The appointment of Family Liaison Officers varies from region to region.

## Publicity and the media

Missing People can help you create publicity by producing poster appeals, website appeals and by using social media. You may also want to approach the media to raise awareness of the missing person's disappearance, and if the police have launched a search they may be able to arrange a press conference for you. Publicity can also be generated with newspaper appeals, press releases and interviews. Information on involving the media, and the advantages and disadvantages of doing so, can be found in our guidance sheets about [Working with the media](#).

Before disclosing any information to the media, however, it is vital to remember that once it is disclosed, it becomes public, so you need to think about the consequences of giving out information which is personal or distressing, or which may subsequently feel embarrassing to you and/or the person who is missing.

It is also very important that information which might interfere with or impede the police investigation is not made public. You and the police should discuss and agree what information is, and is not, appropriate to make public, and the police should agree with you not to disclose any personal or distressing information without your prior consent.

## As the search continues

If the search for the missing person continues, you need to be prepared for the police asking for extra personal information to help in their search. For example, they may want to take away items such as a toothbrush, hairbrush or razor belonging to the person who is missing, or even similar items from close family relatives. The police will do this so they can put the DNA details on a UK Missing Persons DNA Database, which can be used to help to identify someone who has gone missing. (Once he or she is found the DNA details are deleted). The police may also ask for the missing person's dental records and their medical records from their doctor or hospital (you or another family member may need to agree to this).

In due course you might want to check some or all of the following with the police:

- How at risk do they assess the missing person to be?
- Are the missing person's details still on the Police National Computer?



- Have the police contacted the Missing Persons Bureau?
- Have the police given the missing person's dental records and any fingerprints taken from personal possessions to the Missing Persons Bureau?
- Have the police made sure that any DNA samples have been added to the National Missing Persons DNA database?

Keep a record of all the information the police give you for future reference.

There may be developments in the case which alter the original risk assessment. This may lead to a change in the approach taken by the police and the nature of their enquiries. The police should keep you informed of any major developments which alter the initial risk assessment they have made.

As further time elapses the police may not provide regular updates unless new information comes to light. You will probably need to come to an agreement with the police as to how often you can expect to hear from them, and if you don't, how regularly you will contact them for an update.

# How do I Make a Complaint Against the Police?

## Are there grounds for a complaint?

When someone you care about goes missing your anxiety can be overwhelming, and if you report to the police you may well expect them to deal with the disappearance as an emergency. Once you have made your report the police will carry out an assessment of how at risk they consider the missing person to be, and the time and resources they give to the case will depend on that risk assessment. Read our guidance on [What happens after you report someone missing](#) to find out what you can expect from the police.

If the police assess that the person who is missing is at risk of harm, or vulnerable, you can expect them to investigate and keep you informed of the progress of that investigation. However, your local police station may not have a dedicated missing person's team, and you may find that you can't easily get through to someone who knows about your case, or you speak to a different person every time you ring.

It is important that you discuss and agree with the police what they are doing and intend to do, what you can expect from them, and who you can talk to, so that you have realistic expectations as to the progress of the search. If you feel frustrated or angry by what the police are, or are not, doing by way of investigation, or if you feel the police are not keeping you fully informed when they should be, you can talk to us at Missing People. We can help you to deal with the situation, for example, we may suggest that you talk to a senior police officer about your concerns.

If the police assess that the missing person is not at immediate risk they may not be able to give much, or any, time to investigating his or her disappearance. If you think the police should be doing more you could explain to them how you feel and why you think they should investigate. If someone close to you is out of touch, for example, the police may take the view that this is by choice, and they may not be prepared to assess the case as high risk. If you think he or she is at risk or vulnerable you should tell the police why you think so.

Again, if you remain in disagreement with the police regarding what should happen, you can ask us for advice, for example, we may suggest that you try to search in a different way using another organisation to help you.

If you would like information on how missing person investigations should be handled you can access the guidance for police on managing missing persons investigations on the NMPB website (<http://www.soca.gov.uk/about-soca/missing-persons-bureau>) or you can contact the UK Missing Persons Bureau directly for information on **08450 005 481** or [missingpersons bureau@npia.pnn.police.uk](mailto:missingpersons bureau@npia.pnn.police.uk)

It is important to be realistic about what the police can do, and consider whether making a formal complaint is appropriate.

## Making a formal complaint

If you are not happy with the police investigation you may want to consider making a formal police complaint.

In England and Wales:

- A complaint about the policy or procedure of the police – for example if you wish to complain about how police resources have been used, or about the quality of service you have had from the police (for example how a phone call has been handled) - must be made to the police force concerned.
- A complaint about the conduct or behaviour of a police officer or member of staff should be made to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC). A complaint form can be downloaded from their website, [www.ipcc.gov.uk](http://www.ipcc.gov.uk) or requested on telephone number 08453 002002 or by email: [enquiries@ipcc.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ipcc.gsi.gov.uk)

In Scotland:

- All complaints are made to the police station concerned
- If you are not happy with the way your complaint is handled, you can apply for this to be reviewed by the Police Complaints Commissioner for Scotland (PCCS). A complaint form can be downloaded from their website, [www.pcc-scotland.org](http://www.pcc-scotland.org) or requested on telephone number 0808 178 5577 or by email: [enquiries@pcc-scotland.org](mailto:enquiries@pcc-scotland.org)

In Northern Ireland:

- The Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland (PONI) is responsible for investigating all complaints against the police. You can make a complaint either to the relevant police station, which will refer the complaint on to PONI, or you can make a complaint to PONI directly. Their website is [www.policeombudsman.org](http://www.policeombudsman.org), or you can telephone on 0845 6012931 or 0289082 8600 or email: [info@policeombudsman.org](mailto:info@policeombudsman.org)

# Checklist for your Meeting with the Police

## Questions to ask the police

Please can I have the incident number for my case?

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How will I be kept informed of the progress of the investigation?

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Who will contact me and will it always be the same person who will speak to me?

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How often will I be contacted?

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Who do I contact if I want an update or I have something else to tell you?

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What is the phone number of my police contact?

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What is the email address of my police contact?

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Can you give me an alternative police contact phone number/email address in case my police contact is not available?

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When is the best day and time to phone my police contact?

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What do you assess the level of risk as – high, medium or low?

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How are you going to investigate my case?

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What actions will next be taken to find them?

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How can I help and what should I do next?

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### **Questions to ask myself**

Have I told the police everything that might be useful to them in their investigation?  
Have I provided the police with details of the missing person's normal routine, which of their friends they visit or contact the most and why I am concerned about them?

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Have I given the police the details of a friend or relative they can contact if I am not available?

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Have I made a note of everything I have been told by the police which I will need to remember or which may be useful as the search continues?

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Have I contacted the charity Missing People for their support and advice?

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**Additional notes**

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This guidance has been produced with the kind assistance of the Missing Persons Bureau

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For further information and guidance on the issues addressed in this guidance sheet, or for support relating to any aspect of someone going missing, call Missing People’s free and confidential 24 hour helpline on **116 000** or email [116000@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:116000@missingpeople.org.uk)

Whilst this information has been provided in good faith, it should not be taken as legal advice. For information tailored to your circumstances, please contact your police force, solicitor or an advisory organisation as appropriate to your query.