

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP
FOR RUNAWAY AND MISSING CHILDREN AND ADULTS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SESSION FOUR
CROSS-MATCHING UNIDENTIFIED BODIES WITH MISSING PERSON REPORTS

held in

Committee Room Five in the House of Commons

on

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10:30 – 12:30

Panellists

Alan Campbell MP, Lead Chair

Ann Coffey, MP

Mike Crockart, MP

Baroness Hamwee

Baroness Kramer

(From the Shorthand Notes of
Davina Hyde, Carmel Legal
Telephone No: 01737 830013
email: davina@carmellegal.co.uk
www.carmellegal.co.uk)

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Thank you for coming and welcome to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults. We are going to introduce ourselves in just a moment, but I wanted to make a couple of preliminary remarks. Members of the All-Party Group heard earlier this year from families of missing people about the concerns that happen when someone goes missing, and the effect on family life, on rights to property, and the personal support people can expect and demand when someone you love goes missing, and last week some people were involved in sessions looking at the emotional toll that happens when a loved one goes missing. Today we are looking at the more operational side of this, which is the cross-matching of missing persons reports on unidentified bodies, and we are looking at systems that are in place, and looking at what improvements people believe are possible and necessary, and I just want to stress how important this area of work is. Once a positive match is made, of course it might be the news that families are dreading, but on the other hand it does often give a candid closure to what is a tragic sense of circumstances, so it is a mixed blessing, I suppose, and it is very important not only that we take evidence today but we act on that evidence and that we do support the Government in making sure this is a priority and carry this work forward. We have a lot of evidence today so we are going to move on fairly quickly, anyone who does want to ask a question, we may struggle to find time other than my colleagues on the Panel.

Before I ask Rachel to introduce herself, I am Alan Campbell, I was a Home Office Minister before the election, and I was asked in 2009 by the then Prime Minister to chair a Group looking into how Government could work better when it comes to missing people, and that report was published just over a year ago. So I have a real interest, which I why I am grateful that I have been asked to chair this session, and I would like my colleagues to introduce themselves and then we can get on with it.

Ann Coffey, MP: I am sorry I have lost my voice (if anyone can find it I will be very grateful!). I am the Chair of the APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, this session on how data information is collected and shared is very important.

Mike Crockart, MP: My name is Mike Crockart, MP for Edinburgh West. I have not been involved in any of the groups, but my interest in this comes from previous experience as a police officer, I was in the police in Edinburgh for eight years, and two of those years spent in the ID branch.

Baroness Hamwee: Sally Hamwee, I am in the Lords. Missing People is right in the middle of what was my ward when I was local councillor.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: I am really pleased that Rachel Elias is able to join us this morning.

Rachel Elias: My name is Rachel. My brother Richard disappeared on 1 February 1995 from a hotel in London. His car was found parked in a car park at the Old Severn Bridge two weeks later; that was the last factual aspect of his disappearance, and there has been no news since then. We had him declared dead through Probate in October 2008.

Baroness Hamwee: Thank you for sharing your story of your brother's disappearance with us, I know you have had to repeat this story many times. Can you tell us what experience you have had with liaising with the police?

Rachel Elias: Well, in the missing police reports he was classed as a vulnerable adult because he had previous psychiatric history but, unfortunately, the search was only limited, it didn't reflect that. His details were only put in the Police Gazette in November 1995, and not placed on the PNC (Police National Computer) until April, 1996, the following year. Around that time, apart from initial searches from reports police received about possible whereabouts, there was no liaison with police; we didn't have a Family Liaison Officer. We had the combination of three police forces to be involved with, because he went missing from London, his flat was in Cardiff, and also his car was found by Somerset police, this added difficulties, and we had no liaison with them, and that continued.

Baroness Hamwee: Given all that delay, what about cross-matching?

Rachel Elias: There was no initiative on the part of the police at all. I myself contacted coroners in 1999 around the area concerned, and these are letters of unidentified bodies that were sent direct to me by coroners, including post mortems, and police hadn't made any contact with them. These

are letters from coroners who didn't have outstanding unidentified bodies. Then I just happened to watch the first edition of Missing 2005 with Missing People, and came across someone doing that in Hackney Missing Persons Unit, so I found toiletries and just approached the police myself, and asked if I could come up to the Met, and they took a full DNA profile which then went to the then Forensic Science Service, so it was all done on my part.

Mike Crockart, MP: How long did it take, from the point of going missing to the point of having the DNA profile which was used?

Rachel Elias: It was thirteen months before it went on the PNC, and it was ten years before it went on the Forensic Science Service.

Mike Crockart, MP: The fact you got the stuff together to get on DNA, you are obviously supportive of that, do you feel there any issues about the use of DNA?

Rachel Elias: I think it would have been really positive for us if the police had offered that service when it became available, because the evidence was there, it would have been much better. Now there is a gap, where if a body in the meantime has been buried, or worse cremated, (which is the worse scenario), there is a huge gap then during that time period.

Ann Coffey, MP: What sort of service do you think should be offered to families of missing people when they are concerned that their missing relative may have died?

Rachel Elias: If there is a national index of missing people, they could be cross-matched with a DNA profile - they could take DNA from a member of the family if there is no direct DNA - because I understand that can be quite closely matched, and that would provide a framework for families to know that is being cross-matched and reviewed regularly.

Ann Coffey, MP: When coroners are holding bodies that are not identified, do they automatically keep DNA? You may not know the answer to that?

Rachel Elias: At the time, these letters stated physical descriptions of the people, their possible age and height, details of their clothing, no mention in any of these letters of DNA, so no, but I am not sure if that is the case now.

Mike Crockart, MP: I take it you are supportive of them taking DNA automatically on unidentified bodies? I assume also you would be supportive of there being a trigger point at which you can harvest a DNA, maybe after a year?

Rachel Elias: Absolutely.

Mike Crockart, MP: Possibly even earlier for certain types, you mentioned earlier your brother was classified as a vulnerable person. I have been in a situation where I was dealing with childrens' homes where children went missing on a regular basis, and in the majority of cases returned within 24 to 48 hours, so there needs to be a trigger at some point.

Baroness Kramer: Apologies for coming in so late. One of the situations I have had to deal with is terrorism, where it is very difficult for anyone to give any descriptions of people for fear of false perverted claims of relationship with someone else, but presumably DNA offered by the searching party would give some security and might be a route for a quicker process of either bringing people together in cases of quite serious injury, or closure, and I wondered if that could be part of the thinking process.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Could we just go back to the point where you said three police forces were involved, and I suspect one of the themes is the role of the individuals in that system, and without wanting to be critical of individuals, are you able to say whether the reaction you got from the different police forces was the same?

Rachel Elias: It was the same, despite his history.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: I do get the sense from what you are saying that you were very much trying to drive this, doing a great deal of work yourself in order to get the data, but from what you just told me you are clear that the police officers were doing all they could in the circumstances?

Rachel Elias: It was a limited search.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: But they had justifiable reasons in your view?

Rachel Elias: That was their view, but they didn't have Family Liaison Officers as I understand they have now, which would have been very helpful to families, that didn't happen then.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Thank you Rachel, that is an excellent starting point.

Could you introduce yourself and then say something about the services your charity provides to missing people?

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: Chief Executive of Missing People.

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: Policy Advisor.

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: We have existed pre our charity status for a couple of years, and then for eighteen years since our charity status in south west London, and the founders are sitting behind me. We have been delivering a service largely based round the national helpline for people affected by being missing themselves, and for the families left behind. Specifically, the charity provides help and support for those families left behind, by providing emotional support and by helping them to publicise the case. Throughout our time we use different endeavours to help with the process of working out when a person may have died, their body may be one of those that are unidentified, including historically using forensic reconstruction techniques, progression techniques and so on, largely trained by the National Center for Missing & Exploitation of Children in the United States of America, and the professional involved in that is now a Consultant, who works both jointly for them, the Missing Persons Bureau (the 'Bureau') and ourselves in these matters.

We also provide a limited advocacy service, although we are seeking to develop that, which has really come about from a need expressed by families who have found themselves in similar circumstances to the one Rachel describes, where they feel they have not had an effective process to support them, and this includes advocating for effective body matching.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Would you like to add anything?

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: I think Martin has covered what we do quite well.

Mike Crockart, MP: We have already heard from Rachel about the particular problems she had in her case, is that typical, or are there any other types of issues people have in this area?

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: It is an issue that families do ask us about quite regularly - I think it is part of the natural process - if someone has been missing for quite a long time you end up thinking of all the scenarios which might have happened, and where your loved one has gone to. As Martin was saying, we have an advocacy role, and we have worked hard to build our knowledge around this area - around cross-matching - and there is nothing in the public domain that really gives a step-by-step outline of what you can expect in this area. We have been trying to build a picture of this internally, so what we have found is, it is understandable that families can be confused what happens where and who does what, because our understanding of the system is that there is split ownership, and the legal duty to identify sits with the coroner, but the operational responsibility to cross-match actually sits with the police Missing Persons Bureau, so it is kind of split between a national agency and a very localised system.

We know, from doing our own investigations, that the Bureau has a process which it follows but when it comes to actually finding out what processes the coroners follow - it has been quite difficult - because it is not a centralised service, and we have not been able to discover whether there are standard procedures. I know that we have a written submission from the Coroners' Society of England and Wales, which actually covers some of the questions you had earlier, and it does confirm that whilst taking DNA for analysis is good practice, they are not legally obliged to, and in addition they do have the right to dispose of bodies, but again there are no guidelines as to whether they have to take biological samples before doing that.

There are clearly issues around that, which families might well find of concern and, yes, Rachel covered quite well the sorts of issues families have, and again it comes to the starting point of how families feel if someone is

missing for a long amount of time. It is not just worry about the cross-matching side, it is worry about the general search which continues beyond that initial period where the police search is very comprehensive and families might have quite regular contact with the police – and sadly families might come to us and ask us what the police are doing, who are they liaising with, are they checking hospitals, where are they checking hospitals, what liaison with other agencies are there, they want to know how is that done, they want to know are they taking dental chart records for cross-matching, are they doing DNA, have they taken samples and analysed it? These are all questions they have, they want to have their questions answered, as to what is being done and how it is being done, they want to know how regularly. Cross-matching is one part of this big jigsaw which a lot of the families come to us for clarification on, and we would dearly love to be able to give them more information on it, but the information is not really publicly out there.

Mike Crockart, MP: There seems a lot of uncertainty in the minds of the families. Do you have any figures as to the size and scale of the problem?

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: As our colleagues in the Bureau will be talking about later - I am sure it is in the public domain - there are approximately a thousand unidentified bodies in the UK at this point. That immediately shows you that there are a thousand families that could have the answers to the questions they so dearly want answers to, out there, but they haven't got them just yet. We tend to see these questions start arising as cases remain open for a few weeks, so with about ten thousand cases remaining open for a month or more each year in the UK, that probably is about ten thousand families who want to know the answers to these questions, and how coroners are working.

Ann Coffey, MP: I think you illustrated to us a problem that could occur when a coroner identified a body on the basis of probability, and in one situation, a coroner identified a body, which was cremated, and then several years later a relative saw the person by chance on a video. Strange a coroner could do that without keeping some DNA or body identification.

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: I think that is a really good point, and something that really needs to be looked at. It is two-sided in terms

of the fact that coroners are autonomous, and I know there has been a lot of discussion about a national system - but that is not going to happen - and without that national leadership, it is going to be difficult to have accountability and standardisation, so quite difficult for us in light of that to have an idea of what we can tell families. That also throws up the fact that there are standards that should be followed when it comes to identity. It is probably one of the most critical problems to be solved – who is this person who has died - and especially for families left behind. To consider the possibility that these people can be cremated or buried when there is any element of doubt, I think that case highlights it very well, and mistakes can be made here which can never be repaired. The person who was cremated, their family will never have the answers they are looking for. It concerns me some of our service users, who will be aware of that story because it was in the media, will think “What if that was my father? What if that was my brother?” It shows there is a big piece of work to be done here.

Ann Coffey, MP: Particularly when there is much more awareness of DNA in these situations, it seems quite extraordinary?

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: It comes back to the split ownership between the police and coroners, because it seems from conversations I have had with various agencies that there is an expectation it is the duty of the other party to collect this and pay for it. I have been told by a contact that essentially if a coroner took DNA and spent the money on analysing samples in every case it would eat up all their budget, so they can be quite resistant to that, and I think it is another thing that needs to be evaluated from a central viewpoint.

Ann Coffey, MP: The other question I have is, it would be good if the unidentified bodies database was accurate, and it would also be good if the missing people’s database was accurate as well. I understand the current situation is the missing people’s database is informed by reports from local police forces which input the information. I don’t know what the announcement yesterday means regarding the national database, and I don’t know whether that is going to include missing people or not. How do you think we can encourage local police officers to input data in an accurate and consistent way because they do hold the data?

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: As I am sure colleagues will tell you, it has been a labour to attempt to gain compliance with the Police Code which requires local forces to supply this data, to ensure there is a comprehensive national missing people's database. It was quite clear that was a requirement added, it was an outcome of the Inquiry chaired by Alan Campbell, MP, but the reality is we still don't have national compliance. I think that part of the problem is we have police forces operating disparate systems, some of them significantly under-developed, and therefore the procedures associated with sharing information are onerous, and because they are administrative procedures, they are way down their priority list.

The solution would be a single federal database for missing persons, which local forces had operation units that their ongoing investigations were entered through, and, therefore, to harvest the data nationally would be simply a process of accessing the information through the federal database. This would be possible with the current COMPACT databases, which operate within twenty four forces, the input interface would work, and they could store the data on a central federal database, which could be managed by the Missing Persons Bureau. At present the Missing Persons Bureau uses HERMES, which is the system we designed with a Home Office grant in conjunction with the Missing Persons Bureau many years ago. It wasn't designed as the federal system so therefore it has been a challenge to keep operating, but I am convinced the solution is to mandate a national federal database for missing persons that has an automated system, whereby data is only entered once and therefore it is easy to analyse for those people who have gone missing for over a month.

Baroness Hamwee: Can I go back to the DNA? First of all do you have any idea of the cost of taking and storing DNA?

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: We do know both coroners and police say it is prohibitively expensive, and that the coroners' submission says it is the responsibility of the police to pay for the DNA, and the police would like the coroners to pay; neither of them want to pay, and apart from the grotesqueness of it being a bidding war, it is clear the sum is cumulatively substantial enough to be prohibitive.

Baroness Hamwee: That could be anywhere on quite a big spectrum. Has there been any suggestion of problems with data protection and regulations that might make taking and storing DNA a problem?

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: I think there are some conversations: the ethics of storing DNA; certainly our experience from talking to families is that they are very happy to provide their DNA. We certainly have not had any situations where DNA has been harvested from a missing person who has returned or who has complained or raised any issues about that. Our evidence from our families' experience is this is what they want to help reconcile these cases, and to know, even if they can't reconcile a case, that everything that can be done is being done to ensure a rapid conclusion.

Baroness Hamwee: It is not being suggested by anybody that there is a technical regulatory problem?

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor: I think the issue I would flag up is, some families, when they take DNA from other family members to get a profile - which is likely to be very similar to the profile of the missing family member, if there isn't a profile of them - some families are quite unsure what their legal position is when it comes to data protection, for example, if they commit a crime or anything like that.

Baroness Hamwee: Thank you. You have been supporting the APPG and organising these sessions. Can you outline the level of stakeholder engagement in this issue?

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor: I think it is important to say at this point that we did invite to take part a member of the Ministry of Justice, who is responsible for policy around the coroner system, largely because we wanted someone to come in and set the scene from the coroners' perspective in terms of what the coroners are instructed to do when it comes to dealing with cross-matching and unidentified cases. However, we were informed that nobody would be able to join us today. It concerns me that this perhaps reflects the interest essentially when it comes to this area, and as I mentioned before, it seems there are not very many rules or regulations or guidance as to how coroners deal with this at a local level. I have contacted the Ministry of Justice

previously and asked if they had any specialised data around the number of identified cases coroners come up against; I know the Bureau are very good at trying to track and manage cases from a police perspective, but there might be cases that coroners encountered, but they said they don't have central records, and I think it might reflect that maybe a bit of work needs to be done in the Ministry of Justice in assessing their approach in this area, as to whether there is some central role for them.

Alan Campbell, MP, Chair: One of the crucial outcomes from the Inquiry was to get the departments more engaged.

Ann Coffey, MP: I am interested in local resource cost, the cost of keeping unidentified bodies for any length of time, and secondly, coroners perform post-mortems anyway, so I don't quite understand the issue of cost. I do understand the issue of managing it, and cross-matching with the family.

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: I think Holly's point about the division of responsibility is where the problem lies. There is a lack of leadership and there is no clear strategy. We are in a situation right now where we know that we could, for example, undertake a new cross-matching exercise with Missing People's database. Historically, Missing People's database contains people who are not taken as police missing person reports, because the police don't deem them to be at risk. Therefore, there is no missing person entry in the local police force database, and we will take them as, what is called, a 'lost contact'. That has been very beneficial in the past, if you look at the Fred West inquiry, where Missing People was solely responsible for three of the victims, because we held them on our database, we would want to fully work with that process but there is not a pound available to source the appropriate person to do that cross-matching exercise. Again, I think it comes down to the fact there is no national strategy on cross-matching bodies, no clear leadership for it across Government departments, no-one to police it, and no-one to sign the cheque. Whilst I know the NPIA do all they can with the resources they have available to them, the fact of the matter is that this crosses a number of jurisdictions, and it needs clear leadership.

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: Without having clear leadership, there is a lack of accountability, so it doesn't seem very clear in terms of what is done, in terms of sharing, learning and good practice.

Mike Crockart, MP: One point concerning costs; DNA costs are not in the extraction, they are in the analysis, but those costs are tumbling very, very quickly, because so much scientific work going on in this area, so cost shouldn't be a continual problem to the same extent.

Two very quick questions: I know there are particular problems round the different nations' devolution settlement, and, also, I know you are not the only people doing this work, there are a large number of organisations, and is that part of the problem, there is a lot of confusion around the responsibility for it?

Holly Towell, Policy Advisor, Missing People: If I take your first question, I am sure the Missing Persons Bureau will probably expand on this, but I think when it comes to devolution there are issues there, with the cross-matching and responsibilities with the Bureau, and their jurisdiction in terms of having police legally obliged to submit data to them across England and Wales - and I understand that it is best practice for Scotland and Northern Ireland - but without that being on a legal basis it is clear this leaves a loophole which is legally permissible, which means one of the Bureau's primary functions is going to be thwarted to some degree.

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: The second matter; the two other organisations of any credibility and substance which delivers a similar service to us, is the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. The Red Cross only in crisis situations, and with particular interventions around a civil contingency, and the Salvation Army provide a service with lost relatives. Whereas, as far as we know, we are the only organisation that has a universal approach to taking on missing person cases regardless of the risk factor, which has meant historically that we have a very broad range of people, including those people who we would deem to be at risk, but who the local police force has chosen not to attribute the same level of risk to, and that is why our database remains a valuable resource to policing, and has historically been cross-matched, and we have cooperated whenever we have been asked to.

Ann Coffey, MP: It seems extraordinary that in the case of Fred West, three victims were on your database, and not on the police database. Obviously, that was some time ago. Has that changed, would you expect the situation now that those victims would now be on the police database?

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: Earlier this year, a woman's body was sadly found to be a victim of a serial killer, and her family had attempted to make a report to Hampshire police, and because her lifestyle was transient, it was deemed an investigation would be inappropriate as she was frequently out of contact with her family. The family got in touch with Missing People to ask if we could help with their enquiry, so sadly, I think the situation has not changed.

There are some risks with some police forces currently experimenting with higher thresholds of risk, and I have grave concerns that those higher thresholds of risk will lead to less missing person investigations, at the very least being accurately recorded, and I believe it is essential that if that is the way that the budget forces police forces to go, then there must be another way for us to record those missing persons, and a statutory requirement for police forces to refer them to agencies who can take a record, like Missing People, so we don't have a situation where we potentially could have victims with no report on any organisation's database to reconcile with.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Can I be clear that it is your view that this is largely financially driven?

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: I think there is a real concern, and a fair concern, described earlier, that the high level of activity around children going missing from care, can generate an enormous amount of police time around repeat young runaways, however, I don't believe the solution is around risk thresholds. I believe it is about management strategies with local authorities and care homes, and private care homes, and effective protocols; not high risk thresholds.

Ann Coffey, MP: Kent police came to a meeting yesterday, and interestingly they showed how resources could be saved by investigating every missing report, which in itself seems a paradox?

Martin Houghton-Brown, Chief Executive, Missing People: I think there are two very clear schools of thought within policing about this, and they have removed the unauthorised absence from their database, and only have missing persons investigations, and where they see repeat missing person investigations around care homes or individuals they will adopt a multi-agency strategy to reconcile that. Every occasion when police forces adopt multi-agency strategy there has been a reduction of missing incidents and reduction in costs associated.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Thank you for your evidence and I would like to put on record thanks for the work you are doing. Just before I call Matt Searle, I think this is an appropriate moment to go through the evidence we have from the coroner. I just would like to put on record the information they sent to us. It is from Andre Rebello, Hon Secretary of the Coroners' Society of England and Wales:

“Coroners are judicial office holders and there are 100 coroners in 106 separate coronial jurisdictions. There is no national service and the local delivery of the service was confirmed when the coroner and Justice Act 2009 was enacted. There are therefore no national structures for coroners. All coroners are members of the Coroners' Society. The Society represents and links coroners with Government but also ensures information is disseminated to coroners which assist coroners in carrying out statutory duty. As judicial office holders it is important that coroners respect the separation of powers and the timing of the meeting on the 23rd June 2011 is unfortunate as the Public Bodies Bill is half-way between the Lords and the Commons. One matter in this bill for consideration is the office of the Chief Coroner. The Society has been very careful to respect the Sovereignty of Parliament and to allow the executive to make law which we will eventually use. It would be inappropriate for coroners as judicial office holders to comment whilst this matter progresses.

I can however confirm that coronial investigation stems from the presence of a body and the coroner in an inquest is charged with investigating to determine the identity of the person who has died, when and where death occurred and how the death occurred. Coronial investigation is mainly carried out by the police and the Society would expect all police forces to follow the

national standards expected by ACPO contained within guidance from the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau. It is good practice to take samples for DNA analysis from unidentified bodies and this should be funded by the police. The Society works closely with the NPIA with regard to disseminating information to coroners and where there is any misunderstanding the Society are always happy to facilitate contact with a coroner whilst all the time respecting the coroner's judicial independence."

Can you introduce yourself?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing Abroad: I am Operations Manager at Missing Abroad. Missing Abroad was created after Lucie Blackman was killed in Tokyo. It was designed to bridge the gap between what support is available to a family through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and what is needed when a person is missing overseas.

We do not provide counselling at such, our services are geared towards a more active response. This includes international media management, liaising with embassies and police forces worldwide, providing telephone hotlines at local rate in country, providing free flights and other vital services.

In terms of scale, Missing Abroad receives around 3,000 enquiries annually. Of these around 600 cases are on the books each year. Approximately half our total workload is 'missing' cases, and of these around 25% are cases where a person has been missing over a year. We continue to provide support to longer term missing cases right until the point when the person is located, or the family no longer need our service.

Ann Coffey, MP: We have had a previous conversation about cross-matching in the UK, but presumably this becomes a more complex issue overseas?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing Abroad: Absolutely, it can be very difficult in the case of a British national in a foreign country actually given the respect or needs the family needs at the time. It doesn't get the attention sometimes it needs whatsoever. The culture and religion of a country have a huge effect on things. Some countries do not actively seek to identify deceased when they find them. If no one

claims that body, it may well be buried in two to three weeks in a shallow grave, it could be exhumed after a year, if no one has claimed it at that point, it could well be cremated, and no records kept whatsoever.

Ann Coffey, MP: Presumably all countries have an understanding of the importance of DNA?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing

Abroad: I wish that was the case. A lot of countries don't have the facility to deal with DNA. If they do identify a British national in a foreign country, there could well be a sample, but when you talk about who is going to pay for those that becomes astronomical when you are dealing overseas. You have to first of all have a police force over there, request the help of a police force over here, and even if they get that far, and the family are willing to do everything they can, there is still a huge argument about whose responsibility it is to pay for that, get it to the place it needs to be done, the analysis and the findings delivered to the person who needs to investigate it, so, sadly, DNA does not crop up very often with what we are dealing with.

Ann Coffey, MP: Do our Embassies prove helpful?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing

Abroad: As much as they can, but generally speaking they are just providing the family with assistance if they know the body is theirs, when it is a missing person or unidentified there is very little they can do, they can't interfere with the police investigation over there because that is one country interfering in someone else's, and to suggest we send our police over there is tantamount to us saying you are not doing a good enough job so we are sending our boys in, and they won't do that. We have to wait until the force over there says we need help.

Ann Coffey, MP: Quite a bleak picture you are painting, what is the way forward?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing

Abroad: It is difficult, the way forward is a central office database as we discussed, but to make that international is something no one is going to do, I honestly don't know where the answer lies with that one, but fast response, if

someone is missing overseas, having as much information available as soon as possible with the relevant authorities, so that people like ourselves, people like the NPIA, or even a police force if they are helping over here, and Interpol have the right records to give to that force in a foreign country. What we do at the start, after checking hospitals and all the normal channels, we start circulating photos on a regular basis to the forces over there, to say have you found this person or we are looking for a person of this description. It is that fast response you need, because within two weeks that body could have been whipped off the files, and there is no trace whatsoever.

Mike Crockart, MP: It is quite a grim picture you are painting of missing persons overseas. What sort of questions do families come to you with, to try to get help if they feel their loved one is missing abroad?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing Abroad: The main things they are after is the fear they won't have a body for burial, or even knowing if there is a body in the first place. Families often speak to me of their fears their loved ones won't be treated with any respect.

You only have to Google post mortem facilities in Thailand, for example, and it is hideous. Coroners and Forensic would sit here and have a fit. I have been recently sent pictures - they are absolutely horrible - there is no cleanliness, the tiles are all cracked, it is wrong. Obviously, families are looking at this, they are trying to find what might have happened, and that is a horrible prospect for anyone to think of. Also religious problems, certain things need to happen to a person after death according to certain religion and certain beliefs. Depending on the country they are in, that simply might not happen, and that is a big fear for families, an area they are always very concerned about if there is religious belief.

Mike Crockart, MP: All sorts of potential problems for cross-matching, having any uncertainty round samples you are given, would be quite difficult to manage?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing Abroad: That's right. There are some systems, but I do think that is a worst case scenario, in countries which are not equipped for that, but in the more developed countries obviously there are facilities. For example, in the US you

have their nameless database, which is free for the public to use, and you can put in your details of a missing person on that, and if there is a cross-match it comes up with a hit, giving you details of which force is dealing with it, and it is a very good system, but that is in the United States, it then starts to go downhill. We are at the top of the pile as it is.

Baroness Hamwee: You may have answered this question already in responding to Mike, what do families need in this situation?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing Abroad: A fast, quick response. Police forces over here may well not think it worth reporting. If someone is on a gap year, and have gone missing, well they have gone out to party. The amount of times I say a family has come to me, they are in Ibiza, a party place, the police will say of course they are not answering their phone, what do you expect, they will be drunk in a corner somewhere, but that is not good enough, if you are dealing with abroad, tomorrow matters. It can make such a difference, we need to get into place a system where fast, essential effective reporting is in place, so that all the people who to need to know, can know, because we would much rather waste time at the start.

Baroness Hamwee: We are asking these questions using the term families, is that restrictive in any way? Families these days come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and may not actually be family but may be closely linked?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing Abroad: We look at any case of any enquiry of someone who is concerned as worthwhile taking on, could be a close friend, could be an employer, in fact I have someone at the moment who is working for a model agency in Bali, and hasn't been seen, apparently they have reported it to the local police, but the police haven't picked that up, but we have, because the employer has said there is a problem, so we will take it from anyone who is responsible for that person or concerned.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Can I just pick up from something there, we talked about the use of DNA, there are a number of countries, like the USA, who are looking at it, and other countries, who are looking into investing in it as a way forward, have you and others made it clear – in the

countless discussions we have had in this country about the use of DNA and storage of DNA - have you made it clear, in your view, the importance of DNA in the context of missing people?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing

Abroad: You cannot make it clear enough, it is such an essential tool, you can see in the newspapers that someone who went missing 40 years ago, you now have an answer for that, having that information available internationally - it is a double edged sword - it can be the worse news possible, but it is an end, so it is incredibly important.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: It is about the taking and the use of DNA, but it is also about the storage of DNA. It is important to have the database in order to check that sample against?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing

Abroad: Yes, in my opinion, absolutely.

Ann Coffey, MP: Are the changes in law of DNA going to affect this as well?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing

Abroad: Difficult to say until we see how it is going to work out internationally, depends where it is going to be stored, who is going to access it. There already are a lot of complications when someone from a foreign country requests a DNA profile from the United Kingdom, as to who is responsible for the DNA profile when it goes over there, and who is looking after it.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: The threshold for the use of DNA would be slightly different in these cases, because the primary interest of the family is to see whether or not it is the body of their loved one, whereas when the police are using DNA they are looking for a closer match, because they know it is going to be put before a court? So the threshold is slightly different.

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing

Abroad: Yes, and there is a data protection issue as well. We had one when we did actually get a DNA sample sent out to a country, and the force investigating said although we think it might be him, we can't use it because he hasn't given permission for it to be used, and that is the way they use the data

protection law and the way they interpret it, and that is the kind of problem you can come up against.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: How do you think families in those circumstances react?

Matt Searle, Director of Operations and Consular Liaison, Missing Abroad: She went absolutely ballistic and took it straight to William Hague, but, unfortunately, there is nothing we can do, so what we arranged instead is for her to give her DNA, because that is then hers not his, if it matches it is still the right answer, but obviously that involves cost of flights and another DNA analysis.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Thank you for your evidence and all the work you are doing.

Good morning and welcome, can I ask you to introduce yourself, tell us who you are and what you do, and also give us a brief overview of the Missing Persons Bureau.

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: Chief Executive, NPIA, National Policing Improvement Agency.

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: Head of NPIA Missing Persons Bureau.

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: The Bureau is located in Hampshire, comprising around 15 staff, costing a little over £600,000 a year, and in relation to missing person reports, the Bureau received around 7,600 reports in the financial year 2010-2011, in the first two months of this year a further 1,722 reports were received. We notify the forces once a person has been missing for 72 hours, in cases requiring national coordination, and exceptionally at an earlier stage in other cases, where the investigator thinks it appropriate to do so. In 2010-11 the Bureau received just under 180 reports of unidentified bodies, people or remains, the first two months of this reporting financial year 52 cases were received. In 2010-11 the Bureau made contact with police forces just over 7,400 times, and at the beginning of this year, first two months the figures are almost 1600. We had 153 false alerts in 2010-11, and in the same year completed 1017 cross-match searches using HERMES

database. At the beginning of this year, first two months, we have already conducted 146 cross-match searches, and we have provided forces with 678 reports on the results of those searches, including investigative suggestions last year. I suppose the crux of this is in 2010-2011 financial year there were 39 individuals identified, who would not have been found without the assistance of the Bureau, and in the first two months of this financial year a further nine such cases were found.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: In terms of the number of records you have, what is the success rate if that is the right term?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: 39 out of 177 reports in the year, depends how you calculate success.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: What are the main tools that you use for cross-matching?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: We have our HERMES database which has already been described a little to you. We also have a “come to notice” database, this is a database for people who repeatedly come to the attention of the police, perhaps because they give false details, or cannot identify themselves, or frequently turn up at hospitals with complaints that might make them stand out as being unusual. We have a dental index, index of post-mortem dental details, going back to 1960 and also have access to our partners; National Fingerprints Office, National Missing Persons DNA Databases, and through our partners Interpol we have access to the global network.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Just remind me, where is the DNA database. Who owns the DNA database?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: Well, we operate the national DNA database, and the Missing Persons DNA Database is operated by the Bureau.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Can I explore some of the processes involved in cross-matching? We have already heard concerns about whether or not cross-matching actually takes place, so let’s be absolutely clear about this. Is every missing person report logged with the Bureau cross-matched against your records of unidentified bodies?

Sean Sutton, Head of NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: Every case that we receive, yes, if it is a body, or a living person, we do cross-match on all those cases.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: So it is done routinely and regularly?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: Yes.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: When is it done?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: As soon as we receive them, we try and get them back to the police force as soon as we possibly can, there is no real time lag involved.

Baroness Hamwee: You said every case that comes to us?

Sean Sutton, Head of NPIA the Missing Persons Bureau: We cannot always guarantee we receive every single case. It is very difficult for us to know if we do receive every case.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: If they didn't inform you, would they not be conforming to the guidelines?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: No.

Ann Coffey, MP: Yesterday there was an announcement that there is going to be a new Police National Database for police forces to share information? I am just wondering where that fitted in with the missing people database? Do you know what is happening?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: We launched the Police National Database yesterday which was in response to Lord Bichard's report. The Police National Database is a mechanism to share intelligence which is held by police forces on intelligence systems, on domestic abuse systems, child abuse systems and a number of other systems.

Ann Coffey, MP: Missing people?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: Not specifically, no.

There has been an enormous amount of discussion and it is a very sensitive subject. It contains information that has not been substantiated by

criminal conviction, and it also contains a small amount of data about victims of crime, very specific categories of offending, but the fact the database contains that information is sensitive, people are concerned, understandably, about privacy issues and about civil liberty issues. We have taken a step so far, in so far as a missing person may have been recorded, for whatever reason, on a force intelligence system, which is by no means unusual, that data will be uploaded onto the Police National Database, but force missing persons systems do not routinely connect.

Ann Coffey, MP: As I understand it, the forces intelligence system is the Command and Control system?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: No, they are quite distinct. The Command and Control is the system used by the control room who receive calls and they radio out to officers, back in the divisional headquarters is the intelligence unit, which feeds the intelligence system, with intelligence logs submitted by officers, Crimestoppers, and a variety of other routes. The intelligence is along the lines of, we think so and so is involved in this type of criminal activity, concerns have been raised about this person. It is soft information, often can be uncorroborated, although we do have mechanisms for classifying it, and it is that information which Lord Bichard found at the time of the Soham inquiry, whilst there was only one conviction about Ian Huntley, there were more than half a dozen pieces of intelligence about him which viewed together, would have given a stronger indication of the threat he posed.

Ann Coffey, MP: So where does that leave us - reports which are kept on separate databases by police forces, for example, COMPACT, how is the announcement yesterday going to help?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: I think that the announcement yesterday opens up a further alternative to us, one alternative which is that we pursued recently, is to have an incremental progress towards compliance, persuade the forces, the best efforts of Sean and his colleagues in the Bureau working very patiently, trying to coach forces in the direction of better compliance. The second option which was suggested by a previous speaker, why don't we just have a single national system of missing people. I am

responsible for the information systems improvement strategy at the Agency, which is a broad programme of work to try and converge police IT, and one of the stated aims of that strategy is we should have more national IT, largely because it is so much cheaper, so option two would be to do that. Option three, which could be a lower cost way of achieving that, would be to upload the data from individual missing person systems, onto the Police National Database and use it as a place where that information comes together.

There are all manner of things we could have done, the Programme Director, Jennie Cronin, very sensibly tried to stop ACPO and the forces running away with all the possibilities and ending up attempting everything and achieving nothing, we have had some very, very tightly drawn lines, perimeters around what the PND will do, but of course that is an option for further development.

Ann Coffey, MP: We would get other issues with keeping data of missing people together in the same database as people suspected of committing crimes?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: Yes, of course, this would always be sensitive, there are people who think the police, and indeed the State generally, just hold too much data about people, and the more you aggregate that data and have national consolidation it increases the risk because all your eggs are in one basket, so I guess you are not going to satisfy every potential critic, but would it have the effect you describe, yes I think it would.

Ann Coffey, MP: At the end of the day, it is still going to rely on police forces inputting data. It is the decision of Chief Constables what system they buy, and what priorities they give to that. You could get into a cycle, if you have a computer system which is inadequate, you would need more police time and resources to input data manually. What do you think can be done to encourage compliance, when they are saying they haven't got the computers?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: This is a perennial issue. I sit on ACPO's Cabinet, and I sit on ACPO's Council, and we see at every meeting successive ACPO officers with lead responsibility for one subject or another, all very worthy, all competing for attention, all wanting more space on the training curriculum, all wanting their activities to be a performance indicator

for forces. As we go through the agendas, some are higher than others. As I said to you last time, there could be few officers who listened to the panel including Kate McCann the other week, who wouldn't walk away and reflect on the relative importance given to this subject, and think we have some way to go. The answers are probably not procedural, the answers are behavioural. Of course once you have the behavioural activity going in the right direction, good data and good data sharing comes into its own. I wish I had a ready answer for that, but I just don't.

Ann Coffey, MP: I listened to Kent police the other day, and they described a system where actually they put a lot of investment in to save resources, because they investigated every single missing report, they did it in partnership, but it worked, because the number of missing persons reports decreased, not because they redefined it, but because they actually investigated it, and the point they were making was the investment they made actually ended up with very good data collection.

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: That makes absolute sense, that is comparable with a move away from a procedural bureaucratic process, to compliance, to ticking every box, to actually thinking like investigators. We had this discussion earlier this morning, about the tensions that exist in policing between those who are set on reducing bureaucratic processes, because we have to change our ways, and those who see an obvious return on investment with effective investigation.

Mike Crockart, MP: In a moment I would like to move on to your relationship with the coroners, but very quickly, can I ask about devolved issues with Northern Ireland and the Scottish police forces, as I understand it there isn't the same responsibility for them to submit data to you?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: Talks are taking place through the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, and similar dialogue is also taking place in Northern Ireland.

Mike Crockart, MP: Moving on to the relationship with coroners; difficulties were perceived in that relationship and especially in the report read out from the coroners, a particular aspect was costs involved, cross-matching, where the responsibility lies in taking DNA samples?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: I am not sure whether the money is a bit of a red herring. Taking DNA only costs about £50. On the few dead bodies that are recovered - the ones that are skeletons - then you are talking a greater expense, but only a very small percentage of those, generally speaking. I don't think it is about money, maybe cultural.

Mike Crockart, MP: Do you think there is a distinct problem here that the legal duty, the local legal duty to identify, is held by coroners, and the operational responsibility to cross-match is held by the Bureau?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: I don't see it as a huge problem, we have a good relationship with coroners and good relationship with the police service, I can't comment on the relationship between the police service and coroners.

Mike Crockart, MP: Is there any centrally produced guidance?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: There isn't, but we have been speaking to the Coroners' Society, the Coroners Advisory Group, to us it would seem like a sensible step forward to have joint practice guidance. We are working on that as we speak.

Mike Crockart, MP: Does that reflect the difference?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: The coroners have their own individual jurisdiction. Will they work differently, I suspect they will, and I think guidance from our perspective is important to clarify.

Baroness Hamwee: Where do you see overall national leadership and accountability sitting in cross-matching?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: The operational need will remain a partnership endeavour between ACPO and the Agency. We have of course the rather pressing question of where the Bureau, in its entirety, will go after the NPIA is being phased out next year, and I am quite happy to give you my thoughts on that if you wish. I think there is this broader responsibility that sits across Government and there is greater emphasis on this across the Ministry of Justice, Home Office, policing, involving third sector and NGOs. You have heard some anecdotal evidence in the inherent priority given to this, and

I see this too. In terms of the Agency's functions, if I can return to that question. I think a small number of the Agency units and activities will probably pass into the National Crime Agency. In discussions with ACPO and the Home Office, there is a kind of shortlist emerging of possibles and probables, each with around 80 people, each with their own budget collectively of £5 million. The probables are units like the Central Witness Bureau and our crime operational support teams, the possibles - who I think could reasonably well fit in the National Crime Agency - missing persons might fall in that category. So possibly, and on balance, the best possible option may be for the Bureau to move into the National Crime Agency, which would bring with it certain benefits, not least of which is the international dimension.

Baroness Hamwee: What other options are there?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: They are still being considered. This is a technical function, there is a clear consensus that there should be some technical IT developed, the debate continues, but I think there will be some form of body to run the systems and to look after IT procurements. Also there is a consultation process going on following a report made by my predecessor, Peter Neyroud, when he was reviewing police leadership, he made recommendations about a professional body, and it is likely that body would absorb some of the functions of the NPIA if it ever comes into being. Alternatively, a lead force option, or indeed into the Home Office, although that is not an option that has generated a great deal of enthusiasm. Of that shortlist I think the National Crime Agency is probably the most appropriate but that is just a personal view.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: What other options? Imagine you had a perfect solution?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: I would answer your question, but I don't have an answer for it.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Let me ask you another question. What will the downside be if going into the National Crime Agency is the best available option for Missing Persons Bureau?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: I don't think there need be a downside. We do face significant resourcing challenges; the spending review has presented a pretty stiff challenge to the NPIA. We will need to be at the top of our game to preserve services at an acceptable level in the face of a difficult financial settlement. For me, where you sit is ultimately less important than how well led you are, and I think the Bureau has got good leadership, and the organisational vehicle ultimately is an administrative secondary consideration. If you have got good people, who believe in what they are doing, communicating well with policing, you should be able to succeed provided you have realistic levels of resources.

Ann Coffey, MP: Can I just check with you, although some services in relation to missing children have gone to CEOP, you still support families of missing children and people and continue to do so, and you still receive reports of missing children as well as missing people, so actually the relationship you have with CEOP makes that part of the relationship between you quite critical?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: Yes, because it was always going to be the case that there would be an overlap of one or the other, irrespective of who had the lead for which dimension. It would be difficult to imagine two parallel matching processes. Of course, this is another advantage in terms of the options we have just gone through, that CEOP will be in the National Crime Agency too, so again that provides an opportunity for close working. The simple answer to your question is that of course that relationship is critical. I think I mentioned to you last time, there are good relationships at every level, and we are determined that will continue.

Baroness Hamwee: One of the possible options you mentioned was where IT work sits, bringing all technical areas together, not putting words in your mouth, but would that not risk losing skills that have been developed that are not purely technical?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: There are risks with any of the options, change is inherently risky but without change you never improve. If the Bureau were to be caught up with techy geeks, it would be operating in a different environment to that which it is operating today. It is self-contained wherever it ends up, it is a small unit, we are terribly proud of it, but it will be

self-contained wherever it is. Give us our resources, be interested enough to support, us but leave us alone to do our job and watch how well we build the networks to be effective.

Baroness Hamwee: We are not just techy geeks!

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: I am a technical geek!

Baroness Kramer: I am not sure if I misheard. You said earlier, every case is cross-matched. Did you mean by that every missing person case is cross-matched, or every unidentified body case is cross-matched?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: Yes the latter. There are so much fewer of those. It is that work we concentrate on.

Baroness Kramer: Just to clarify, it is not every missing person case that comes to you?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: It is the bodies or part of bodies. We know they are deceased, so we know we have someone to look for.

Baroness Kramer: I just want to establish it is not comprehensive.

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: No.

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: 360,000 reports each year relating to around 200,000 people, dramatically reduced number referred to the Bureau.

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: Yes there are about 7,500 people who are still missing after 72 hours, at any one point we might have 5,000 open cases.

Baroness Kramer: How many of those would you have DNA to cross-match with?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: That is a good question. I couldn't tell you exactly, what I can tell you is on the Missing Persons Database we have about 600 samples. We have about 1,000

outstanding cases that are bodies, or parts of bodies, but about 300 of those cases are from Interpol.

Baroness Kramer: Is there anything else you would like to say?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: We are very grateful for the opportunity to give evidence. From our perspective, the issues we have talked about today are important for us, and I think we have done a lot in the Bureau, having a national lead for that has been very effective, and I think there has been a sea change in respect of the activity and policing of missing persons, which has also been followed by political, NGO and other stakeholders as well, so I have been very grateful to have the opportunity to give evidence to this Inquiry, and very interested to hear the results.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: One of the points raised, you will be aware of the concerns particularly with CEOP, that there is an important line sometimes crossed, where an agency becomes obviously part of the policing family, whereas one of the successes of CEOP is a fantastic partnership between police officers but also outside agencies. Surely you have to be careful where you put CEOP, so to the outside world it doesn't look like it is another part of the policing family?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: I think rather more has been made of that argument than is necessarily justified as part of the discussion about the National Crime Agency. I think policing is about partnership at a local level, we were dishing out awards last week for the local team in Leicestershire, which is police, fire, and ambulance working as volunteers together, and from that very local level right up to international level, it is all about partnership, and I think it is leadership that matters, not so much the organisational structure.

Mike Crockart, MP: This is a procedural issue. The problem is the order in which the report comes in. How do you cope with the potential scenario if the person has been reported as missing, the police force record it as not being an actual missing person, so you don't get that trigger of 72 hours of missing, and you have had that body come in with potential DNA, then the report of a missing person comes in, then there is no cross-matching done at that point?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: It is an interesting point. The timing is quite crucial. Typically if we are going to get a report it will be within 72 hours, but if the police have any concern about the circumstances of that report, they will come to us directly, they have a discretion, so there is that issue, but typically the body is recovered normally some time after the report of the missing person has already come in. We have also, on top of that, we have put in place a cold case review, doing that with forces under Operation Kharon, trying to get forces involved in the older cases, in some cases when DNA wasn't around, so we do keep a gradual review of cases we have on our books, very mindful of the fact things change.

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: Don't forget if you have a body found, and remains unidentified, there is likely to be quite a substantial investigation going on back in the police force concerned, and they will keep forcing the issue and asking questions and likely to go back to the Bureau.

Mike Crockart, MP: For the procedure to work, the police will need to take the reports and get them to you as quickly as possible.

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: That's crucial.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Last point, there is some uncertainty about the timescale. Will you take the view, take the responsibility to issue guidelines to the police forces, because there is greater uncertainty around leadership, are you not in a danger of having a gap where some of the operational stuff might be moved across?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: I suspect, bearing in mind that change is also likely for ACPO as well, I suspect that the policy responsibility and policy lead will reside, as it does today, with ACPO, and it will continue to work in partnership with the relevant national agency. You are right to identify a gap, we won't see the National Crime Agency until 2012, 2012 is when the NPIA will be phased out, and it is entirely conceivable that we can just achieve that in two steps, so the agency lodges in the Home Office for 12 months before moving to the National Crime Agency, and that partnership with ACPO and its successors could continue in a turbulent and complicated, but nevertheless entirely achievable way.

Baroness Kramer: You just said where there is an unidentified body there would be an active police investigation going on, I thought that might be true where there is a clear evidence of crime, but there are quite a range of cases where there would not be that active investigation taking place?

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: The nature of the investigation may have changed, but if a body is found in the street, for example, a rough sleeper died on a cold night overnight, foul play is not suspected, but nonetheless there will be a coroner, an investigation, for as long as that person remains unidentified, it is our job to work on the coroner's behalf to identify the person, to establish who they were, when and how they died. I am not suggesting there is going to be an incident room with a load of senior detectives, and the full machinery of a murder investigation, but it remains an investigative responsibility, and there will be people whose job is to find out what happened.

Baroness Kramer: My concern is on the one hand we have a large number of missing people, and on the other hand, we have a significant number of unidentified bodies. Somehow it doesn't seem to add up. Most of those unidentified bodies are reported in the system by somebody, there must be certain numbers who have no relations, but most of them at some point must be in the system, yet we are not getting them linked, that is what I am struggling with.

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: Do we identify everybody we receive, no we don't, but I can say over the last three years the amount of unidentified bodies on our records has not gone up significantly, so I suspect from that we are identifying a lot more now than we were three years ago. We do the best we can.

Nick Gargan, Chief Executive, NPIA: I wouldn't like to offer a figure of how many is high. We have a population of 60 million, an increasingly transient society, more and more international travel, and people who may have been missing in other jurisdictions. Whether 1,000 is massively high, or really rather low in these circumstances, I don't know, I have no benchmark of which to compare.

Ann Coffey, MP: One question, you are saying in the last three years you have been doing a lot better in cross-matching, why is that?

Sean Sutton, Head of the NPIA Missing Persons Bureau: I might be biased of course! The simple thing is we do have a lot more resources than when it was in the Met. You can't blame the Met for only having three and a half people. We have done a lot since then, we have fifteen members of staff, it doesn't sound a lot, but it is a lot more than four, and we have associated allied people that we work with, we are able to influence people, we do have very close access to national policing systems - because my Director pretty much owns them - we do have economy of scale, I think it has been a lot easier for us than it would have been for anyone else.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Thank you. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: I am Phil Shakesheff, I am Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: We have just heard from the Bureau about the rules in place for forces around data when it comes to missing persons investigations, so we would like you to talk about it at the local level. So if I can start by asking about the various computer systems that forces use to collect data on missing persons in your experience?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: Seven years ago we were on a paper-based system with all the problems that came with that. A cumbersome system; if you wanted to see a report you had to go to a dark dusty cupboard, friends and associates – they were all lost. In terms of data protection, we didn't have any, not working that well with our partners.

Seven years ago as part of the project team for West Mercia, I travelled around the country to try and identify what the best system was at that point. Lancashire were happy to let us use their system, so we decided to purchase COMPACT. Currently twenty three forces use COMPACT. I am Deputy Chair of the COMPACT user group, it is a very powerful forum, we meet up every three months, about fifty delegates from twenty three forces, we share best

practice, have guest speakers, and talk about how we can improve our processes and practices, and try and get the best out of it, to keep people safe.

Mike Crockart, MP: A lot of forces are trying to come up with their own way of doing things, do you think the better way of doing this is to go to a national system?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: Clearly the experience we have had from working with the COMPACT system, it is very user friendly, excellent data, very good investigative tool. I am sure if we didn't have the system now, that far more people would have come to harm, because it is allowing us to trace people quickly, and I think whatever system the police forces are using, it needs to have the highest specification, which is why I believe COMPACT is 95% the way there at the moment. COMPACT needs to speak to the NPIA and Missing Persons Bureau. Clearly if every force had COMPACT they would all be speaking to each other; that would be the ideal position. Missing person investigations don't respect police force boundaries; offenders who exploit children don't respect police force boundaries. It would take hours to obtain information manually, slows down the investigation. This is clearly the way forward.

Mike Crockart, MP: Why do you think some forces are better at making data submissions to the Bureau than others? Is COMPACT helping you do that?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: Half the country's forces are using COMPACT, and for those forces who don't use COMPACT, it can take three or four days. COMPACT will email it at the press of a button and it delivers that seamlessly, and clearly those forces who do not have IT systems that are up to spec will need to look at a system that does deliver that, does reduce that bureaucracy, delivering that very powerful and important data.

Mike Crockart, MP: What is holding them back? Is it cost?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: I think the issue is mandating Chief Constables to buy an effective system. It might be easier to mandate Chief Constables to say, if you are going to have a system it

needs to be pitched at this specification, then they would either raise their spec, or look to buy a system like COMPACT which I believe would be a very effective operational tool.

Baroness Hamwee: What's the role of the Home Office? You are allowed to have a view.

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: My view is I have been charged by my Chief Constable to keep people safe. If you look to see what systems are out there, best practice for all these forces is COMPACT. I have to believe it is by far the best system out there. I accept there are challenges, but it has so many useful features, for instance, every time a child goes missing, I don't have to pick up the 'phone to my local branch and tell them, it automatically emails the local authority, a child under the age of 18 in their care has gone missing. When I first started doing that eighteen months ago, I had phone calls from my local authority asking what was happening, hinting I should be turning off the email - they were unaware of the scale of the problem - and I have been working very closely with my local authority to address that. We had 800 children in Worcestershire that went missing last year, and it did come as a surprise when I was searching on the internet, to see 810 children reported missing from England, which is clearly at odds. In terms of children missing over 24 hours, I think there was about 900 missing over 24 hours, well we had 260 in West Mercia alone. I know local authorities find it difficult to collect the data, and they may well be using different methods of collection. It is clear as mud, when you look at my data, for seven years now I have been able to tell you how many children have gone missing, how long for, we have always been able to produce those figures. It did come as a bit of a surprise when I saw those figures, and I thought they were misleading and unhelpful.

Ann Coffey, MP: When I tried to get figures, West Mercia and Kent found the figures in an hour, Greater Manchester took at least two days to get the figures. Your system has a search facility; you can identify not only numbers but patterns. Without that search facility it is very difficult for a police force to establish that.

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: Yes. On the front page of our system, for example, it tells you these are your top premises, these are how many reports each premises made. To give you an example of the impact, in 2009 we had one care home which called us 900 times, by having an effective tool to measure that, we worked with the home to identify what the problems were, and worked with them, and 2010 we had 50 'phone calls, so had gone down from 900 to 50 calls, and 200 missing reports to 10, that is one example of having a good IT system, you don't have to spend time looking for things.

Ann Coffey, MP: Presumably helpful in uploading data in missing persons reports.

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: Yes, for example, in West Mercia, over 40% of our missing persons reports are from repeat missing people, between two and thirty three times. Now we have had an impact on that, it sound a lot, but four or five years ago it was in the hundreds.

Baroness Hamwee: We have been talking about the importance of IT, can you say a word in your view about the importance or otherwise of a single point of contact within the force? Does this help towards greater resolution of cases?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: Undoubtedly, it is key, forming good relationships with the Bureau, Missing People, I think it is key to understanding the scale of the problem, and directing resources appropriately, sharing data and trying to keep people safe. Years ago when I first went to the Bureau, it looked like a broom cupboard, and when I see how it has been turned round now, and the professional organisation it is, all credit to them, the hard work they have been doing. Unfortunately, across the country some forces are doing away with them, and some forces, for example, West Midlands, have just appointed ten across the force which I think is fantastic news, and having a central point in my view is good.

Ann Coffey, MP: You have probably heard some of the previous witnesses discuss how cross-matching relies on joint working with coroners. Have you had any experience of working with coroners?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: We are a largely rural force, we have got two coroners in our force and they are very proactive and very helpful, and when we have gone to the coroners to ask for help they have been very supportive.

Two years ago I put a paper to my Superintendent saying we had 57 cases dating back to 1965, and in my view this affects the trust and confidence the public had in us, and I felt the families needed to be reassured. I went to retrieve the files from bin bags in our force headquarters. Out of those 57 cases we actually found 30 of them, all over the world, in the jungles of Vietnam, in America, all across Europe, the majority didn't want any contact with their family, but at least we were able to go back to the families and reassure the families. In one case – certainly the letter I got from the daughter who hadn't seen her father for forty years – if I had one letter in my service that would be the letter I would have. Out of those 57 we traced 30, and we identified 17 were dead, 10 left.

In terms of working with the coroner, one particular case involved a mental health patient near a river - we found his leg bone eighteen months later - and the coroner was quick to direct us to DNA, and we were able to identify him, and clearly that put his family at rest; we don't have particular problems, but I understand speaking to my colleagues on other forces there are problems, not wanting to spend huge amounts of money.

Mike Crockart, MP: We have heard from some of the families of difficulties of missing people lost contacts, do you think there is better way for police forces to deal with this type of situation?

Phil Shakesheff, Detective Inspector of West Mercia Police: The definition of 'missing' is quite wide currently. We are looking at reviewing that. My view is to establish whether there are any risks. You need to put it on missing person system at least, and make some basic enquiries, and to write it off on a Command and Control message as a lost contact case, I don't think it is

trust and satisfaction for the family, and I think it will affect the reputation of the force. I do refer to a lost contact, but I know if I do, that I am satisfied I am not just giving a message, I am satisfied we have done a robust investigation that establishes there are no risks to the person, and that comes with a caveat clause if they feel there are any risks they will come back to us and we will reinvestigate it.

Alan Campbell, MP, Lead Chair: Thank you for your evidence. Phil is our last witness.

Can I just say thank you to everyone. The evidence from today has been extremely useful and important, thank you all, and thank you to my colleagues on the Panel.

(From the Shorthand Notes of
Davina Hyde, Carmel Legal
Telephone No: 01737 830013

email: davina@carmellegal.co.uk
www.carmellegal.co.uk)