

## 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF RECONNECTIONS

**All reconnections are unique, but this research has identified a number of themes which are relevant for missing people, their families and those searching for them. These are identified with two main purposes: to help affected individuals prepare for reconnection, and to improve wider understanding of how varied, challenging and convoluted reconnections can be.**

### RECONNECTION IS MISSING PEOPLE'S ULTIMATE AIM

Missing people have the choice about whether to resume contact, but by reconnecting via the charity, they have the opportunity to find out about who is searching and explore the impacts reconnection may have. Families have the chance to reach out and to communicate with the missing person to assuage their fears.

### RECONNECTION CAN BE PROMPTED BY MANY THINGS

Sometimes missing people are prompted to return by a range of internal and external factors such as feeling hungry or cold, or because of emotional ties or discovering that people are searching for them. Search strategies should consider when and how to reach out to missing people.

### RECONNECTION CAN TAKE PLACE IN A NUMBER OF WAYS

Missing people can reconnect directly to family or friends (be it face-to-face or via correspondence), via police or through a third party such as Missing People. Reconnection can take place in person, by telephone or through written communication.

### RECONNECTION IS NOT ALWAYS IMMEDIATE

Once the decision is made to reconnect, missing people may take time before making that connection. Once initiated, the process of reconnection may also take time, particularly if messages are passed through a third party.

### RECONNECTION CAN BRING BOTH JOY AND PAIN

For some missing people and some families reconnecting may not be an easy or happy process, and there may remain ongoing ambiguity if either side is unaware of what the other experienced. In circumstances where one side decides not to resume contact, the missing person's reconnection with one party can be very painful for others and may invoke feelings of rejection and frustration.

### RECONNECTION SHOULD BE HANDLED HOLISTICALLY AND TAILORED TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

All reconnections should be responded to in a tailored way that suits the assessment and support needs of the returned person and their family or carers.

### RECONNECTION IS DYNAMIC (MAY NOT BE PERMANENT)

For some missing people, reconnection may be short-lived. Either the missing person or family members may terminate reconnection. For example, either party may decline to send or receive a message or make direct contact. Even if a missing person returns, they may leave again.

### RECONNECTION IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY BUT THE BEGINNING OF RECOVERY

Although it can be tempting to see reconnection as the end of a traumatic experience, it may, in fact, represent the beginning of a challenging period of recovery. This period may be difficult for the individual, family members and professionals.

## 4. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

**The findings of this research, and the identified characteristics of reconnections, point to a number of changes that would benefit missing people and their families. These have been highlighted in each case study previously and are now listed in the order in which they appear in the report.**

1. Reconnection provides an important opportunity to reduce the likelihood, severity or duration of future missing incidents. In order to realise this opportunity, police officers conducting 'Safe and Well checks' and providers of return interviews should ensure that all people who have been missing are made aware of the help available to prevent future missing incidents, or to safeguard the individuals concerned should they go missing again. These resources include Missing People's phone, text and email services via 116 000, as well as local services and emergency accommodation options. The government should ensure that children and young people are educated about the risks of running away, and about the help that they can access to stay safe before, during and after a missing incident.
2. Reconnecting missing young people is currently challenging, because of the shortage of appropriate safe places to which to refer them. In order to prevent young people facing risks in the community or having to turn to inappropriate places (such as police stations or accident and emergency centres) for shelter, the government should ensure that every missing child or young person who is unable to return home safely can access suitable emergency accommodation.
3. Not all social services teams are aware of how the charity can help missing people, or how it can support their own work to safeguard vulnerable people. Missing People must communicate with social services teams across the country to ensure that they are aware of the services the charity can provide (including TextSafe). The charity should develop a suite of information for local authority staff members, as well as good practice examples, guidance, and information about services for young people.
4. Families are not always sure how best to support a young person who has been missing: what to say, whether to ask questions, how to address their experiences. In light of this research, support services for young people who have run away should consider extending their service provision to include family support once the young person is found, which would ensure that the support given to young people is contextualised and that families are included in a holistic approach to dealing with the young person's running away. Where this is not possible, referrals for family support work or mediation should be considered.
5. Not all young people have access to support services in their area when they return. Missing People must effectively trial and evaluate support for families when a young person returns from going missing and explore opportunities to roll out suitable services further. This service should, where possible, provide a consistent support service to families and young people who are repeatedly going missing.
6. In order to develop more effective rapport with returned young people, providers of return interviews for young people who go missing repeatedly should ensure that the interviews are conducted by the same person each time. Where this is not possible or appropriate, information from return interviews should be analysed together, to ensure that a full picture is gained.
7. Where return interviews are conducted for children or adults, and where these indicate a need for subsequent support, local agencies must work together to ensure that this is provided. It would be appropriate for statutory guidance to state agencies' responsibilities for working jointly to deliver a co-ordinated support package after return.
8. Many returned missing adults do not receive professional guidance or support after a missing incident, although this and other research suggests would this be beneficial to their wellbeing.

All returned missing adults should be offered a return interview, in line with ACPO guidance (2010) and best practice principles, and with the aim of identifying harms and risk, addressing the reasons for the disappearance, and preventing a repeat incident. Return interviews should be available to people who have been reported missing from inpatient care and adults with dementia. As is good practice with children and young people, return interviews would be best delivered by staff from independent agencies who have undertaken training in missing and related issues. This is important because some returned people and their families may find it easier to develop trust with non-statutory services, and services with specialist knowledge about their circumstances.

9. More effective multi-agency work would ensure smoother referral of returned adults from police into other local statutory and voluntary services. While statutory guidance on children who go missing has been available for many years (DCSF, 2009; DfE, 2014), no such guidance exists for missing adults. Statutory guidance on adults who go missing from home and care would provide much needed clarity on different agencies' responsibilities for responding to a missing incident and for providing support when people return. Such guidance could be based upon Missing from Care – a multi-agency approach to protecting vulnerable adults – A national framework for police and care providers, being developed by the National Crime Agency.
10. It is likely that it will be harder to reach out directly to missing people who have dementia; they may not carry a mobile phone, they may not realise that they will have been reported missing, and they may not be able to reach out for help if lost. This makes the role of publicity appeals especially important. In order to make local people aware that someone with dementia is missing in their community, Missing People and the charity's current and potential partners should continue to pursue opportunities to access publicity channels to publicise missing incidents quickly.
11. Return interviews with people with dementia, like those for all missing adults, would be best conducted by independent organisations. Organisations with expertise in dementia, and sufficient training in issues around missing people, might undertake this work, in order to share their knowledge about living with dementia, the experiences of carers, strategies to keep people with dementia safe, and sources of additional support.
12. Missing People's services provide a range of options for supporting missing adults to reconnect, including acting as a contact broker. Missing People and partner organisations must therefore explore opportunities to reach out to more missing adults, and to direct them to Missing People's 24/7 services via 116 000. Key opportunities for marketing include support services that missing adults might access, be they targeted drop-in centres, health or social services, or public spaces where missing adults are likely to be (such as transport hubs, supermarkets; Stevenson et al, 2013).
13. In order to reach out to help more missing adults reconnect, Missing People should consider the possible use of TextSafe (or an email equivalent) for low risk missing adults. This approach might be offered in support of low risk police cases that are not ordinarily referred to the charity, in order to reach out to adults who may have chosen to leave but may also welcome advice and support.
14. Police forces should consider signposting returned missing adults to 116 000 if they do not wish to have direct contact with their family, because the charity can then broker contact by passing messages back and forth. Other service providers (such as homelessness services, refuges, etc.) should be encouraged to direct clients to Missing People's expert, independent services as a contact broker, when clients consider reconnecting with family members. Service providers may also consider becoming Missing People Support Partners, thereby receiving missing person appeals and guidance on supporting missing individuals.

- 15.** Reconnection can be daunting and stressful for adults who have been traced after losing contact with family members. Missing People should therefore consider developing enhanced support for people who have been traced, both on the phone and online (e.g. guidance documents, policy statements), with the aim of supporting reconnections whilst also safeguarding missing people's rights.
- 16.** While adults have the right to go missing and stay out of contact, the police will not close a missing person enquiry until they are satisfied that the missing person is safe and well. Support services that provide information to adults who may be missing (such as people who are homeless, or people who have fled domestic abuse) should ensure they are able to provide up-to-date and accurate information about being reported missing, a missing person's rights and the nature of police investigations. They can do this by pursuing partnership working with local police Missing Person Units or Missing Person Coordinators and the charity Missing People.
- 17.** In order to maximise the chances of reconnecting missing people, Missing People and current and potential Tracing Partners should explore opportunities to extend the charity's family tracing service. Preference should be given to partnerships which allow access to national level data, to ensure that the charity's service is of consistent quality across the UK. Opportunities should be sought which improve the chances of tracing missing adults who are less likely to be registered on the Electoral Roll or have a landline telephone.