

Manifesto goal three: Missing children and young people need a safe place to stay

Key Points

- Children and young people who go missing can find themselves exposed to a number of risks including sexual exploitation and violence.
- There is a distinct lack of flexible emergency accommodation for runaways across the UK meaning that there is very little that children and young people can do to avoid these dangers.
- The government should ensure that every missing child or young person who is unable to return home safely can access suitable emergency accommodation to keep them safe.
- This would be best achieved by imposing a statutory duty on Local Authorities to provide flexible accommodation which meets the needs of children in their area.

Overview

Approximately 250,000 people go missing every year in the United Kingdom. Estimates suggest roughly two-thirds of all missing cases relate to children and young people, meaning around 140,000 people under the age of 18 go missing each year (Home Office, 2010: 5).

These young people, who have decided to run away or are forced to leave home, can be vulnerable in a variety of ways relating to their age, education level and/or inexperience. They may feel the need to engage in risky behaviour whilst missing in order to get by on a day to day basis, and can be at risk of violent crime and sexual exploitation amongst other potential problems.

In order to minimise these risks, Missing People believes that Local Authorities should have a statutory duty to provide flexible emergency accommodation which is sufficient to meet the needs of young people in their local area. This accommodation would provide a vital safety net whilst fitting with Local Authorities' responsibility for safeguarding and promoting children's welfare.

Dangers children and young people can face whilst missing

Children and young people who are missing can be extremely vulnerable. Many engage in risky behaviour in order to get by on a day to day basis, for example, in a study found that one in six (18 percent) young people reported sleeping rough or staying with someone they had just met whilst away (Rees, 2011: 16). Some young people can also be exposed to violence, with one in nine (11 percent) saying that they had been hurt or harmed during the only or most recent time they went

missing. There is also extensive research (for example Smeaton, 2013 and CEOP, 2011) proving a link between child sex exploitation and runaway children, with statistics showing that 70 percent of sexually exploited children had also gone missing (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2012: 49).

"I've run away a few times to London and you have to choose whether to spend all night sitting on a cold street or go for a drink with a stranger who's come up to you." Kayleigh, 16.

Many young people who go missing are reluctant to seek professional help. They fear that they will be taken into care or sent straight back to where they have run away from, and so they decide to go 'off the radar'.

A lack of emergency accommodation

A lack of emergency accommodation makes it very difficult for children and young people to avoid the dangers of being missing. Having access to a safe space to stay overnight helps to minimise these risks and additionally provides a space away from other problems allowing valuable thinking time and access to vital services.

Research has shown that there is widespread recognition of a need for this type of accommodation. Respondents in a study by The Children's Society (including local authorities and police authorities) highlighted the need for easy to access safe spaces when young people find themselves in crisis (Evans et al, 2007: 48). Only 20 of the 69 local authorities who responded stated that there was emergency accommodation available to runaways in their area (ibid: 5). In addition, ten of the 27 police force respondents stated a lack of alternative emergency accommodation had led to young people staying in police stations overnight (ibid).

There is now just one refuge in Britain that provides confidential emergency accommodation for children under the age of 16 who have run away and are at risk of harm. The Safeplace Refuge, which opened in Yorkshire in 2007, is a last resort for the people they help. The refuge is run by Safe@Last, an organisation who is committed to ensuring that children from the local area who have no safe alternative are adequately looked after.

Other emergency accommodation services do exist, such as DePaul's Nightstop, which provides a growing network of emergency accommodation in volunteer hosts' homes. However, this is only currently available for 16 to 25 year olds and, in most areas of the country, the demand for accommodation for young people significantly outstrips supply (Homeless Link, 2014).

Missing People considers it extremely important to provide a safe space for the thousands of vulnerable young people who run away or go missing every year, but this type of accommodation is currently very rarely available.

A call for a network of flexible emergency accommodation

The charity believes that this must be addressed with urgency, by establishing a national network of flexible emergency accommodation that meets the need of young people of different ages. The Safeplace Refuge in Yorkshire provides a key example of good practice.

Research by the Railway Children has shown that young people who have experience of running away are in favour of emergency accommodation dedicated to young people (Smeaton, 2009: 93). Young people also reported wanting this to be a place where they could talk to non-judgemental professionals and be listened to (ibid: p94). This support would ideally work on a drop-in basis and be relatively non-structured (ibid).

A statutory duty for Local Authorities to have such a network in place would be in line with their duties under s17 of the Children's Act 1989, which addresses the need for Local Authorities 'to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need'¹ which 'may include providing accommodation'.²

This statutory requirement would also enable the UK government to better achieve the standards expected of it under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was ratified in 1991. Article 27 subsection 1 of the UNCRC states that 'States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.'

This would further provide a breathing space for vulnerable young people, whilst not requiring children to have looked after status. In addition, it would give an opportunity for them to link in with services that could help change their lives, and a chance to find suitable long-term accommodation if they cannot return home.³

Manifesto for Missing People

Missing People is calling on the government to ensure that every missing child or young person who is unable to return home safely can access suitable emergency accommodation to keep them safe.

This proposal is part of the charity's Manifesto for Missing People, which calls for changes to be implemented by the next government in respect to four key issues affecting missing people and their family and friends, by way of improving support.

Information on each of the four calls, and the Manifesto in its entirety, can be found at www.missingpeople.org.uk/manifesto.

1. Section 17 (1)(a) Children's Act 1989

2. Section 17 (6) Children's Act 1989

3. Railway Children is undertaking research to explore how young people could be better enabled to find a safe place to stay. Its report is due by November 2014 and will provide useful information on planning and commissioning emergency accommodation.

For more information please contact the Policy and Research team by email at policyandresearch@missingpeople.org.uk.

References

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Missing Persons Taskforce (2010) [*The Missing Persons Task Force: A report with recommendations for improving the multi-agency response to missing incidents*](#) (London: The Home Office)

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