

Missing People's response to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children's inquiry into children's social care.

1. Missing People is a UK charity which offers a lifeline to children and adults reported missing to the police and other agencies. We listen in confidence, and support missing people and their families to explore their options and, where possible, to reconnect. For those left behind we provide specialised support to ease the heartache and confusion, and help search for their missing loved ones. We provide our services through partnership working, including with the police and social services, as well as other charities and professionals, and also undertake research and policy work. We provide a return home interview service for missing children in East Sussex and Swindon.
1. We are interested in responding to this inquiry because we are concerned about runaway and missing children and young people, who are already vulnerable and become more so when they go missing. In 2014-15 there were 211,521 missing incidents, of which 112 252 were of children aged under 18 going missing.¹ We believe that there independent return interviews have a crucial role to play in ensuring missing children are safe and preventing them from going missing again.
2. We believe that resources from children's social care should prioritise offering independent return home interviews and follow up support. This would enable relevant services to respond effectively, as return interviews gather information about the risks a child faced before they went missing, and while they were away from home. As Department for Education guidance states "when a child is found they must be offered an Independent Return Interview (IRIs)." It states that they "provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect a child from going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home."²
3. Independent Return Interviews and follow up support have proven to reduce the number of missing incidents and offer social return on investment. Evidence highlighted by Ofsted showed that interventions from the Worcestershire service contributed to a 30% reduction in missing children incidents over the previous year.³ Furthermore, evidence compiled by Railway Children has illustrated that for every £1 spent on independent return home interviews and follow up support from agencies, including Missing People, there is £5 of social value achieved as well as positive outcomes for young people such as improved family relationships, greater confidence and self-esteem and better education prospects.⁴

¹ UK Missing Person's Bureau, *Missing Person's High Level Data Report 2014-15*, (2015).

² Department for Education, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, (2014).

³ Ofsted, *Missing Children*, (2013).

⁴ Railway Children, *The value of Return Home Interviews and follow-up support when young people go missing: a social return on investment analysis*, (2015).

4. We are concerned that not all children are offered a return interview and feel that a number of factors may be causing this. Recent reports from Ofsted indicated that the application and quality of return interviews is not consistently good enough⁵ and that there was limited evidence of return interviews in nearly all Local Authorities visited.⁶ Indeed, evidence from a report from Ofsted has highlighted that, only 25% of children who go missing from home, within the eight local authorities inspected, had a return interview.⁷ Furthermore, a recent PEEL report highlighted that return interviews were not always undertaken.⁸
5. We are worried that data collected from IRIs is not always passed on to the police, which prevents them from taking action on crimes that took place during a particular incident as well as informing any problem profiling or pattern analysis.
6. We are concerned about the lack of funding available to ensure that all children are protected. Department for Education guidance states that local authorities must offer an IRI for every missing incident. Moreover, although there is evidence to demonstrate that follow up support after an IRI leads to positive outcomes, the guidance does not currently require this to take place and it is therefore difficult to fund. Therefore, we are concerned that wider local authority budget cuts could make this offer of return interviews and good practice of delivering follow up support increasingly difficult to deliver for missing children.
7. As a recent Ofsted report highlighted we believe that to ensure that there is an effective independent return interview service that the following should be in place:
 - a. Effective multi-agency cooperation
 - b. Timely and consistent follow up support
 - c. Continuity of workers
 - d. Children's views are listened to and taken account of.⁹
8. In conclusion, we think that children's social care should focus resources on offering independent return interviews and follow up support for missing and runaway children and young people. In order for this to take place local authorities need to be clear on their responsibilities as highlighted above and have the necessary resources to implement this duty.

For further information please contact:

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⁵ Ofsted, *Annual report into social care 2013-14*, (2015).

⁶ Ofsted, *Missing Children*, (2013).

⁷ Ofsted, *The sexual exploitation of children: it couldn't happen here, could it?* (2014).

⁸ HMIC, *PEEL: Police Effectiveness (vulnerability). A national overview*. (2015)

⁹ Ofsted, *Missing Children*, (2013).

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