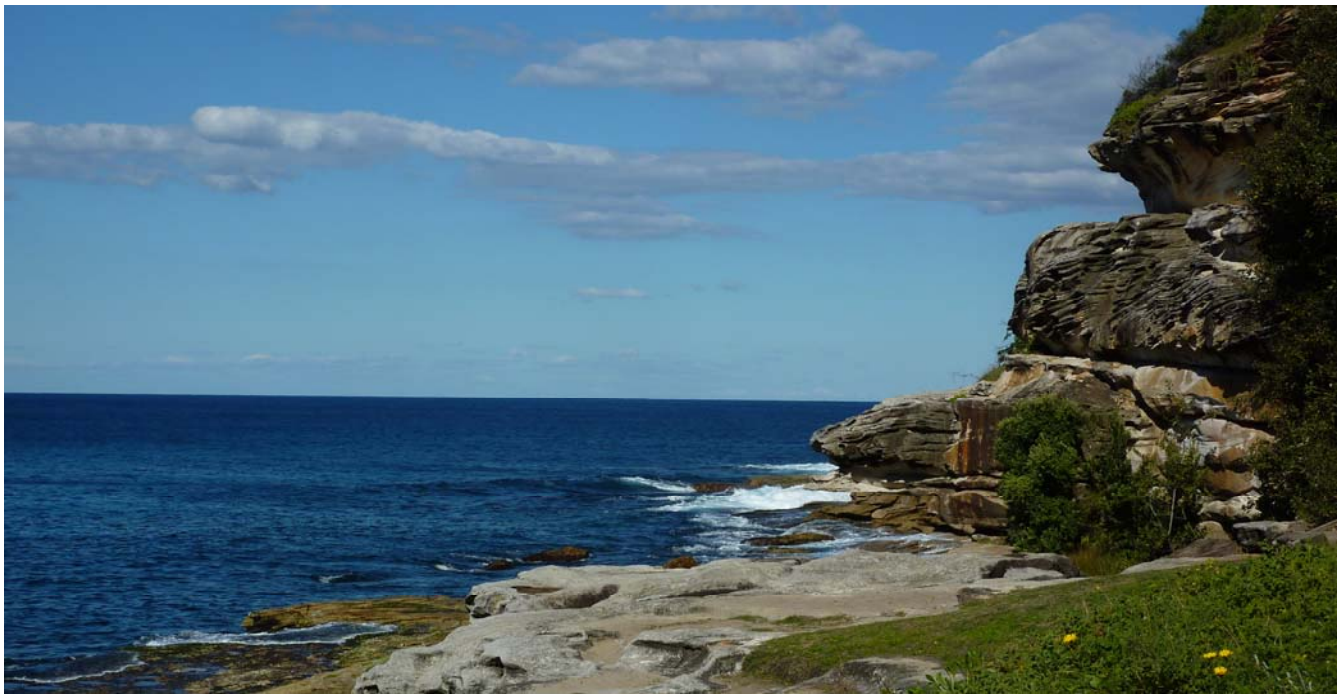


# Lessons from Australia: Developing a new counselling service for families when someone is missing

## My chance to make a difference

**Helen Morrell**

missing people

Registered Charity No. 1020419

## Contents



## Overview

This report aims to inform the development of a new therapeutic counselling service for families of missing people in the UK.

The themes that are explored in this report are drawn from a visit to Australia in April of this year, where I had the privilege to meet with counsellors, families, academics, and police working with families. I also explored some of these themes further from 'missing' and counselling literature.

At Missing People, we know that the emotional support available for families is just not enough to help families through the most painful of experiences.

My experience in Australia inspired and humbled me. I was inspired to hear how services can make a difference to families: to help them cope; to help them carry on.

I hope the lessons I have learned will, in some small way, help the team at Missing People to develop our services to make a difference to families. Time will tell.

**'The painful emotions of the 'missing' experience are very deep, very dark and very enclosing. So one way I came to find I can limit the difficulties around talking or thinking of my son was to see the whole emotional minefield as like a ravine or deep black hole. I know that it's dangerous to go too close to the edge because once you fall in it's very hard to climb out again. So as with a dangerous hole, I know I can only go so far and no further in getting near the edge - I take care not to fall in and can feel the emotional gravitational pull if getting close.'**

**Sarah Godwin**

## Acknowledgements

In Australia, cultural practice is to start meetings and events by acknowledging the aboriginal custodians of the land on which the meeting takes place and respect is paid to Elders past and present. I in turn thank Australia and its people for hosting my stay and keeping me safe. I feel privileged to learn and understand more about the experience for people living with the uncertainty of having someone missing. The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust has funded this opportunity, and I am indebted to those who allowed me to go and for the ease with which my Fellowship was granted and administered.

The Trust fund 'travel to make a difference', and the opportunity that this has offered has made a significant difference to me, the charity Missing People and I hope the families of missing people. In the past, the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust in Australia has funded three fellows to further their understanding of the 'missing' issue. The fact that Australia has developed its service provision and is considered in some way advanced in comparison to the UK is clearly attributable to the investment in the issue that the Trust has made.

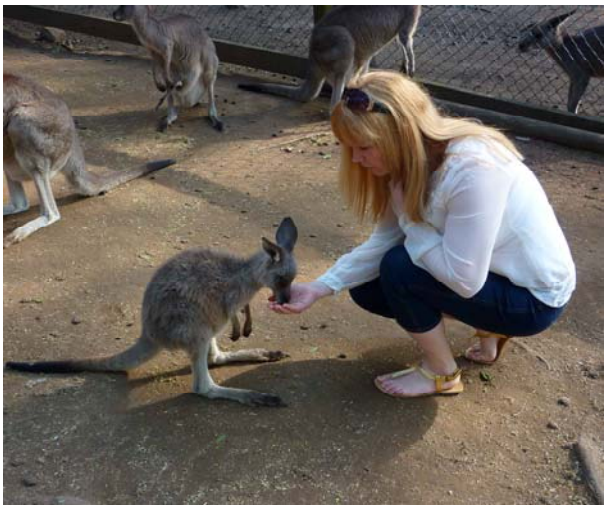
My responsibility has been to learn, to challenge and to find solutions to bring back to the UK. I am thankful to every person who has been kind enough to spend time with me and share their thinking. I have been very well looked after and supported by generous hosts who enriched my visit. Thanks in particular to Margi Cunningham, Dr Julie Clark, Vannessa Swann and Jill Faddy.

I have been supported in this opportunity fully by my colleagues at Missing People. I am very lucky to be part of a fantastic team and my particular thanks go to Emma Cummings and Jo Youle, who have been burdened by my time away and still remained encouraging and patient. I am grateful to Lucy Holmes and Cecilia Hazlerigg for using their big brains to guide me and aid my thinking. I am very proud to be part of the Services Team at Missing People, and every time I speak about the work that we do, I realise how hard the staff and volunteers work and what efforts they make to support people.
I draw my strength and resolve from the stability and love of my family and friends. Thanks to them all for supporting me through this time, in particular David and Renard.

The families of missing people live with an experience that I find hard to allow myself to personally consider. My thanks to those people who have allowed me to hear their voice and see through a window into their difficult reality. I hope that my efforts will face in the right direction to help us improve.

## The Author

I am the Services Manager at Missing People with responsibility for family support, both leading the team providing support and also considering the development of services. I have worked in the Charity sector for the last 10 years predominately working with young people, vulnerable adults and families. I have worked for Missing People for 3 years.



## Introduction

An Australian family member explained to me, that such was her counsellor's quest for knowledge about the experience of living with someone who is missing she felt -

"like a chip being pecked by seagulls"

Most counsellors will not have met anyone who is experiencing unresolved loss caused by a family member being missing. The lack of guidance, therapeutic intervention and support agencies for both families and practitioners, may mean that people are left without adequate support.

There is no specific counselling available to the families of 'missing', and people who have sought a more general counselling service have often reported to us that they have found the subsequent experiences inadequate.

Another family member I talked to explained that the counsellor they met felt so unprepared to talk about the 'missing' issue that the family member felt like a teacher.

We need to determine whether there is something unique about the experience of having someone missing that would be best addressed by specialist counsellors. Alternatively, will increased knowledge about the needs of 'missing' families, enable generic counsellors to support families adequately.

### Missing People

The UK charity Missing People offers emotional and practical support to the families of missing people across the country. This support is currently accessed by telephone and email, delivered from a central office in London. It is known that the families we help face many complex issues, highlighted by research by Lucy Holmes. Her report Living in Limbo (2008) sought to understand the experience and impact of families of missing people. It has aided our understanding and encouraged us as a support service to improve and to deliver more specialised and needed services.

Missing People offers emotional listening support to family members for as long as they need it. The support that is offered is not counselling and we acknowledge that this will not be enough for some people. It is therefore one of Missing People's objectives to establish a model of counselling for the families of missing people with the ultimate aim of building a nationwide network of counsellors that are trained and confident to meet their needs. It is our vision that all families who would like counselling would be able to reach tailored and specific therapeutic support, thus enabling them to feel better able to cope with having someone missing. Findings from the *User Feedback Survey*, conducted by Missing People in 2010, indicated that 65% of family members would use emotional helpline support, 62% would use therapeutic face to face counselling, and 48% would use therapeutic telephone counselling. These results are the catalyst for developing such services.

There are many issues for which people seek generic counselling, including grief, loss, bereavement and trauma. The counselling models that exist, and the therapeutic support that is given to help someone through these issues, may have elements that might be useful to the families of missing people.

Missing People's pilot will aim to bring families and counsellors together to explore these issues, trialing a counselling model that we hope will be a source of help for some. This work will be unique in the UK, although there have been steps made towards this in other countries, such as Australia and the USA.

## Purpose of my visit and of this report

This report shares the insights gained during an exploratory trip to Australia to understand service provision, therapeutic interventions and theoretical understanding of the issue of 'missing'.

Australia has had at least a ten year head start in developing its counselling provision and service delivery. In 2001 the Hunter Institute of Mental Health worked with practitioners and academics to develop best practice for counselling families of missing people.

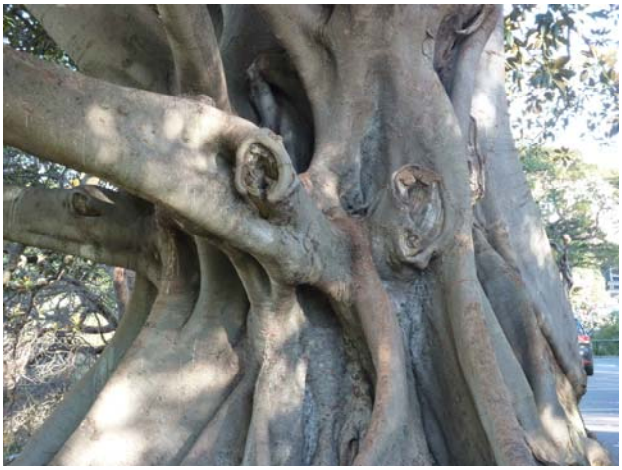
On this basis I decided to travel to Australia to learn more. The impression from afar was that statutory services, such as police and social care, were well linked to NGOs and that family-to-counsellor referral mechanisms were well established. In addition, there is academic interest and research being undertaken in the 'missing' subject in Australia.

A key objective of the trip was to gain understanding of how both emotional support structures and formal counselling works for the families of missing people. I felt it was important to see at first hand how well the country's established counselling framework, '*Supporting those who are left behind*' (Wayland,2007) was meeting the needs of families. As the first of its kind to bring together guidelines and an approach for counsellors when working with families of 'missing', the framework has been well marketed and is available nationally via Australia's police force, permitting counsellors across Australia to access information about supporting families who have someone missing.

This report shares the findings from consultation with practitioners, counsellors, families and academics in Australia. I hope I have represented their thoughts accurately. I aim to draw some comparison to the charity Missing People's understanding of the issue. The report should inform Missing People in their development of a counselling service.

The sections of this report will discuss support provision for 'missing' families in Australia, share understanding about 'missing' counselling and expand on some themes which may impact people experiencing unresolved loss.

('The Listening tree', Sydney Botanical Gardens)



# Section 1: Provision of support services for families of missing people

## The Australian Picture

The geographical focus of this trip were the states and territories of New South Wales, (NSW) Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Queensland (QLD), which are all in the east of the country. The 'missing' research and service delivery and development in Australia seem to be prominent in these areas.

Australia is policed by eight *state* and *territory* police forces that enforce law within their respective, localised jurisdictions , and the *Australian Federal Police* (AFP) which is responsible for policing crimes against the Commonwealth of Australia law, both across Australia and internationally. This report does not offer a comprehensive picture of Australian missing person's police investigation, nor its national services for families of missing people.

This report centres on those states/territories mentioned above (NSW, ACT and QLD) and focuses on the information shared by the relevant service providers, families, and academics, with reference to support services for families. It does not seek to evaluate the police investigative process, media reporting, cross agency partnerships, research, funding or public awareness.

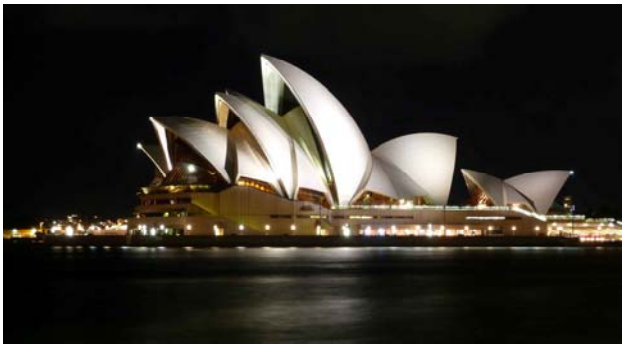
## Support agencies and services in Australia

"There are several key agencies in Australia involved in investigations or searches for missing persons. These include law enforcement, and government and non-governmental search agencies. A designated counselling service is also available through the Attorney General's Department of New South Wales."
(James, Anderson, Putt. 2008: 5)

Amongst the numerous agencies, The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC), which replaced the National Missing Persons Unit in 2006, and the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), established in 2000, are two of the key agencies in Australia, active in improving service provision and counselling in the field of 'missing'. Lobbying by the Missing Persons Committee NSW was key to the creation of the latter.

There are other organisations in Australia, which provide insight into the possible service delivery for a counselling service and the needs of families of missing. NALAG Telephone Grief Support Branch (Sydney) and the mediation service, Relationships Australia, provide invaluable support to families.

This section of the report outlines the aspects of 'missing' service provision that currently exist in Australia.



(Sydney Opera House, Sydney Harbour)

## National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC)

'The NMPCC is in a unique position with the police and NGOs. As the peak national organisation and through its existing structures it is well placed to continue to provide a leadership role in an effective and coordinated response to the issue of missing persons within Australia' Page 131 Australian Institute of Criminology, Missing persons in Australia,( James, Anderson, Putt 2008:131)

The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) is based in Canberra and located within the High Tech Crime Operations portfolio alongside Crime Prevention in the Australian Federal Police. The Centre is well placed to evaluate the national and localised provision of police investigation, and the overall picture of 'missing persons' in Australia

The Centre is guided by the 'missing persons' *PLEASE* policy framework established by the Australian government, which identifies Prevention, Location, Education, Awareness, Support and Evaluation as focus points for statutory response in the 'missing' field. The framework's *Support* element is particularly relevant in considering the enhancement of emotional support. In relation to the families of missing people, this element identifies the potential detrimental impact upon the families and friends of missing persons, including poor physical and mental health; compromised quality of life; unstable emotional well-being, financial difficulties, and the potential strain on significant relationships. It also identifies that evidence-based and professional support both practical and emotional may help to minimise the impact of a disappearance.
*(Taken from: Going missing is not a crime but there are alternatives, the PLEASE policy principles fact sheet, Australian Federal Police)*

The NMPCC is currently staffed by Rebecca Kotz and Margi Cunningham. Some of the more obvious outputs of the work of the NMPCC are their website, fact sheets and awareness-raising campaigns such as advice for young people, distributed during National Youth Week (NYW), the coordination of National Missing Persons Week (NMPW), and the Australian launch, each year, of International Missing Children's Day (IMCD).

The NMPCC operates a free advice and support telephone line, which is available to members of the public, the police and other agencies. Many of the calls are enquires about missing people, both reporting and asking advice. The NMPCC staff signpost callers to the appropriate agency or police force to get the correct assistance. The calls are taken by NMPCC staff during office hours, within the AFP offices in Canberra. Between 2009 and 2010 the number of incoming calls was 480.
(Cunningham 2011)
This is the only national freefone 'missing' advice line in Australia. To make a direct statistical comparison, Missing People's freefone advice line took 29,929 calls during the same time frame.

One of the NMPCC's key roles is in the coordination of meetings between the lead 'missing persons' officers from the separate state and territory police forces. Each force works independently, and combined with the geographical distance between areas these opportunities for coordinated thinking are essential to establish consistent, national systems. For example, there is currently no national database system in Australia for sharing and collaborating missing reports between Australia's police forces. This has an obvious and significant operational impact in terms of police investigation, cross-border working, and also in mapping trends and the collations of statistical data for research purposes.

The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre holds a vital function in encouraging opportunities for shared working and maintaining a strategic and national focus for the 'missing' agenda.

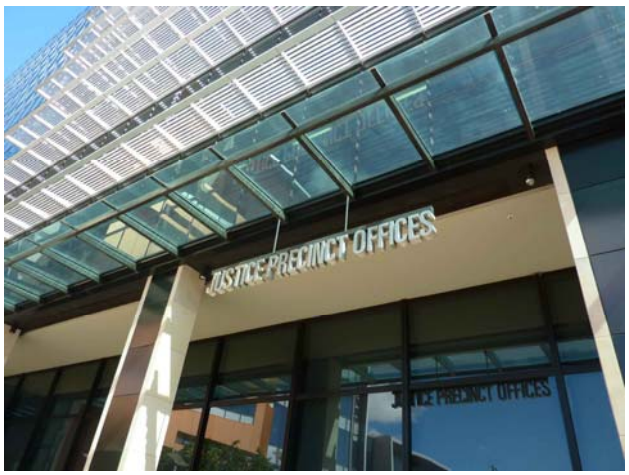

**(**Helen Morrell and Margi Cunningham, NMPCC Stakeholder Event)

## The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), New South Wales

'New South Wales is the only state in Australia that provides a free specialised counselling service that acknowledges unresolved loss in relation missing persons' (James, Anderson, Putt, 2008: 80)

The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) was established in September 2000 and is funded by the Attorney General's Department of New South Wales. It sits within the Victims of Crime Bureau at the Justice Office in Parramatta, Sydney. The FFMPU provides free and confidential counselling and support services to the families and friends of missing people. They receive approximately 350 referrals per year from families and police. The service extends to families who live within NSW and to those families whose missing person was resident in NSW when they went missing. This restriction is based on the Attorney General Department funding, which only covers New South Wales.

The FFMPU is currently run by three staff members: Elizabeth (Liz) Davies, Emmanuel (Manny) Kassiotis and Stacey Tuffin, who directly provide the support to families. A relatively new configuration, this staff team brings expertise from broader areas of counselling, additional to the subject of 'missing'.




(FFMPU's offices, Parramatta)

The level and type of support that each family or individual that FFMPU aims to help can be very different. Manny Kassiotis explained how the support of family members is approached at the "family's pace". For some there may be a very "intense phase" of support where regular and "intensive ongoing support" is offered. For others there will be both times of "engagement and disengagement", when support from the service is sometimes wanted, but times when things are either too difficult or the support is less necessary.

For some families, the requirement of a support relationship with FFMPU may come after the initial phase of having someone missing. It may be for some, as the agency explained, that they "don't anticipate that it will continue for such a long time" (Manny Kassiotis), and after such a period of time, the situation of having someone missing becomes harder to deal with.
The FFMPU state they provide;

"crisis counselling, ongoing emotional and practical support, telephone and face-to-face counselling, liaison and referral, information on legal issues and search agencies and support during times of reunion"

The counselling they offer allows families to:

- Talk about your experience in a safe and non-threatening environment
- Assist in re-establishing basic routines like sleeping, eating well, socialising, returning to work
- Understand the effect of traumatic and unresolved loss in relation to having someone missing
- Assist you to identify both the practical and emotional supports you may need
- Help you cope with triggers that remind you someone is missing
- Balance the ongoing search for your loved one with the other demands of your life.

Families and Friends of Missing Persons (2011)

Liz Davies, FFMPU felt practitioners need to accept that there is some specific knowledge to gain in order to be able to successfully support the families of missing people.
Additionally, it is not essential to have missing persons' specialist counselors – those only supporting the families of 'missing'. (Manny Kassiotis). Counsellors could be exposed to the issue of 'missing' before being added to their counseling repertoire. At this stage across Australia, there is neither the agency nor the training in place to be able to offer this exposure.

In addition to concentrating on the families of 'missing', it is equally important to look after the well-being of the workforce. As the FFMPU Coordinator, Liz Davies is responsible for the clinical and administrative supervision of the small team. She talked about the importance colleague support in the prevention of vicarious trauma, and the setting of professional workplace and workload boundaries. She explained that there are useful and valuable self assessment tools for staff so they can determine when they are in need of extra support.

(FFMPU Family Forum 2011)

**Missing Persons Committee NSW**

The Missing Persons Committee has existed for over 15 years and consists of families of missing people, mental health practitioners and interested parties. They successfully lobbied the Attorney General for the creation of the FFMPU and also have commissioned services and research in 'missing'. Peter Trebilco, current President, explained the Committee's role in advocating and agitating for the Government to support the development of services for families. It has functioned as a mutual support group and has influenced policies. It seems that the Committee is one of the leading reasons as to why services in New South Wales (NSW) have developed as effectively as they have. In the time that it has been running, the Committee has seen the change of the Supreme Court Act and Australia's Privacy law.

It has seen the development of Missing Person week each August to raise awareness to the public and also to act as a marker each year to remember those missing. They have designed and run www.talkingworks.com.au, which is a website designed to inform young people about 'missing' and to encourage them to talk about their problems before leaving home. Peter Trebilco explained that they are looking for their next challenge to get behind, to further the advancement of services and support for families.

**National Association of Loss and Grief, (NALAG), Telephone Grief Support Branch - Sydney**

NALAG (NSW) Inc. is a not for profit organisation. The NALAG Telephone Grief Support Branch provides 'a listening ear for those wishing to talk about the losses they have experienced'. The helpline started operating in its current format in February 2011 and is run by its Coordinator Elizabeth Fogolin and Maria Holden. They function through the use of volunteers who take it in turns to 'answer' the helpline from their home. The volunteers are trained in grief, loss, helpline skills and support and are supported through handover, debriefing and regular group meetings. The unique service that they provide has no equivalent in the UK. They work with people around any loss, such as financial, parental, health, mobility, employment, death, or divorce. The volunteers are yet to experience working with the family of a missing person but they discussed the impact of 'ambiguous loss': the uncertain loss when someone is missing, as one of the worst they could imagine. The difference that most of the other types of loss have already occurred and are final such as a divorce or a permanent disability. The uncertainty of the missing situation presents a very different set of challenges for the family and the normal support they provide in terms of grief and loss models may not be fit for purpose.

However, many of the losses that they are experienced in providing support with, may well be relevant to the family of a missing person. Some families will find themselves not only with the uncertain loss of someone being missing but may also face multiple other types of loss either as a consequence of the incident or indeed as part of normal life

There is learning to be gained for 'missing' support services such as FFMPU and Missing People in how to support families around other types of losses. Having a counsellor who has experience of the other types of loss would be beneficial to families of missing people.

**Dr Julie Clark**

Dr Julie Clark is a social work lecturer at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. She has conducted research in the impact of missing on people who have experienced their sibling going missing. Her findings from the article Clark, Warburton, Tilse, and (2009) *Missing Siblings: seeking more adequate social responses*, concluded some interesting learning.

It highlighted two areas or particular relevance. The impact on siblings of someone going missing can be quite specific and for some their loss might be not as recognised as equal to other family members. They may experience 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka 1989), 'their loss was not necessarily recognised or understood by parents, other siblings or friends'. (Clark, Warburton, Tilse 2009: 272)

The research paper also acted as a mechanism to 'give voice to the views of participants and to encourage practitioners to engage more purposefully in work with family and friends affected by this issue'(Clark, Warburton, Tilse 2009: 267).There is little research about the lived experience of family members who are left behind.

Dr Clark has brought an understanding of 'missing' into her social work teaching, as she sees that it is a relevant subject area for social workers as 'missing' impacts many vulnerable children and adults who may well be cared for by the state. She is also keen to see service provision and enhanced data collection improve in Australia to benefit families, agencies and the understanding of the issue.

(Dr Julie Clark and Helen Morrell, Mt Tambourine)

**Dr Geoffrey Glassock**

Dr Geoff Glassock is a Psychologist, an Anglican Minister and has specialised in grief, loss, death and dying. He has been involved in the FFMPU and the field of 'missing' for many years, and he has spent many years of his career involved with the National Association of Loss and Grief.

He recently submitted his Ph.D. thesis is in relation to loss, grief, and missing persons. It takes into account the lived experience of the families of missing people. His findings talk about the uniqueness of the experience and the loss that families feel. In terms of counselling models for families, he explained that there are some specifics in relation to 'missing'. He uses the term 'the grief of missingness' and defines it as having some specific differences to other forms of grief and loss.

**Sarah Wayland**

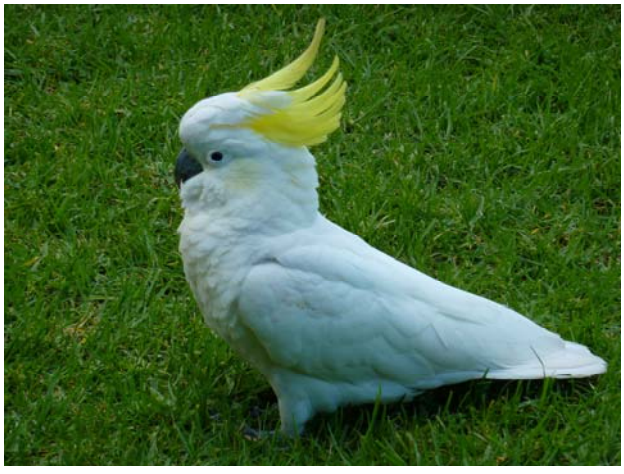
For many practitioners and families, the name Sarah Wayland is synonymous with both the FFMPU and the NMPCC. She has worked within both organisations and is employed currently by NSW Victims Service, within which the FFMPU sits. Although her current role does not involve the direct provision of support to families of missing people, Sarah was the first counsellor employed by FFMPU to provide emotional support to families. I met Sarah and she spoke about the challenges and the longevity of support that some families need, and that she developed her understanding of the subject through experience and getting to know about particular needs from working with families.

In her role with the NMPCC, she went on to develop the framework '*Supporting those who are left behind*'. This was supported by her Churchill Fellowship, which allowed her to collaborate with other international agencies and individuals, in particular American Professor Pauline Boss, whose work on 'Ambiguous Loss' has been influential in the 'missing' field.

**Relationships Australia**

Relationships Australia provides family mediation services, in particular with relation to family breakdown and divorce. They have branches in all states across Australia.
In 2009 Relationships Australia and NMPCC started a joint initiative to train some counsellors at Relationships Australia to support the families of missing people and also to offer missing people support in re-connecting with their family through mediation. This was trialed in Queensland, and no longer exists.

Janet Carmichael from Relationships Australia in Sydney explained the existing infrastructure in Australia for general family counselling. Funding is provided by the Government for family support through The Family Relationship Services Programme. This is a national provision across Australia. It is recognised that the issues that families need support with are varied and therefore the funding's remit is wide. Janet felt that it was conceivable that counselling for families of missing people could well fit the funding criteria. Although the need for specialism exists Janet felt that there are many similarities in supporting a family who has someone missing to the core understanding and principles of a family therapist. She suggested there are similar themes in areas of support such as having a disabled child, a terminal illness or parental separation.



(White Cockatoo, Sydney Botanical Gardens)

## Identified points for development of Australian provision

'Australia lags behind the USA and UK in the growth of community-based, state and national support and advocacy services for missing people… Arguably, the presence of these…groups contribute to a more multi-disciplinary, accountable and dynamic service… and may be useful additions…in Australia' (Clark, 2011: 22)

The organisations and parties who were consulted spoke of the improvements that they would like to develop and what gaps they felt existed in family support provision in Australia.

The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) Stakeholder Event in April 2011 was the first opportunity in many years for the various agencies, academics and support services to get together to discuss 'missing'. The event raised some areas of development and gaps in relation to 'missing' family support in Australia.

The gaps in provision and recommendations from the Stakeholder event were outlined as:

- Counselling models need to have continued development and refinement
- The grief model used in loss and grief services does not work for this client group and this needs to be recognised. There is specific grief(s) related to missingness. The 'grief of missingness' is poorly understood
- Need for police training and evaluation of police training re missing persons in relation to management of missing persons cases and police communication with families.
- Estate management is still an issue in the missing persons field as not all states have adequate legal provision.
- Existing established groups to assist families/communities affected by suicide. These networks need to be tapped into re missing persons and support needs of families and communities

- FFMPU primarily available in NSW. Similar services need to be established in each state and territory. Need for each state and territory to have a contact point re missing persons enquiries

- Need for grass-roots committees with involvement of family members beyond NSW. Need to establish missing persons committee and/or inter-agency in each state and territory

- Family support networks need enhancement. Family members personally affected to assist

- Engage local police in printing out/providing referral information to families of missing persons (example – procedures in place in NSW not being followed)

**Cunningham (2011) NMPCC**

## National provision and accessibility

It is clear that in Australia, the FFMPU is held as 'a shining light', a good example of service provision and there is some desire for the service to be replicated in other states. As outlined by Ellen Flint whose brother was missing 'the bad news is that for families and friends in other states and territories, there is, at the moment, little or no organised help or support and no sign of it evolving' (Flint, 2005: 288)

There is no other equivalent service provision for families of missing people in other parts of Australia.

Services aren't necessarily available, 'in particular the families who completed the questionnaire all found that support services were not readily available' (James, Anderson, Putt 2008: 85)

Manny Kassiotis explained that the responsibility of the FFMPU team is great in terms of number of families to support and the FFMPU's unique position in Australia, although in fact their resource provision is quite low. They would like to be able to do more home visits, travel more often to the more remote areas of NSW and also be able to develop awareness of the service for more effective referral. He spoke about the importance for the family that the counselling sessions should be in their "own time and own space". The FFMPU are reliant on their office space in the Justice precinct in Parramatta, Sydney which isn't accessible or suitable for all.

FFMPU suggested that even families in the New South Wales area are often not directed to help, and have to seek it out on their own or face not receiving any. In response to this NSW police now aim to hand out cards to families to encourage them to make contact with FFMPU but this doesn't happen consistently as I heard, at the FFMPU forum.

' Police connecting family members to appropriate support services by making referrals to relevant services may free police to focus on investigation and assist in achieving improved outcomes for troubled families currently left in limbo'(Clark, 2011 : 23)

## Service restrictions

As outlined there were certain accessibility and eligibility restrictions for families in accessing FFMPU's support due to funding and lack of resources.

Manny Kassiotis from FFMPU also spoke about the benefits of a charity agency such as Missing People over a state run service such as FFMPU, in that an independent organisation can lobby and advocate for better service provision and support for families. The FFMPU have at times found themselves in a position where families have become frustrated with the service because they can't be helped in the way that they want, i.e. the FFMPU can't advocate for the family in legal or police matters. They do provide a liaison role with the police and other agencies, but because of their place within statutory services they can't be completely independent. Some families will disengage with the service when the provision doesn't take the role they would like it to.
Margi Cunningham from NMPCC questions "Do families self select out of support because they feel they don't need it any more or is it because the consistent and right kind of support is not in place?"

## Therapeutic support provision

In the 'It's the Hope that Hurts' report developed for FFMPU by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health in 2001, it outlined some specific recommendations for the service including the principles of counselling the families and friends of missing persons which were identified as key:

> Counsellors of the families and friends of missing persons are encouraged to:
>
> Ensure they possess well honed basic counselling skills recognising the particular importance of empathy and genuineness
>
> Ensure they are well informed of the particular needs of the family and friends of missing persons
>
> Avoid a dogmatic attachment to a "stage" approach to loss theory and particularly any unmodified application of grief and loss models that emphasise 'closure' and 'resolution' as end products.
>
> Be familiar with the 'lived experience' of the family and friends of missing persons.
>
> Be available for the 'long haul' in terms of availability.
>
> Be familiar with developmental issues surrounding the loss/hope dilemma experienced by family and friends of missing persons.
>
> Maintain currency in the literature surrounding loss and grief and the issues facing family and friends of missing persons.
>
> Develop an association with local support groups for the family and friends of missing persons. Engage in a therapeutic philosophy that assists the family and friends of missing persons helpfully redefine and reinterpret their altered status with the missing person.
>
> (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001: 7)

The principles are relevant to the development of a counselling service and the key points are evident in the ethos and the current work of the FFMPU. It is important that the improvement of the services and the projects such as the group work will be able to move forward without resource restriction.

## Reflections about service provision

A key point, evident during the trip to Australia for the development of service provision was that services must be easily accessible to people. This is important so that a family can seek direct support when the person goes missing, but there are also clear channels to therapeutic support if it is available.

> 'such specialised help as is available needs to be selected, sought out and pursued with determination by the people who need it- people who are suffering deep trauma, have no life experiences of the problems they are facing and are in no condition to make important judgements or decisions' (Flint, 2005: 286)

Basic practical and emotional support should be easily accessible in the areas where it is available which in Australia is only in New South Wales (NSW).

In the UK, Missing People provides a national service but similarly families often have to search for the support they are looking for. The Charity is trying to tackle this in a number of ways, by improving its report forms and information on the website, by better promotion to the police and also by working with the police database Compact, so that an automatic email is sent to families informing them about Missing People's support when they report someone missing.

The desire to improve services, increase accessibility and expand geographical consistency and provision is apparent from talking to the professionals in Australia. The continuation of strategic and national oversight from NMPCC and the lead of the FFMPU in support services should hopefully see positive changes for the benefit of families across Australia.

One of the fundamental considerations of developing a counselling support for families of missing people is whether to focus on specialist 'missing' services or base the service on existing family counsellors who could be trained to understand more about missing and then be funded to support families. The support to families who have someone missing is restricted to some parts of Australia, mostly due to limitations in funding. If there are structures and funding in place for other areas of family counselling, could a national structure and funding mechanism already be in

place in Australia just not being explored or utilised fully?

One of the main questions I wanted to answer was does the counselling service delivered by the FFMPU meet its aims it aspires to. The counselling framework 'Supporting those who are left behind' was designed as a tool for use with families. It is helpful but in the opinion of the current staff team it doesn't meet the need of many families.

This report is not able to evaluate the experience of families who have received counselling from FFMPU, as this opportunity was not available. There wasn't an evaluation of the service or quantitative data available at the time of my visit. The practitioners at FFMPU, certainly spoke of a period of transition development and adjustments as they look to different ways of delivering support, such as group work, ongoing support and specialist counselling.

## Summary

The service provision that exists for families of 'missing' has been partly explored in this section. There will be other agencies and individuals that are working to support families in Australia, that I didn't have the opportunity to meet or who don't have recognition for the work they do.

There is no charity provision that has a national or an influential lobbying focus and there is certainly a desire for services to be replicated across states, but also for an agency which doesn't necessarily have full statutory ownership. The Stakeholder event indicated that that the lack of national family support agencies is negative and in my opinion it feels unbalanced.
It would be great to see an initiative such as the one developed between NMPCC and Relationships Australia being trialled again, so that there would be explicit learning that could be evaluated comparing generic family counsellors, supporting families of 'missing'
The agencies have a real potential for research and service development consultation with the families that it works with, and it would be great to see family feedback about the services that they are being offered, to find out if it meets their needs.

There is one national agency with two staff members and one local state counselling agency with three staff members, to provide support. It would be natural to conclude that there is insufficient provision for families of missing people in Australia. For most of the 35,000 Australians (James, Anderson, Putt, 2008) who go missing each year it is likely that there is a family left behind.
A few dedicated people are carrying the national responsibility for supporting the families of missing people who deserve more.

(Kookaburra)

## Section 2: Counselling and Emotional support

This section will share good practice from the current interventions by FFMPU and highlights some of the suggestions that were shared in Australia about what would be considered important for developing a therapeutic counselling service for families of missing people.

One family member said “how can you trust counselling is going to be beneficial” and another said of potential counselling, “is there any point if it doesn’t achieve something, work through something, change something, enable new thinking and hurt a bit”

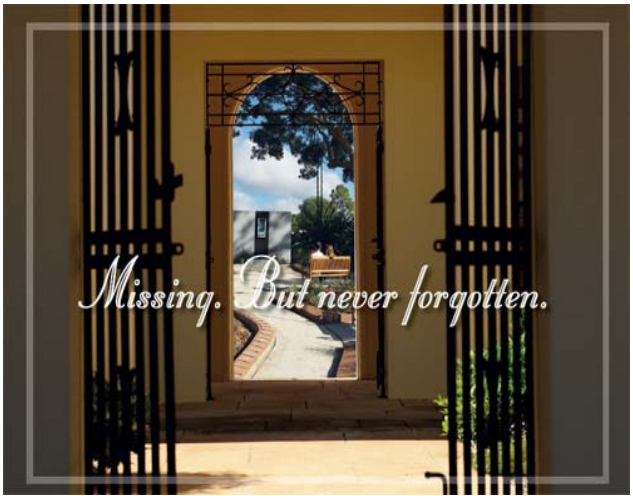
Liz Davies, FFMPU Coordinator, explained that the counselling sessions that her team provides “start where the client is at” and that the sessions focus on “sitting with their strengths”. Liz explained that key to understanding the family’s support needs are finding out: the story, the impact on the family, where support has come from, who they have to help them and what has been the impact on the life system within which they operate. Additionally, discovering what the family would like the police to be doing and, what the family would actively like to do at the present time, were both proposed to be important.

The '*Supporting those who are left behind*' framework (Wayland 2007) is a product of the FFMPU and Australian Federal Police now and is a tool that the counsellors can use in their work. The current counsellors at the service explained that they draw upon it, but that it doesn't entirely meet the needs of families. As Manny Kassiotis explained each family is different and their needs and the support offered to them should be specific.

The framework is not used as a step by step manual within the counseling provision at FFMPU, rather a tool to explore some themes with family members that may occur as a result of living through someone being missing.

Manny Kassiotis identified the elements of the framework which he uses during his work with families.
The ‘Celebration so far’ theme explores the use of remembrance of the missing person, their life and their identity. Acknowledging that it is only celebrating their life ‘so far’ allows the family to maintain hope that the missing person may return. Manny explained it is useful with some “longer-term” families, although the word ‘celebration’ is not so frequently used in this context. Its connotation with joy is perhaps not always as appropriate as, for example, the act of ‘remembering’. It is important for some families to be able to have opportunities to mark and remember their missing person. For many families, finding rituals and physical and tactile signs have been significant in Manny’s sessions. For some who cannot verbalise the loss they are experiencing, they can show it in a more physical way. The practicalities of organising events and activities can meet a need to be proactive in searching for the missing person.

Manny has seen rituals used in others' work, such as at Compassionate Friends, where residential opportunities are provided as part of their support services to those bereaved.
National Missing Persons Week is held in August each year in Australia, where awareness-raising events are held. In the past there have also been ‘services of remembering’, which have formed a ritual for families to mark the week by, and as a national signifier of remembrance.
The ritual theme has been taken further still in Australia with the creation of a memorial garden at the Woronora cemetery near Sydney called the Doorway of Hope, constructed for families of missing people to have a physical space to visit and to remember their missing family member.




(Image: The Doorway of Hope from Woronora Cemetery website)

The 'Trauma timeline' theme can be a useful task for counsellors and families to complete together as both Manny Kassiotis and Dr Julie Clark explained. The physical act of compiling a timeline which takes into account the incidents and the emotions that were present leading up to the missing incident, during the incident and after can be very beneficial.

The 'Protected Place' theme involves creating a safe space to express feeling and thoughts. It allows the opportunity for the person to give themselves permission to step away from the distress they are feeling without feeling guilty. By placing boundaries around the feelings and then setting times when a person allows themselves to focus on their missing person, it may allow someone to feel more in control and better able to cope. A clear example of how Manny Kassiotis and FFMPU have used this is through helping a family member to understand how to plan their day while at work, so they can focus on their work and stop the feelings about having someone missing until a more appropriate time. As a coping strategy, this provides a very necessary function in managing daily life.

Dr Julie Clark felt in therapeutic terms, counselling should draw upon humanistic, CBT and mindfulness counselling models and that in essence it should be "high warmth and low directness."

There should be a focus on re-framing thoughts, making meaning of the situation and finding ways to cope. It should involve creating a safe environment, where the individual could be validated and the experience normalised.

A good philosophy would be that the "client is expert in their own life", and that a strength based approach which invested in the person feeling confident about their strengths and existing coping skills would be positive. She spoke about developing strategies for the person to help contain overwhelming emotions, and finding tactics for stopping detrimental thoughts.

For some the opportunity to explore the experience and to speak about what it has been like for them is a crucial one. This might include helping them to expand their knowledge and explore their thinking and speculation about what has happened. There may be a role for a counsellor to help someone to anticipate what the future may hold and what the person thinks is the best outcome from the support they are receiving.

For some families it will be important to understand what the influences are in their life; it's about looking at the person in their social context. It is relevant to understand who else shares their perspective, and what support networks they have around them. It is important to know what else is there in the person's life other than the missing episode.

## Group Work

As part of discussions in Australia, people shared their opinions about the benefits and challenges of therapeutic group work.

**Benefits**

Many people spoke about the perceived benefits of group work for families of missing.
Margi Cunningham from NMPCC though that group work would aid families to have a "shared learning voice" and would have significant additional value compared to individual counselling.

Dr Geoff Glassock indicated the importance of contact between families as an opportunity for connectedness and feeling supported. This is important for some families who can feel a great sense of isolation. Knowing another family who has experienced the disappearance of someone is quite rare, as thankfully there are not many people who have faced such a challenge, but this can mean finding someone in a similar situation is difficult for a family to achieve on their own.

Manny Kassiotis at FFMPU is employed to bring group work into the portfolio of their service. They have trialed 'information sessions' as a way of bringing families together. The title 'information session' has been used as opposed to 'support group' which was felt to be too confrontational for some families.
These sessions work as a combination of presentations from professionals such as the police or coroners, to provide updates and advice and then some informal time for families to be together and talk. These sessions are not designed as a therapeutic intervention and the support the families gain is informal.

Dr Julie Clark talked about the benefit of psycho-education within a group session, to identify shared issues and to challenge some of the 'life limiting decisions' they might have made. She thought that individual counselling sessions as well as group sessions running parallel could be very beneficial.

Dr Geoff Glassock thought group work should be conducted by two people; 8-10 sessions and then stop; it should be about making meaning of the situation they have found themselves.

Liz Davies from FFMPU spoke about making it clear to families what the purpose of the group would be: whether it was an information session or a therapy group. Families should be able to choose what they want to take from it and it should meet their needs.
A key part of the group work would be the opportunity to meet other families and shared reflection may be very helpful to each other.

**Challenges**

There are some concerns from FFMPU about attempting a closed counselling group, where the same family members meet for a set amount of planned sessions. In their experience, some family members have felt trepidation coming forward to group sessions, or may have attended the first and then not felt equipped or strong enough to maintain their commitment. This highlights how important professional support would be for the individuals in the group.

Manny Kassiotis explained that the difficulty in getting any group together is partly geographical He is planning to start group meetings regionally in Canberra and Wollongong, which are both some distance from Sydney where FFMPU is based. One benefit of these local groups where there is little provision will be that families feel better connected having met others. He also explained that they may trial a separate men's and women's group. He wants to explore the full potential for group work and to consider the potential for therapeutic residential weekends for families such as Project Jason's Keys to Healing retreat in America. He has also seen residential groups work beneficially through the Child Bereavement service, Compassionate Friends.

## Levels of therapeutic support

It was clear that there is a difference between the service that FFMPU is providing and the service planned at Missing People. FFMPU's staff are all qualified counsellors and they work with the family from basic advice giving right through to therapeutic interventions. At Missing People, the family member would be supported by a trained helpline worker who would provide emotional and practical support but wouldn't be a qualified counsellor nor would they be 'counselled'. The therapeutic counselling support would be separate. This poses some questions regarding how the family member accesses this counselling support, who refers them, and how the decision is made that counselling is the right progression for that person.

It was agreed in discussions that it is really important to define the different levels of support that could be available and what the boundaries of the service should be. For example, what is appropriate to offer in terms of practical and emotional ongoing support via the helpline and what support is specific to therapeutic counselling.

Dr Julie Clark explained that the family member should be aware of who information would be shared with, and whether any support plans made with the counsellor would be shared with the helpline worker to aid ongoing support.
Referral information would need to be shared between helpline worker, the family member and the counsellor, to make sure that the right support was maintained.

## Reflections about counselling and emotional support

The charity Missing People will aim to pilot a counselling service in 2011. Based on opinions voiced in Australia, there is a clear need to define what the counselling sessions are for, what the intended outcome might be and allow people the opportunity to ask lots of questions before taking part. It needs to be seen as positive and worthwhile. It would be unfair to expect that the family member would feel changed or better from the experience, as their real life situation has not been altered; their person is still missing. It would hopefully mean they felt better able to cope.

It is important that the counselling is transparent in its potential and its limitations.

Group counselling, support groups, peer to peer support, an online forum and opportunities for families to get together are all projects that Missing People are planning to be able to offer in the future. This is based on feedback that has been received from consultation with families and also from other practitioners about the wish to connect with others and to get support from people who have similar

experiences. Currently there are no group settings for families of missing people in the U.K except for occasional fundraising events.

Families who meet together should feel supported, safe and not burdened to carry the weight of another family's distress. Support services have a responsibility to ensure appropriate facilitation and support to individuals so that meeting other families promotes connectedness and encourages shared learning. It will be interesting to see how group work develops at FFMPU. From the discussions in Australia, it would seem that group work may be a key aspect of supporting families, despite the challenges they have identified in developing groups.

Therapeutic support, in its nature is time limited. For some who experience the increased level of support, it may be problematic when the counselling sessions cease despite the support offered from Helpline workers. Counselling for families of missing people will never be able to resolve the 'problem' as it may for other issues. The situation for the person has not changed, the person is still missing, and the questions are still not answered.

Missing People has also consulted with some families who have expressed that they wouldn't necessarily feel 'entitled' to the service, that they wouldn't have the self worth or confidence in asking for help. Helpline support could encourage families to take the opportunity for counselling support.

Families should be able to self-refer to counselling, rather than 'the service' choosing participants. However this has resource implications, which would need to be carefully managed in order to manage expectations.

It is Missing People's experience with many families of 'missing' there is usually a key member who makes and maintains contact with the police and support services. Sometimes this will change as time goes by but often the same person will maintain contact, and it can be the person who is most able to be vocal or more able to communicate about the situation. This is something to be mindful of when considering counselling for families, as other members such as siblings, grandparents and close friends may benefit from the opportunities.

'The effects of trauma are felt in families, partnerships and in any other relationships that the trauma survivors have. Unfortunately, the ripple effect of the trauma on close relationships is often ignored and not addressed by professionals, whose main concern is to aid the trauma survivors' (Herbert and Wetmore, Robinson, 2008: 43)

There were mixed feelings between the Australian professionals spoken to about whether multiple family members from the same family could attend sessions together or whether it should be individuals from a family. This decision would need to be made when developing a service, being mindful that support of some sort was accessible for multiple members of families.

## Summary

The Friends and Families of the Missing Persons Unit have evolved the support that they provide to families. It will be interesting to see any further research findings from family consultation about the services that they have received.

Not enough is known about the experience of families, their perceptions of the support they have received and how it could be improved. I felt I missed the opportunity to speak with Australian families, and that the chance for someone to do so with inform not only FFMPU's service delivery but better inform understanding of the issues.

In what is still a relatively uncharted therapeutic field, research and consultation will provide the answers that are needed to better inform service improvement and development.

Missing People is at the start of the journey in their counselling and emotional support services. The precedent set in Australia is going to be hugely valuable for learning and ensuring good practice.

## Section 3: Reflections of the issues that families face

Certain theories and themes were prevalent and recurring in discussions in Australia. Some ideas were new and others borne from current practice of supporting families of missing people or speaking to families both in Australia and the UK. The following section will present some of the issues that occur for families when they have someone missing. The purpose of outlining these is to highlight some of the areas that people need support with either from helpline assistance or therapeutic counselling.

### Practical and emotional support.

Often, for families with someone missing, the practical and emotional support needs are hard to separate. The key marker of a success is achieving the family's ultimate aim, finding the person who is missing.

Each family member loses some control of their life when someone goes missing. The responsibility to regain this control is handed over to police and other agencies, in the hope that the person is found. These relationships become high value to the family, and the expectation for solutions to be found and problems to be solved are great. Whereas the family would normally be self reliant, they become embroiled with statutory procedures, processes and dependant upon the competencies of other agencies.

'Ambiguous loss makes us feel incompetent. It erodes our sense of mastery and destroys our belief in the world as a fair, orderly and manageable place' (Boss 1999: 107)

For many families the practical efforts to find their family members become supremely important. For many trying hard on behalf of them and doing all that they can to find them may be a way of showing their commitment for the person. For those who will only be satisfied when they have done everything they could, they expect the same response from the police. One family member in Australia said "there is the hope that she will know I have done everything I can for her".

These families will often want to be regularly updated by the police, actively help with publicity, physically searching and keeping the search alive.

For other families, the emotional impact of the person going missing may render them inert and unable to communicate their need or to take practical steps.
As Dr Geoff Glassock explained this is similar to the grief theory of instrumental and intuitive grievers; instrumental grievers think about the situation and aim to act to take control and problem solve whereas intuitive grievers express themselves through feeling and emotion. This is sometimes very clear when speaking to families at Missing People.

Some families express themselves in terms of their emotional needs and the impact that the incident is having on them, whereas other family members seek practical assistance, advice and updates only. It is important that helpline workers and counsellors alike are able to understand that people will grieve in different ways and may not request emotional support explicitly. The challenge is allowing people to understand that emotional support is an option for them.

'For some people, mastery means controlling what is internal- perceptions, feelings, emotions or memories- while for others it means controlling what is external- other people, a situation, or the environment' (Boss 1999: 109)

### Relationship with police

For most families, they enter a relationship with the police when they report someone missing. They expect the police to find the person and also to work in the best interest of the family.

Manny Kassiotis from FFMPU talked about how the police response has a massive impact on family since the police represent the opportunity to finding their missing person. The control in the relationship sits with the police.
Families who do not have a positive experience with the police may feel they have to negotiate the relationship so they are not seen as 'trouble making' or difficult to deal with. Other families may not share information with the police that could be useful because of damaged relationships or negative perceptions between the two parties and this lack of dialogue may compromise the investigation. Other families do not feel able to be honest about what they would like from the police. They may be worried that they might do something wrong, so stop articulating their frustrations or make

contact with police as frequently as they would like as they don't want to "blow the relationship with the police or other services helping them".

The police's responsibility is to look for and find the missing person. They are not specifically trained in emotional support of families and often it isn't and cannot be their priority during the search. This can have an impact on families.

'When responses by police were perceived to be slow, ad hoc or inadequate, participants expressed a high level of distress and extreme frustration about the quality of the investigation' (Clark, 2011:15)

In acknowledgement of these issues FFMPU have strengthened their working relationship with NSW police and also the Local Area Commands, so that they can aid some of this relationship building and communication between police and families. They also have regular meetings with the Missing Persons Unit officers so that they can advocate and liaise on behalf of families. The Missing Persons Officers agreed that this was a strengthened and beneficial relationship and that there was mutual learning between them and FFMPU staff.

Margi Cunningham from NMPCC suggested that an important part of the role of support services should be in psycho-education, providing education and awareness of the psychological impact of the situation to both parties. This would aid the police and family to further their understanding of how to work together and to provide advocacy and liaison.

Support services do have an important opportunity to enable better relationships, advocate for families, and understand the police's perspective to maintain the most effective investigation for both parties.

## Impact of the Media

'For the families of missing people, involvement in media appeals can be important not just as a practical measure to assist their search, but also emotionally; helping them to fulfil their duty to keep up the momentum of the search. Although the experience of seeing media appeals, and of being interviewed, can be stressful or embarrassing, interviewees described a sense of obligation to access all possible publicity' (Holmes, 2008: 39)

Media articles, interviews and poster publicity are all tools that aid the search for the missing person. News stories about missing people attract public and journalistic interest. Families of missing people may find themselves in the situation of having to speak to journalists or authorise media releases. For most this is a new experience that brings challenges.

One family member spoke of the challenges with working with the media "what do I have the control of when doing media? Nothing, only the choice to do it or not".
Families at the FFMPU Family Forum talked about not having control over what is published, how the missing person is portrayed, what personal information might be shared and the video and photo images that are shown.

Many families express hesitance and concern over speaking to journalists, having their photo taken and appearing on camera. For many this is a new experience and one that isn't something they feel naturally comfortable with. Many also feel very protective of the missing person's life and don't want "to air dirty laundry". If the missing person has vulnerabilities such as mental health issues many families worry about public perception and the stigma it might cause for their person. They take the role of guardian for the missing person's life and reputation in the wider world.
Some families may share a lot of information about the situation whereas others may not initially, perhaps because they hope that they missing person will return and believe sharing their information is inappropriate.

Some families in both Australia and here in the UK hope that publicity may change the situation expecting there would have been sightings, their missing person would have seen it, the person would have been found. Often their hopes are dashed. The adrenaline and emotional turmoil of carrying out a piece of media quickly turns to anti climax and disappointment.

Working with the media, is for most a new experience and families need clear advice on how and when to do it and how to protect themselves and their family. It is good to see that FFMPU provided some guidance to families as part of their Family Forum session and also NMPCC have produced guidance sheets for families.

## Support agencies

The importance of support agencies such as FFMPU and Missing People having specialist knowledge to support families is recognised as vital for many families.

Families enter a new world when they experience someone going missing and for many having someone to help them understand the process, explain what they need to do, and remember in the long term that they have someone missing is crucial.
Supporting families who are experiencing uncertain loss should be carried ourt by staff that have been given awareness and understanding of the issues and coping skills to deal with the impact on themselves.

Dr Geoff Glassock signified the importance of recruiting staff that are comfortable with ambiguity. He appointed staff to the FFMPU that were able to tolerate uncertainty, and were not driven to seek 'closure'.

Professor Boss in her work around ambiguous loss also indicated that it is important for staff to understand to ' cope with uncertain losses, we must first temper our hunger for mastery... we must give up trying to find the perfect solution' (Boss 1999: 107)
This is perhaps one of the distinct differences in developing a support service specifically with concern to 'missing'.

Margi Cunningham from NMPCC asked about the role of support services in maintaining contact with families for an indefinite amount of time. Where does the need lie? Is it with the family to stay connected to a specialist service or is it the service who decides that it will keep in contact regardless of the family's need? She considered whether support services such as Missing People aid the family to "redefine their life around the trauma".
Does the family still need to revisit their feelings about the person many years later or is that the expectation of the support service?
Margi suggested that it should be the service's role to help someone "survive the experience" and the service should "concretise tools for survival rather than concretising the victim hood".

In reality, for many, the feelings don't get any easier, the ambiguity of their loss means that time scales are irrelevant. The experience of trauma goes on for as long as the person is missing. The service should have the flexibility and understanding to work with the family's need and not create dependency when it could create empowerment.

Margi Cunningham questioned whether it is patronising to families to assume that they need support throughout the missing incident and felt that it is important that the support and contact should be where they understand their options. It is important for services such as Missing People to analyse what is the value of the support they provide and what is the benefit of maintaining relationships with families over what could be many years.
By maintaining a lifeline when someone needs us, as is the case at Missing People do we disable people from moving forward, and as Margi indicated do we aid people to "redefine life around the trauma" rather than "survive the experience"? This is worth further consideration, especially when developing new services.

Manny Kassiotis from FFMPU spoke about the importance of developing a relationship and a connection between the family and the counsellor, to be able to offer ongoing support. At FFMPU, one counsellor tends to take a lead with a family although the other team members will be aware and will at times support the family as well.
A change in staffing means that families and new counsellors have to build new relationship and the counsellor has to manage the pre-existing expectations that the family has of the support that is offered.
The longevity of some missing incidents means that for some families they have to renegotiate relationships with many police officers, agencies, media contacts and support networks including counsellors.

Manny spoke about the importance for both the counsellor and the family member of having the physical space and time for contact. For the counsellor, it is important to have the time to prepare for the call or home visit, to understand the person's need and being aware of their situation so they can support them properly. Manny Kassiotis explained that making proactive phone contact with families was often done from a quiet meeting room rather than an open plan office desk. This draws a clear parallel to some of the concerns at Missing People, where the physical environment, a busy Helpline, is not always ideal for making quiet calls. It is about preparing both parties to be able to enter into a space to talk and listen away from distractions.

## Stages of 'Missing'

The experience of someone being missing is particular to each individual in the way they feel about it, the investment they make and the stages of emotions they may go through.
Each 'missing' situation is unique in its duration, the worry for the person, the family involved and the implications and complications for ongoing life.
Practitioners in Australia described practical and emotional impacts on family member, within stages. It is was unreservedly agreed that a 'missing' incident is not linear and the experience will not be the same for any two people, however there are certain elements to an incident which may mean family members may need to negotiate certain aspects in stages.

Someone being missing may last minutes through to many years. For some families the responsibility to search for the person may never diminish.

Comparisons have been made to the physical and emotional impact of the death of a family member to the experience of 'missing' someone. There are similarities but there are distinct differences. For many people there is no finality, there are no answers, and so many people are 'left in limbo' (Holmes 2008)

There are a number of general stages of a missing incident when thinking about support provision; the initial realisation that someone is missing, the practical and active search stage, and in those rare occasions where the person is not found, an ongoing phase.
It is important to note that these stages represent the physical and practical phases of an incident, not necessarily the emotional impact for the person left behind.

'Experience dictates that during this time "psychological first aid" and practical assistance are priority activities with the traditional forms of face-to-face counselling probably inappropriate. Indeed, Trolley (1993) suggests that the role of helpers in these early stages is that of a crisis counsellor; offering support, calm reassurance, concerned objectivity, and providing information and assistance with practical matters and decision making processes. However, as time unfolds, for that small percentage where the individual continues to be missing, counselling may rise in usefulness.'
(Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001: 23)

## Initial stage - Realisation someone is missing

At Missing People we understand that families need immediate support when someone goes missing. They need; advice and guidance, search assistance, reassurance, hope, someone to care, the financial means to manage and knowledge of support available to them. In the crisis they need simple and clear guidance and direction.

'Negotiating the period of time after their sibling went missing was experience…as a time of extremely intense and prolonged frustration and powerlessness' (Clark 2011:19)

Dr Geoff Glassock explains, that for all there is a time when "families voice their fear" as when they vocalise that the person might be missing. By talking about this, they make a reality of the person disappearing.

Dr Glassock explains that, for some, it represents "coming to terms with the reality that they are missing" and that they are now living in a "space between knowing and not knowing".

Dr Julie Clark also agreed that there is the "daunting reality" of reporting the person missing to the police. Not only does this make a physical task for the family, which they are unlikely to have experienced before, they also allow professional judgement about often personal family matters.

This reality is often described as a very physical experience of panic and distress, particularly in circumstances where the risk to the person is great such as someone with dementia, a child, a suicidal person. For others who are out of contact with the person and it occurs to them that the person might be missing, the feelings are sometime described as anxiety, a desire to know they are OK.

There are some who think that the experience of having someone missing is akin to professional definitions of 'trauma'. Margi Cunningham from the NMPCC made the comparison of a missing incident to coping with trauma: "the experience of trauma goes on forever…..it is the starting point then that the person has survived thus far, It is about looking at the strengths that have helped them get that far". If trauma is physically felt and has physical symptoms, there may be some clear parallels.

‘An experience can be considered traumatic when a person’s normal ability to cope has been completely overwhelmed by a terrible event (Herbert and Wetmore, Robinson, 2008: 4)

Some families talk about the physical feelings they experience when they realised that their person was missing, such as a gut reaction, a ball in the stomach, a holding of breath, rising panic, feeling sick. The physical and psychological impact on the family is significant. The support structures and health services have a role to play in helping families through this experience.

For some who experience multiple incidents of missing, for example a mother of a young person who frequently leaves the family home or ongoing concern that an elderly parent with dementia may wander again; there may be a sense of inevitability and lack of control. They may feel more prepared to deal with the physical search and liaison with police but the emotional impact and worry may be the same.

For most people who have explained the feelings of missing someone in the early days, they could not anticipate at that stage that they might be still in the same situation of uncertainty months or years later. Family members may hold back from accessing services such as FFMPU or Missing People because they have not contemplated, nor wanted to contemplate that they may need support ongoing.

“The realisation that a loved one is missing provokes unheralded anxiety and anguish mixed with a doubting hope that presents the individual with a confused spectrum of emotion that defies description. Suffice to say that the experience presents a full range of feelings from the very depths of ones most primitive fears of abandonment and isolation to the heights of faith and hope while along the way, guilt, panic, despair, anger, sadness and an array of roller coasting other emotions emerge.”
(Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001: 21)

## Practical and active stage - The search

Parkes defined an "assumptive world as "a strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognising, planning and acting" (Kauffman 2002: 130)

Missing incidents move people into a new world where their day to day life is shattered. Their ‘assumptive world’ (Parkes 1975) has become more fluid and they cannot be in control. This loss of control and certainty means that the desire for answers becomes even more urgent.

Families begin relationships with statutory agencies and processes that they don’t understand. At a time of heightened emotions, anxiety and confusion, the person has to pick their way through learning how to communicate with the police, understand what the process is when someone goes missing and often become involved in the active search for the person.

In the first days of a disappearance, the families are often the most physically and mentally busy. For many, the number of visits and interactions with agencies and communication with concerned parties will be very intensive .As Manny Kassiotis indicated, the physical energy needed is then impacted by feelings of “uncertainty, distress, despair and disbelief”.

For many, they begin having to renegotiate a change in life, and what they understood about life has changed.

'For many in traumatic grief, the world is no longer a safe place to be. They know that someone can disappear and that terrifying things can happen.' (Caldwell, 2010: 10)

When someone goes missing, everyone affected wants to know what happened to the person, why they left, where they are and when they are likely to be found. Families, police and members of the public speculate about the circumstances of the situation. The reality is that without the missing person to ask, guessing is all that can be achieved. Regardless, professionals, media and the public are driven by the need for answers.

‘Speculation was pervasive, constant, protracted and debilitating for those experiencing missingness’ (Clark, Warburton, Tilse 2009: 273)

Some families may present a version of events which is fit for public consumption or palatable, which protects their missing family member from scrutiny but also allows for hope.

Often the family member may present a determined answer about what they think has happened. In reality, they may be far from being decided about what they think. The circumstances surrounding the person going missing are often replayed and for many, as Dr Geoff Glassock describes there is a 'vacillation between hope and despair'.

The overall impact for the family member of living with 'missing' someone will depend on the nature of the relationship between the two people. What was their connection to each other and what value is placed on the loss? For example the impact will to some extent depend on factors such as a loss of income, accommodation or physical support when the missing person leaves. The financial, practical and legal consequences are well documented in the research 'Living in Limbo' (Holmes 2008). It is important that support services recognise that the impact might have many facets.

It can be very challenging for families when different individuals within the family unit or externally have opposing versions of truth. One person maintains their hope that their missing person is alive and will return, another may find it easier to cope to believe that their missing person has died, therefore allowing themselves the opportunity to grieve and achieve a sense of finality.

The variety of assumed realities can have a negative impact when it is at odds with another individual's version of truth.

Family members may also not feel able to share their version of truth with the rest of the family, either because their reality is not so credible or because their role in the family means that they feel less entitled to hold a view.

'Participants were disenfranchised by their parents' immersion in their own grief' (Clark, Warburton, Tilse 2009: 274)

Dr Julie Clark used the term "mind traffic" to explain the busyness and complexities of people's thoughts when speculating about what might have happened and what their role is through a 'missing' incident. She also talked about "flip-flopping" between ideas and opinions. Is this continual changing of truths and constructions of realities inevitable given everything is uncertain and no truth is known. The only truth is that life has uncompromisingly changed and that the future is uncertain. In the "flip-flopping", individuals should be given permission and room to change their opinion of reality. In a phase of uncertainty, anyone not experiencing the situation personally should not expect fixed opinions or final opinions from those living with the unknown.

Speculation is a fundamental characteristic of living with missing someone. It may even play an important psychological function for many in allowing them to cope with the unresolved questions they have. Dr Julie Clark indicated that speculation provides the possibility for hope and is "fundamental for human survival".

At Missing People we know that for some, the fact that they do not fix on one reality may leave them feeling disloyal to the missing person. Support services should remind people that they should allow themselves permission to speculate as a natural part of the ambiguity of having someone missing.

## Ongoing stage - Life has changed

'Being confused, unable to grieve, feeling ambivalent, defying the idea of "closure"- are all natural reactions to ambiguous loss. They are not evidence of resistance of psychic weakness, but the result of ambiguity piled on top of loss' (Boss, 2002:16)

There comes a point when someone is missing over the long term when the police scale back their active investigation, when the media starts to take less interest (if they took any in the first place) and when the family are living with experience that has lasted longer than they ever thought possible.

For some families, the missing person stays missing for a long time. In the UK, estimates suggest that 1% of missing people will stay missing for more than a year. Families live through months or years without news or resolution. Life is changing around them but the last certainty they had about the person is from before their disappearance.

'Maintaining hope in the face of long-term ambiguity requires ceaseless effort' Boss 1999: 118)

For some this means that they need an anchor to that time; a living space such as a bedroom may remain untouched, birthday and Christmas cards may be stored for their return. It may mean that people express themselves as feeling 'stuck' and 'frozen' in the experience.

The ongoing uncertainty of living with someone who has been missing for a long time may be significantly different if, for instance, the family expect the person to return of their own accord, if they feel the person needs looking for, and also what they think might have happened to them.

The ability to get on with one's own life while waiting for the missing person may be dependant on whether the person feels they have a responsibility to find them.

Some families start to define their identity in relation to the missing person. For example, "My name is Mary, my son Mark has been missing for 4 years". The experience of living with someone missing in their life has become normalised as part of their daily experience and their identity in certain audiences becomes shaped by the disappearance.

Family members often come to accept that the ambiguous loss is here to stay. They begin to appraise their situation, make decisions, and take action. This is the turning point' (Boss 1999: 106)

Some families use the term 'no closure'. This phrase is common and may be considered overused in counselling literature, but for some it helps them to articulate the challenge they face.

If we cannot make sense out of the ambiguity nothing really changes. We merely endure' (Boss, 1999: 118)

The police response and the status of the missing investigation is significantly important at this stage for the family. Many families understand the police's logic when they know the investigation has ceased to be active, because there isn't anything practical to follow up. However having to accept that the person isn't going to be found by active search can be very difficult to accept.

Further to this, the family's acceptance of the police's response to scale down an investigation is dependant upon their belief in sufficient effort and the thoroughness of the investigation up until this point in the missing incident. As the ultimate goal of finding the missing person has not been achieved, many families do not feel that enough has been done, or they have not updated enough in the steps that have been taken. Relationships with police may become fractured as trust becomes challenged.

For some families they know the only way to find resolution is if a body is found or some new intelligence comes to light. This brings many emotional and practical challenges for people. They also have to develop new understandings about distressing issues, such as the coronal process, DNA body matching and legal presumption of death matters.
In Australia, each long-term missing person investigation is assessed by the Coroner. The Coroner in NSW will make a decision about whether they presume that the missing person has died. They will issue a death certificate to the family on this basis. I spoke with two families who have been given these certificates, partly before they were ready to consider that their family member may have died. Having a death certificate may be very beneficial legally in aiding a family to manage the

missing person's affairs. However as one family member said it now meant that they can't leave anything in their will to their missing son as he is legally considered dead.

This situation is different in the UK. The Coroner will not automatically assess each missing person's case, and a death certificate or presumption of death would only be initiated by the family. These processes are still confusing and unclear in this country and Missing People recognises that families need clearer guidance but also that better legislative processes are needed.

For families where there is no update and there is change in the circumstance of the situation, many people expect that the family will start to come to terms with what has happened.

'Eventually they are pressured, by a relative, a friend, or by circumstances themselves, to define the status of the missing person one way or the other. The family then makes their best guess, based on the available information, as to the probable outcome of their unclear loss' (Boss 1999: 93).

There is an expectation from some that a family will "get over it and move on". If the family decides to make a decision about what has happened this can have significant impact. This is referred to as the 'family gamble' (Boss) - what if the decision about the person's status is the wrong one, and does the family have enough information to make the decision.

'Absolute thinking carries a high price. At either end of the spectrum- closing someone out too soon or acting as if nothing has changed- denial ultimately causes more rather that less distress for couples and families facing an ambiguous loss. It invalidates and separates them. Each person is alone in his or her private interpretation' (Boss 1999: 88)

Many families speak of feeling isolated and not having someone to talk to about how they feel.

Dr Julie Clark explained that for some families they would "social edit their friends" and that friendships can be "distanced". Support networks that were in place often diminish. This may be due to other people's reactions or perceived stigmas. It may be because of what the friend thinks has happened or their reality is different from that of the family member.

Some participants saw themselves becoming more distant from friends, partners and their young children as a way of protecting themselves from future hurt' (Clark, Warburton, Tilse. 2000:273)

She spoke of the role for the support professional in looking at what social networks the person has and "keeping an eye on relationships". For some families they may have new territory to negotiate with friends or family members as they try to make sense of what has happened.

Families who are 'living in limbo' have different needs in terms of support. To continue to be supported when there is no change. To be supported when there is no perceived outcome, or practical purpose. Support should be a listening and patient space for the family to gain the emotional support in the way they need. They should be in control of the frequency, the purpose and the space. One family member in Australia spoke about needing support "in periods of saturation", when the need was the greatest. The role of the counsellor might not be problem solving but supporting through a period of time, regardless of how long the person might have been coping with ambiguous loss.

When someone goes missing, life for the people left behind becomes uncertain and initially ever changing as they lose control and have to learn a whole new set of rules. As the experiences drags, life becomes never changing, there are no developments and for some just enduring worry and frustration.

## After the missing person is found

When a person is found, either alive or dead, the 'missing ' incident ends. The emotional experience doesn't necessarily improve, it just changes.
'

One father spoke of finding out that his missing daughter was dead by saying, "I no longer have a missing daughter, I have a murdered daughter".

For people who are reunited with their family member, there can be many challenges. Some families who speak to Missing People have asked advice about how to talk to the person when they come, how to stop them going missing again and

what they can do improve their relationship. There may be benefit for specialist mediation services and support for both parties to learn to live after the experiences they have been through.

When a missing incident ends with the death of the missing person, the family face a difficult time.
Dr Geoff Glassock talked about the difference in bereavement for families of missing people. Normally there are four types of death; natural, accidental, suicide and homicide and in bereavement counselling these all have a distinct grief reaction which forms the basis of the counseling intervention. When someone dies during an episode of being missing, it adds another layer of loss and complexity to the family's feelings.

Further to this point. If the family did not consider that the death was a possible outcome of their relative being missing, then it adds another emotional layer on top. The family may still be without answer about what happened.

When a person is found dead the family can grieve a final loss, rather than the ongoing uncertainty of the person being missing, but they have questions related to the missing incident, which remain unanswered.

There is no clear service provision at either FFMPU or Missing People for bereavement and aftercare support for families once their family member has been found either alive or dead. Both agencies focus on the 'missing time' and will signpost and refer to other agencies that may be able to help when support is needed outside of the 'missing' remit. However, if there is something specific about the grief that families of missing people feel, it is clear that there is a need for more specialist 'after-care'.

## Summary

There is a clear need for guidance, and the work that NMPCC and FFMPU have produced is helpful literature for families and professionals. There is a need for Missing People to act similarly and to produce written information offering consistent and specific advice. There are some areas which may be specific to the 'missing issues' such as the emotional impacts and working with the police and media, which mean that the 'missing' agencies should take a lead in producing these.

Considering that there may be some separate stages in a 'missing' incident may be useful to help understand elements of the journey but recognising the individual experience is equally important.

Relationships with police and support agencies, are crucial for many families, especially if there social and support networks are fractured. I feel there is a responsibility for both police and support agencies, to understand the control they may have and respect the wishes of the family as they carry out their actions.

My visit has highlighted the need for Missing People to look inwards towards its physical layout and its systems. Family support needs to be timely, consistent, unhurried and valuable. The physical environment and the staff doing the work are so important in achieving this.

It is clear that the issues that people face when they have someone missing are many and varied. There is a need to develop relationships with other agencies, particularly in terms of after support, such as bereavement support and mediation, so that families get fuller assistance.

(Sydney Harbour towards Luna Park)

# Conclusion and Recommendations

The experience of living with the disappearance of someone is unimaginable for most people. It is hard to allow yourself to consider how it would feel. The fear of facing such a trauma is too horrendous to contemplate.

For the families who do have to experience this situation, life is changed significantly, and for some, forever.

Sometimes families sadly have to cope for years. The unique nature of their needs necessitates that support services remain in place indefinitely. There may be no natural conclusion. The assumption that people over time will come to terms with the situation is unfounded in terms of ambiguous loss. The reality seems to be for many families, feelings don't get any easier, and in fact the ambiguity of the situation means that time-scales are irrelevant

I don't think that there is enough known about the needs of families and the grief that families face when they are experiencing unresolved loss.
At this stage not enough evaluation has been done to know whether families need specialised 'missing' support or could be adequately supported by generic counsellors. I think that it is clear that there are some specific impacts on individuals experiencing unresolved loss. Counsellors whether working for a specialised service or not need greater understanding of the 'missing' issue and an ability to live with ambiguity.

There is work to be done in all countries to strengthen the services and assistance to these families.
The statutory response to the issue of 'missing' in Australia has seen the development of the FFMPU in NSW. It was brought about by the public demand of the Missing Persons committee. In the rest of Australia there is no equivalent and no plan in place to make it different.
Families in the rest of Australia may have no support other than the police officers who are assisting them.
The findings in this report suggest significant need for families for comprehensive, consistent and specialist support.

It will be interesting to see what happens at FFMPU and how they use their experience of providing counselling to develop the good work of the service but also to tailor their support to individuals and groups of families. An open dialogue between Australia and the UK, continuing to learn about respective successes and challenges will enable a consensus to develop about best practice for effective and intuitive services to meet the needs of families.

It is clear that there is much work to be done in the UK to get us to a position where families are offered comprehensive support. Missing People sits in a good strategic position to consult with families and develop services appropriately.

The visit to Australia generously funded by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, afforded me many opportunities both personally and professionally. By visiting the people whose voices are captured within this document I was able to debate, problem solve and see first hand how it works. The trip has created working relationships that will afford future consultation for the counselling pilot.

The single greatest outcome of the trip was the opportunity for me to take the time away from the day to day work of the Charity. It gave me the change to think, explore my own understanding and strengthen my resolve to make a difference.

In closing, it is important to recognise that an individual's journey through their 'missing' experience is individual and unpaved. The road will not be the same for any two families. The support structures therefore need to be informed, knowledgeable, patient and most importantly tailored.
In a world of an uncertainty the family should feel in control and secure of the relationship they are entering and the support they receive should be unique to them.

## Recommendations

### Next steps for Missing People

Missing People must maintain its commitment to improving family support and achieve its 3 year strategic aims which include

- Develop, pilot and implement a comprehensive package of central and regional emotional support services
- Provide families with comprehensive and accessible resources to alleviate financial and legal difficulties
- Provide families with professional guidance and advocacy in dealing with statutory and other agencies
- Provide support to families of missing people and assist their search including publicity.

Everything I learned in Australia supports these objectives.
The first steps to achieve these 3 year aims will be to:

- Develop and deliver counselling service for families of missing people
- Incorporate findings into Missing People's learning from Australia relating to counselling and family support
- Start providing face to face family support in local communities
- Write Family Guidance "What to do when someone goes missing"
- Develop and Launch an Online Family Forum, so families can connect.
- Host Family Support Events with the aim that 55 family members report they have attended at least 1 event with other families and had a positive experience.

### New areas to consider - Service Developments

### Family support

1. Missing People should consult with families at each stage to make sure that developments are informed, useful and needed.
2. Develop defined boundaries of how we expect helpline workers to support families and establish at what stage a therapeutic intervention is right.
3. Consider what questions need to be asked to families so that the support is tailored, useful and the need for contact is lead by the family. ensure that services provided for families are well explained and transparent
4. Allow consideration of the extent to which services for missing people 'hold' and 'define' people in their trauma (and explore how this could be remedied if so), or provide necessary ongoing support for an ongoing situation
5. Consider new ways to make sure the offer of support is accessible to more than one family member in each family.
6. Give consideration in the development of services and events at Missing People to creating opportunities for families to remember their missing person, for example Services of remembering
7. Ensure opportunities are created for families to come together, for example the event hosted in Australia where an information giving session was combined with chance to share experiences with other people in similar situations

## Counselling

8. Consider in the development of the model for counselling at Missing People the inclusion of a step by step guide for practitioners

9. Manage the expectations of people using any counselling service ensuring both the potential and limitations are explained

10. Pay special consideration to ensuring the effective transition between the support offered to families through the helpline team and counselling, both before and after an intervention

11. Explore further into what resources might be made available to aid generic counsellors to support families of missing people.

12. Develop further understanding of intuitive and instrumental grieving processes to develop the more tailored approach to support offered by Missing People

## Missing People training and environment

13. All staff and volunteers should be trained and have had time to explore unresolved loss, and examine both the practical and emotional aspects of support that families might need.

14. Missing People should make sure that all staff and volunteers are supported for signs of vicarious trauma and that self assessment should happen regularly

15. Adapt the physical space at Missing People so both families and helpline workers have a quiet space to talk.

## Partnerships

16. Develop working partnerships with; Red Cross, Salvation Army, Reunite, Relate, Cruse Bereavement Care, Compassionate Friends, Home-Start, Victim Support, Children and Families across borders, among others. This will create better referral mechanism and aid families to get the specialist help they sometimes need.

17. Maintain relationships with Australian agencies and look to develop better international relationships with 'missing' agencies, to further our shared understanding.

18. Consider how partnership working with the British police can be improved to include better signposting for families, and case liaison. Share knowledge so police understand more about the impact of their relationship with families during an investigation.

## Possible Research projects/papers

- What is the breakdown of parents/siblings/friends etc- that we are supporting?
- How many times are we supporting more than one family member within a family?
- What do families think they need in terms of counselling?
- Is there a grief of missingness?
- Is bereavement after 'missing' different?

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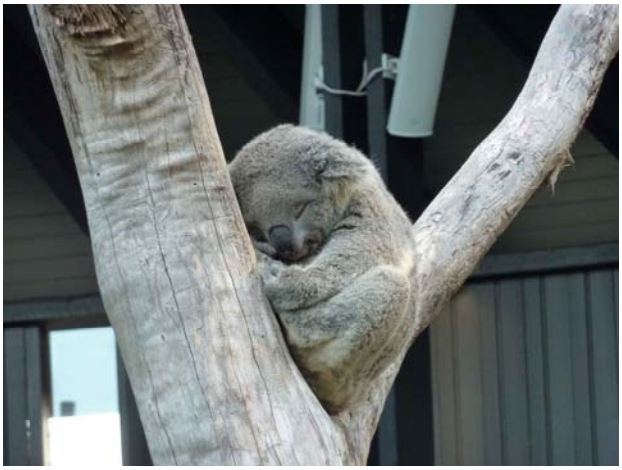

(Sleeping Koala)