

The delivery of return interviews

An analysis of freedom of information requests by Missing People on behalf of the English Coalition for Runaway Children (ECRC)

The English Coalition for Runaway Children (ECRC) is a coalition of organisations that work on behalf of children and young people who run away or go missing from home or care. The group exists to share good practice and campaign on relevant issues with the aim of ensuring that all missing children are safeguarded from harm through effective policy and appropriate services at both a national and local level.

This analysis was carried out by Missing People on behalf of the ECRC. The findings and analysis were shared with members of the coalition but have not yet been endorsed by member organisations



Introduction

An estimated 86,000 children are reported missing each year in 235,000 incidents.¹ Thankfully most will return within days or weeks² but nonetheless many will be at significant risk or have experienced harm while away. Going missing has been linked to child sexual exploitation;³ child criminal exploitation;⁴ mental health issues;⁵ abuse and neglect;⁶ trafficking;⁷ as well as many other serious harms.

It is vital that any child who goes missing is offered the time and space to speak about what caused them to go, what happened while they were away, and what support they want or need upon their return to prevent future missing episodes.

The Department for Education (DfE) 2014 statutory guidance stipulates that *“When a child is found, they must be offered an independent return interview. Independent return interviews provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home.”*⁸

These return interviews⁹ are a key opportunity for intervention and one of the only tools that do not require children’s needs to meet a specific threshold, or a particular type of harm to have already been identified. A return interview should be offered to every returned missing child, regardless of the risk level of their missing episode or any other information known about them.

The purpose of a return interview is to:

- Identify and respond to any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the ‘safe and well check’ by the police – either before they ran away or whilst missing;
- Identify underlying risks to the child, which may not previously have been disclosed, therefore ensuring that agencies can put the right support and safeguarding in place and improve future risk assessments;
- Understand and try to address the reasons why the child ran away;
- Help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away;
- Provide them with information on how to stay safe if they choose to run away again, including helpline numbers;
- Signpost and/or refer to relevant support services;
- Instigate safeguarding or child protection process where necessary

¹ 2016/17 Missing Persons Data Report, NCA <https://www.missingpersons.police.uk/en-gb/resources/downloads/missing-persons-statistical-bulletins>

² P.14 2016/17 Missing Persons Data Report, NCA <https://www.missingpersons.police.uk/en-gb/resources/downloads/missing-persons-statistical-bulletins>

³ The Office of the Children’s Commissioner (2012) Inquiry into CSE in Gangs and Groups, Interim Report <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/files/PandR/APPG%20Missing,%20Gangs%20and%20Exploitation%20Roundtable%20Report.pdf>;
https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/files/PandR/MP_Allofuswerebrokenreport_A4_Final_ONLINE.pdf.

⁵ <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/76-keyinformation2.html?start=2>

⁶ <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/76-keyinformation2.html?start=2>

⁷ Missing People, ECPAT UK (2018). Still in Harm’s Way: An update report on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK

⁸ Department for Education (2014) Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care

⁹ Return interviews are also known as return home interviews (RHIs), return discussions or debriefs

However, despite the importance of return interviews, current provision across the country is inconsistent and the quality of interviews which are provided is unclear.¹⁰

Research aims

The aim of this research is to increase understanding regarding the delivery of return interviews with the following key questions:

- Who is delivering return interviews?
- Are they offered to every returned missing child?
- How often do children accept and take part in an interview?
- What follow-up support is available?
- What is done with the information gathered?
- Are there any changes to national policy that could improve the effectiveness of return interviews?

Methodology

Missing People, on behalf of the ECRC, sent Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) to the 152 local authorities in England, from which we received 120 responses (79%).¹¹ Some results had to be excluded because the data was not provided in a way that could be used: where this is the case we have made clear how many responses the analysis is based on.

Local authorities were asked to provide information about:

Who currently provides Return Home Interviews in their local authority (third sector agency or a team based within the local authority)?

Who provided Return Home Interviews in their local authority one year ago?

Who provided Return Home Interviews in their local authority five years ago?

They were also asked, for the financial year 2017-18:

How many incidents of children going missing were reported? How many individuals does this figure relate to?

How many RHIs were offered to children and young people who had been missing?

How many RHIs were completed?

How many completed RHIs were carried out within 72 hours?

Local authorities were also asked about the provision of RHIs for children placed out of their local authority. The data collected through these questions will be reported on in a separate report.

¹⁰ The Children's Society (2017) Making Connections: how local agencies can better keep missing children safe

¹¹ A number of local authorities made a partial response to the FOI request, citing exemptions under the Freedom of Information Act.

The full FOI can be found in the appendix at the end of this report.

Scotland and Wales

Due to the devolution of powers related to social services in Wales and Scotland, the DfE statutory guidance does not apply in each country. A FOI request was sent to every local authority in each, but the responses were excluded in the principal analysis because of the different duties regarding return interviews. A summary for each country is included at the end of this report.

Who delivers return interviews?

What does the guidance say?

Department for Education (DfE) statutory guidance is clear that return interviews should be carried out by an *independent* professional, however little detail is provided:

“[A return interview] is normally best carried out by an independent person (i.e. someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge.”¹²

In practice this has been interpreted in a variety of ways with some local authorities commissioning a third sector organisation, and others building independent teams within their own staff. In some areas interviews are delivered by the child’s social worker; delivery which could not be considered as independent within the parameters laid out in the DfE guidance.

There has been relatively little research carried out to understand what is most effective in terms of who provides return interviews, however, there are a number of important considerations from information already available:

- Trusted relationship model: previous research¹³ has found that it is important to have a designated adult who is able to provide consistent support, particularly for children who are looked after within the care system. More broadly, it is important to build trust and positive relationships with young people. While this does not mean only one professional can or should be involved in supporting a child, it is important to consider the implications of this when considering who works with a child upon their return from missing.
- Research,¹⁴ as well as anecdotal experience from members of the ECRC, has shown that some children do not have positive relationships with their social workers or a positive perception of social services. This is not always the case, but it is important that the views of those children are considered and alternative opportunities for engagement are provided. Some children will feel more comfortable talking to someone from a charity or youth work services who they do not associate with being responsible for their care.

Ultimately the main priority should be that children have a choice in who they engage with upon their return from missing. As acknowledged in the guidance, it is important that an independent option is always available as the child may not feel comfortable or willing to talk to someone who is responsible for their care placement or with whom they have had a negative relationship in the past. However, if a child is more likely to engage with a professional with whom they already have a relationship, their choice should be respected.

¹² Department for Education (2014) Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care

¹³ Lewing, B. Doubell, L. Beevers, T. Acquah, D. Early Intervention Foundation (2018) Building trusted relationships for vulnerable children and young people with public services

¹⁴ https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11515/1/Children_s_views_and_experiences_of_contact_with_social_workers_report_July_2010.pdf

What are the research findings?¹⁵

Previous research has shown that delivery is inconsistent and local authorities interpret the guidance in a variety of ways.¹⁶ In addition, members of the ECRC, some of whom are or have been commissioned by local authorities to conduct RHIs, had anecdotally noticed changing patterns in who is delivering RHIs, with some who had previously commissioned a third sector partner beginning to take the service 'in house'.

To better understand this pattern, the FoI request asked:

- Who was carrying out return interviews at the time of the request
- Who had been providing them in 2016/17 (one year prior to the request)
- Who had provided them in 2013/14 (five years prior to the request)

Return Home Interview delivery provider							
Who delivers interviews?	2013/14		2016/17		2017/18		Proportion of delivery: % change 13/14 – 17/18
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
Local authority	59	49%	59	49%	71	59%	+10%
Mixture of both	13	11%	27	23%	24	20%	+9%
Independent provider	30	25%	31	26%	24	20%	-5%
Information not given or held	18	15%	3	3%	1	1%	-14%
Total	120		120		120		

As shown in the table above, the number of local authorities commissioning an independent provider has decreased between 2013/14 and 2017/18 whilst the number delivering the service in-house has increased. The number who are using both an independent provider and in-house provision has almost doubled over the same period, from 13 to 24 local authorities.

When local authorities delivered return interviews internally the FoI requested further details regarding which team or professional would be delivering the return interviews.

¹⁵ The FoI was sent to every local authority in England: of the 152 local authorities, 120 (79%) responded. This analysis is limited to those who did respond to the FoI.

¹⁶ The Children's Society, 2019. *The First Step: How return home interviews can improve support and safeguarding for missing young people*

In-house local authority RHI provider						
Who delivers interviews?	Number of LAs 13/14		Number of LAs 16/17		Number of LAs 17/18	
<i>Base: All LAs that deliver any RHIs in-house</i>	72		86		95	
Child's social worker	8	11%	3	4%	3	3%
Child's social worker or another social worker in the same team	0	0%	0	0%	2	2%
Child's social worker or another team	12	17%	18	21%	19	20%
Independent social worker	5	7%	2	2%	0	0%
Social worker (independence not stated)	8	11%	4	5%	2	2%
Social worker (independence not stated) or another team	7	10%	5	6%	2	2%
Other team (variety of professionals)	31	43%	50	59%	59	63%
Other team or professional with existing relationship	1	1%	3	4%	4	4%
Professional with an existing relationship	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
Volunteer	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%
Sub Total	72		85		93	
Information not provided	0		1		2	
Grand Total	72		86		95	

The number of local authorities using children's allocated social workers, or another social worker in the same team, has decreased since 2013/14, however the fact that in some instances RHIs are being provided this way is concerning due to the possible lack of independence.

It is positive to see the 23% increase in local authorities using professionals from other teams which are often workers dedicated specifically to providing RHIs. However, practice varied significantly: in some areas these professionals would be youth or community workers, in others they were Youth Offending Service workers which risks criminalising missing children and reinforces messages of victim blaming.

Giving children a choice in who they want to speak to, including someone independent of their care, may result in the provision of support most suited to each child, and there may be a better chance of effective engagement and disclosure. This was acknowledged by local authorities in open text answers to the FoI: *"We would also like to see more emphasis on relationship building, which develops trust and is more likely to lead to sharing of information and appropriate safeguarding of young people... We would like to see a system that gives greater consideration to the individual*

young person's views and circumstances." However, this is not fully understood yet and would be a useful area of future research.

How many children go missing?

National statistics:

Each year 86,000 children are reported missing across Britain

These children will be reported missing in 235,000 separate incidents

National statistics do not give the number of individual children who go missing repeatedly, but we know that 63% of missing episodes are attributable to children who go missing more than once.

Within the 107¹⁷ local authorities that provided data on this question there were a total of 123,156 missing episodes which related to 43,648 individual children.¹⁸ This means that on average, 65% of incidents were attributable to children going missing more than once.

There was significant variation in the percentage of episodes that related to repeat episodes between different local authorities, with some areas reporting that 80% of their missing episodes related to repeat missing children, and others reporting less than 20%.¹⁹

% incidents repeat missing	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
0-50%	11	10%
51-60%	25	23%
61-70%	35	33%
Over 70%	36	34%
Total	107	100% ²⁰

There is a significant issue with many children running away repeatedly, meaning they are at increased risk and suggests that effective, preventative interventions are not put in place following earlier missing episodes. The number of repeat missing episodes is a clear argument for better engagement and support upon someone's return; otherwise patterns of harm and risk may continue and potentially escalate.

¹⁷ 11% of the 120 local authorities (13) were not able to provide this information for both incidents and individuals or had to be excluded because of anomalies in the data.

¹⁸ The numbers from each local authority varied significantly which reflects the variations in size and population of different areas. For example, 11 local authorities reported less than 250 incidents of children going missing whereas 14 others reported more than 2,000 incidents.

¹⁹ The local authorities who reported the lowest percentages of repeat missing were more likely to have included information about additional support that children could access after return interviews – both existing services and dedicated RHI follow-up support. However, the numbers are relatively small so it is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions from this.

²⁰ The total does not equal 100% due to rounding of percentages.

How often are RHIs offered and delivered?

Offered²¹

The responses showed that, on average, **79% of missing episodes were addressed with the offer of a return interview**. It is clear in statutory guidance that all children should be offered a return interview after every missing episode, yet in one in five incidents (21%) children are currently not being offered a return interview. There can be some reasons in which a return interview wouldn't be appropriate to offer, for example: to very young children; or if the child would not benefit from having another professional introduced into their life. However, the number of incidents in which this is the case will be small.

% offered	Number of local authorities	
0-50%	9	9%
51-60%	5	5%
61-70%	14	15%
71-80%	13	14%
81-90%	14	15%
91-95%	8	8%
96-99%	12	13%
100%	20	21%
Total	95	100%

The offer rates ranged from 16% to 100%. Two local authorities offered interviews in response to 20% or less of the missing incidents; whereas twenty local authorities offered interviews in 100% of incidents. This inconsistency means there is a postcode lottery of support with children in some areas being unlikely to be given an opportunity to talk about going missing.

One area specifically noted that they do not offer RHIs to all children and that unless certain circumstances have been met, it is left to the discretion of their social worker to decide if a return interview should take place. This is contrary to DfE guidance, which emphasises that a return interview should be offered to every child after every missing incident.

Declined²²

Return interviews are an optional intervention for any returned child. It is the child's choice if they want to engage with professionals or talk about why they went missing and what happened while they were away. Relatively little research has been done to understand what drives children to engage with return interviews or to decline them but, as with all support services, it is reasonable to expect some to not take up the offer. However, it is important to monitor and analyse the levels of completions and declines as significant discrepancies could be due to variations in how the interview

²¹ 20 local authorities did not answer the question or were unable to provide the information. A further 5 had to be excluded because of anomalies in the data

²² 29 local authorities did not answer the question or were unable to provide the information. A further 7 had to be excluded because of anomalies in the data

is offered and the quality of the service, and therefore could help to identify the need for better engagement attempts.

Similar to the offer rates outlined above, the percentage of how many interviews were declined varied significantly across different local authorities:

Percentage of interviews declined	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
0-10%	31	37%
11-20%	20	24%
21-30%	20	24%
31-40%	9	11%
41-50%	3	4%
51-60%	1	1%
Above 61%	0	0%
Total	84	100%

On average, return interviews were declined by children for 18% of missing episodes.

Whenever possible it is important to record the reasons why a child declines an interview. This is not only important for safeguarding – ensuring that the child is not being prevented from engaging by another person; but also to identify any patterns therefore allowing the service to improve and identify opportunities for better engagement.

It is important to note that there may be discrepancies in what different local authorities report as a decline. It is possible that some will consider an interview accepted if they are able to visit the young person who then does not engage; others may consider this a decline as the child has not spoken to the interviewer about their missing episode or any concerns. This inconsistency is problematic when considering good oversight of the delivery of return interviews and requires clarity in guidance.

Completed interviews²³

In total, RHIs were completed for 58,445 of the 109,797 missing episodes reported in the 99 local authorities that provided completion figures. **On average, 53% of missing incidents were addressed in a return interview.**

Again, there was a great deal of variation in the completion rates of different local authorities: 41% addressed less than half of missing incidents in an RHI, while 16% of local authorities completed interviews for over 80% of episodes.

Percentage of incidents addressed in an RHI	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
0-30%	16	16%
31-40%	8	8%

²³ 16 local authorities did not answer the question or were unable to provide the information. A further 5 had to be excluded because of anomalies in the data

41-50%	18	18%
51-60%	19	19%
61-70%	16	16%
71-80%	6	6%
81-90%	9	9%
91-100%	7	7%
Total	99	100%

As with decline rates, these figures should be treated with some caution as the definition of a completed interview may vary between areas. It is possible that some local authorities deem any conversation with the child after return to be an interview whereas others require the child to engage and talk specifically about their missing episode in order to be recorded as a complete. In addition, it was clear in the qualitative responses that some local authorities accept that multiple episodes can be addressed in a single RHI; whereas others did not consider a return interview complete unless it was carried out for each missing episode separately.

The variation in completion figures is so great that it is clear more needs to be done to understand why some areas have such a low completion rate. Good practice from the areas where the majority of incidents are addressed should be considered.

72 hours²⁴

A further question was asked of local authorities to understand how many interviews are carried out within 72 hours as directed in statutory guidance.

The results suggest that the majority of local authorities struggle to deliver this aim: only 33% of all missing episodes are addressed in an interview within this timeframe or 61% of all completed episodes.

Percentage of completed incidents addressed within 72 hrs	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
0-30%	8	10%
31-40%	8	10%
41-50%	9	11%
51-60%	15	18%
61-70%	15	18%
71-80%	12	14%
81-90%	8	10%
91-100%	8	10%
Total	83	100%

²⁴ 31 local authorities did not answer the question or were unable to provide the information. A further 6 had to be excluded because of anomalies in the data

As before, these figures should be treated with some caution because the way in which the 72 hours timeframe is recorded varies significantly between local authorities. In recognition that there was likely to be variation in approach, the FoI specifically asked local authorities both whether they calculated the 72 hours from the child's return or from receipt of the police referral which could be later, and whether the 72 hours was counted in hours, calendar days or working days.

Of the 96 local authorities who responded to either or both parts of this question:

- 27 (28%) stated figures were based on the police referral date;
- 65 (68%) on the child's return date; and
- 4 (4%) did not respond to that part of the question

And

- 14 (15%) stated they calculated the duration in hours;
- 48 (50%) in calendar days;
- 29 (30%) in working days; and
- 5 (5%) did not respond to that part of the question.

In addition, some specified that one return interview could address multiple missing episodes if the child had been missing repeatedly in short succession, while a small number specified that they did not 'bunch' incidents in this way.

There were no significant variations in the number of RHIs completed within the timeframe in relation to how the 72 hours was calculated. However, further guidance should be issued to ensure that local authorities are recording this information in the same way to ensure that the level of compliance is comparable between each.

It is concerning that local authorities and independent providers are struggling to deliver within the timeframe set out by statutory guidance. However, the ECRC have previously raised questions about how helpful the 72 hour expectation really is²⁵, particularly whether it genuinely helps to safeguard children and young people. Members have recommended that the DfE reconsider the timeframe to ensure that delivery is achievable as well as in the best interests of the child.

Ability to report

There were some significant challenges in collecting this data from local authorities, with some local authorities only able to report some of the information we requested. Reasons that local authorities gave for not being able to report on the data was that they did not specifically record it, or section 12 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which provides an exemption based on the time or cost of providing the data. This exemption was used where each individual case file would have needed to be checked to provide the data, for example:

"We record this on the child's individual file. We would not be able to pull a numbers report on this data. We would, therefore, have to extract the information manually and we estimate that

²⁵The English Coalition for Runaway Children Return Home Interviews – Good practice 2017 <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/policy-parliamentary-work/175-english-coalition-for-runaway-children/1033-rhi-good-practice.html>

compliance with your request would exceed the appropriate cost limit under section 12 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.”

Some simply did not provide the data requested, instead leaving those questions blank or not providing the data, for example:

“Data not available”

“Information not available”

Ofsted inspects local authorities on some of the questions Missing People asked in this FOI so local authorities should be able to provide this data in an easily reportable form. However, some local authorities were not able to provide the data to Missing People:

- 20 of 120 (17%) were unable to, or did not, provide information about how many RHIs were offered in relation to the number of missing incidents
- 24 of 120 (20%) were unable to, or did not, provide information about how many RHIs were accepted
- Over a quarter (31 of 120, or 26%) were unable to, or did not, provide information about how many RHIs were completed in 72 hours

It is problematic that local authorities cannot easily identify data on these issues. There is inconsistency in the way in which data is collected and recorded across local authorities which raises concerns about how, at a local and national level, those working in this area are able to understand trends and strategically respond

What happens after a return interview has been completed?

Follow up support²⁶

Return interviews are a vital opportunity to provide dedicated time and space for returned missing children to talk about what has happened to them while away, however, it is unlikely that an RHI alone will be able to address any significant issues or harm that may be disclosed. RHIs can be used as a tool to identify the harm or risks present, but often children will need other, more in-depth interventions to effectively make them safe. It is therefore vital that follow-up support is offered when necessary and that clear pathways to further services are available.

85% of local authorities (96 of 113) said that they provide some sort of follow up support, 8% (9 of 113) said that they do sometimes and 7% (8 of 113) said there was no provision in their RHI service for follow up support.

When asked to give detail of the support available, the majority (85 of 113) spoke about referrals into existing social services including early help teams or full assessments for further intervention.

Moreover, 46% (52 of 113) indicated that they made referrals into other existing services, for example youth groups, charity services, CAMHS or exploitation services.

²⁶ 7 local authorities did not provide information on follow up support.

Only 26 local authorities (23%) mentioned follow-up support specifically associated with return interviews. Most common was one-to-one support provided for children who required it and for whom other services might not be appropriate. These services are particularly useful considering the often narrow remit or high thresholds of other local authority or charity provided services, however, to be effective they need to be well-resourced to ensure that they can meet the potentially significant need of returned missing children.

It is possible that some other authorities provide this sort of service but did not mention it in their response, however, some specifically stated that they do not commission or provide any services that sit alongside return interviews. Instead any risks would necessitate referrals into existing pathways for children's social care assessments or other services as detailed above.

Information recording and sharing²⁷

Return interviews are often only as effective as the actions taken from them. To ensure these are meaningful appropriate information sharing and pathways are vital.

Return interviews are often a tool for identifying risks and harm that may have occurred so it is therefore important that any information disclosed in them is used to inform children's placements and safety plans. It should also be shared with services who are able to provide support for any specific issues. If any intelligence that might be relevant to the child being victim of a crime is disclosed, appropriate information should be shared with the police and other relevant agencies such as schools and health services.

Local authorities were asked what happened with the information disclosed or recorded during a return interview. This was an open text question, so the below actions are only those identified in open text responses. It is therefore possible more local authorities use these processes than those who specifically mentioned them.

Around half of the 114 local authorities who answered this question stated that the information is recorded on a database or case management system. Most specified that this would be on the child's file although some mentioned that information from return interviews is held in a separate file to other information about the child. It was not always clear whether the information would be easily accessible for professionals working with the child in the future.

A large proportion mentioned sharing information with the police: some sent a copy of the full interview report, others specified that they would only share information that was relevant as intelligence.

Research carried out in 2017 found that 29%²⁸ of police forces rarely or never received information from return interviews, a figure which is particularly concerning considering the intelligence being vital to understanding a local picture of risks and harm, and informing risk assessments in the case of future missing episodes.

²⁷ 6 local authorities did not provide information on what happens to information gathered during return interviews or how data is recorded and shared.

²⁸ The Children's Society (2017) Making Connections <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/making-connections-how-local-agencies-can-keep-missing-children-safe.pdf>

A smaller proportion of local authorities mentioned that the information could be discussed in a team or multi-agency meeting. Again, there was a range in what this could look like. Some local authorities will discuss interviews that have raised concerns and others will discuss all missing episodes and subsequent return interviews with focus being given to any support needs and necessary actions that have arisen as a result of the interview. The frequency of meetings varied with some local authorities and their partners holding these on a weekly basis and others doing so monthly. These meetings were separate to Strategy Meetings which a significant number of local authorities mentioned arranging in response to vulnerability of specific children

A small number specifically mentioned using the information for mapping. This was often done with the aim of identifying 'hotspots' – locations that are regularly identified during return interviews, or those that were identified as being linked to significant risk. Others looked more broadly at patterns and behaviours amongst the missing children in their area.

More research needs to be done to understand the effectiveness of information sharing following return interviews. The information provided in response to the FoI shows that many local authorities have clear processes for recording and sharing important information. However, for others the process was not mentioned at all or was limited in its capacity.

We cannot say in this report whether local authorities generally have good procedures in place, and we have not sought any information regarding the effectiveness of the processes discussed. It would be valuable to engage the police, social workers and other key partners to better understand if disclosures made during return interviews are genuinely informing safety plans, police intelligence, future support for the child, or wider mapping or understanding of concerning trends and patterns with a focus on prevention and disruption.

Examples of what's working well

Not all²⁹ local authorities responded to the question of what was working well in their area, however the key themes from those who did are summarised below.

Multi-agency response

In response to the question of what was working well in relation to the delivery of return interviews, multi-agency working was the most commonly mentioned element. The descriptions of how this worked well varied but the following are some examples:

"Multi agency commitment to respond collaboratively to children who go missing at operational and strategic level"

"Staff located within police missing persons team- leading to enhanced partnership working and fast information sharing"

²⁹ 73 local authorities provided some information about what is working well in response to any of the open text questions

“We see multi-agency working as strength with strong links established between Children’s Services and the [deleted] police officers. Attendance at our METRAC is consistently high and includes members from Education, CSC, Police, Barnardos, CAMHS, Sexual health and School Nursing”

“It [MACE] also enables any emerging themes or patterns to be identified and action to be taken at the earliest opportunity”

“Multi-agency Missing Core Group consider patterns and linkages between children, premises/care provision, adults of concern, activities of concern etc.”

As these illustrate, there are a number of ways in which positive multi-agency working can have an impact on how return interviews are carried out and often more importantly, what happens with the information shared during them.

Child’s choice

Another area of practice which was raised as a strength by multiple authorities was providing children a choice in who they meet with for the interview.

There were two different aspects to this:

- **Which professional:** Thirteen local authorities specifically mentioned that good practice includes offering the child a choice in which professional carries out the interview. They acknowledged the importance of children having trust in the person that they are speaking to. It is important that an independent option is included within that choice as some children, particularly those who are not happy in their care placement, may not feel able to talk to the person who is responsible for that placement; others may perceive their relationship with professionals in their life as negative. However, if a child does want to speak to someone that they already have a relationship with it is important that their choice is respected.
- **Continuity:** Five local authorities mentioned the importance of trying to ensure that children who go missing more than once are able to see the same interviewer upon their return from each episode – this facilitates good relationship building and means that children do not have to repeat their story unnecessarily.

“While an offer of independence is important, we often find that young people would like to talk to someone they share a relationship with.”

“Independence of interviewer - national guidance states that the interviewer should be someone independent from the child's care. Whilst this is a sensible suggestion in the majority of cases there are some situations where the concerns for the child are outside of care/home, and the person they engage best with is their carer”

Staff skill

Another commonly mentioned key part of good return interviews was the skills of the staff delivering them. Thirteen local authorities identified this as key in their service. Positives included:

- Tenacity and persistence of staff
- Experience in delivering return interviews
- Going 'far and beyond' to get good results
- Skilled at engaging young people who take time to build trust with services
- Good knowledge of the area, vulnerability hot spots, people of concern and the children themselves

Regular training for all staff who deliver return interviews was also noted as important for maintaining quality.

Other good practice

A number of other practices were specifically mentioned as contributing to good quality return interviews but only in a limited number of responses. These include:

- Creative methods of engagement
- Dedicated worker for just RHIs
- Using information to inform care planning
- Offering RHIs to all children (Inc. absent)
- Focus on prevention of future missing episodes
- Availability of Youth Services

Barriers to effective provision

As with the previous section, the question relating to barriers in the FoI request was an open question so it is possible that local authorities who did not respond may have experienced the following as well, or that other barriers may exist but have not been identified.

Providing RHIs within 72 hours

The barrier most commonly mentioned was having to carry out return interviews within 72 hours of a child's return was a challenge and could in some cases be detrimental. The key issues raised were that the timescale is:

- **Impractical** considering a lack of 24 hour or weekend services; delays in notifications of a child's return being shared with the local authority; challenges in getting in contact with the young person or their family; geographical distance which was particularly relevant when considering children placed out of area; the fact that some children will go missing again before the return interview has been carried out
- **Not helpful for the child** in some situations. Some responses flagged occasions on which asking a child to talk about their experience soon after their return could actually be harmful if they are not ready to speak. Others pointed out that asking children to talk immediately

could result in them declining the opportunity which they might have been engaged with if they had more time.

- **Negative impact on quality.** Some local authorities felt that a focus on completing interviews within such a short timeframe failed to allow for the child's individual needs and could risk too great a focus on fast completion to the detriment of the quality of interviews.

It is important to note that other responses did raise the need for return interviews to be carried out relatively soon after a child's return to ensure that the conversation felt relevant to the missing episode. However, the vast majority who commented on timeliness felt that there should be greater flexibility.

"Review the 72 hour advice – clarity and greater definition is needed to underline placing the needs of the child at the forefront of response. 72 hours is not always appropriate. Although it is recognised that the RHI is a valuable safeguarding tool and that they must be conducted in a timely manner, Ofsted have placed great weight on the 72 hour deadline, and at times have appeared to prioritise this as a performance indicator, over the needs of children."

"If they are questioned too soon and they are still angry or upset they may simply decline because they wish, at that moment to be left alone. However giving them more time may glean far more from the child once they have had an opportunity to think about what has happened and they may welcome an opportunity to then talk about a situation."

"This [the 72 hour timeframe] in turn can impact upon the quality of the RHI delivery, with workers becoming focused upon meeting deadlines rather than achieving meaningful engagement with the young person. More emphasis should be placed upon the perspective required to carry out an in depth and worthwhile RHI that aims to achieve better outcomes for the young person and provides relevant agencies with useful intelligence that can be used in safeguarding young people."

Other barriers

A number of other issues were identified as barriers to providing good return interviews.

Local authorities spoke about the challenges of providing interviews for children placed outside of their local area. Problems including the logistics of carrying out these interviews within the 72 hour timeframe; and information sharing between the host and responsible local authority both in notifying when a child has returned and in sharing the information once an interview has taken place. Some local authorities expressed frustration that they offer interviews to other local authority's children placed in their area but this offer not being reciprocated, while others again flagged that sometimes the responsible local authority is not best placed to carry out interviews for this group because intelligence gathered would be meaningful for the professionals and police force in the host area.

Others talked about the difficulty in contacting some children and families, therefore making it challenging to even offer an interview; and the significant numbers who decline meaning that there is no opportunity to find out risks or harm the child has experienced.

Other issues that were mentioned included concerns that children who did agree to an interview often wouldn't discuss the missing episode in detail; a lack of resources meaning that return

interview services were stretched beyond capacity, or that the services to refer children into when vulnerability was identified were limited or not available at all; and the challenges in arranging interviews with children who go missing repeatedly.

One local authority acknowledged that professionals across their workforce were not particularly engaged with return interviews and therefore did not prioritise them or the information that was gathered during them. They identified this as a significant problem as it means they are not seen as a tool for supporting children.

Barriers	Number of local authorities
Out of area placements	11
Children and families hard to contact or declining	7
Resources	5
Children not engaging	4
Lack of information sharing	3
Arranging interviews for repeat missing children	2
Not enough focus on individual child's needs	2
Lack of engagement from staff	1
Children frustrated at repeating themselves	1

Changes to national guidance

The final question asked of local authorities was what changes they would like to see in national guidance on return interviews. Only 22 local authorities provided a response, the key points of which were as follows:

- 1) Clearer guidance on independence and who should do the interview
- 2) Clearer guidance on how the timeframe should be counted
- 3) Increase the timeframe in which return interviews should be completed with a greater focus on quality and flexibility based on each child's needs
- 4) Statutory returns on the information collected in return interviews
- 5) Clearer guidance on what happens for out of area children including:
 - A single system for alerts and notifications for out of area placements
 - More opportunities for spot purchasing from the host local authority, or reciprocal relationships so return interviews whenever possible are done by the local authority in which the child lives
 - More guidance on information sharing following a return interview carried out by a local authority for a child they have placed outside of area or a local authority who are carrying out the interview on behalf of another
- 6) Changing the name of 'return interviews'
- 7) A greater focus on early intervention
- 8) More focus on also speaking to parents and carers

“The name of the RHI could be changed. Describing it as an interview is misleading for both staff and young people and their families. It gives the impression of a very formal and intrusive interaction whereas describing as a "chat" or a "catch up" makes it more accessible for the young person and potentially increases the likelihood of engagement.”

“It is surprising that clearer national guidance is not provided or a specific, well-defined data-set of indicators not required as part of Statutory Returns. The upshot is that all local authorities will collect Missing, CSE, and CE data and report this data in slightly different ways making comparisons nationally or with Statistical Neighbors almost impossible. This therefore, makes it difficult to know how well we are doing and which other authorities we could be learning from.”

“The interview and the whole approach needs to be more firmly tailored onto the circumstances of the young person”

“I would like the national guidance to be more robust on the guidance re out of area placements. I think an emphasis needs to be given to how these children are extremely vulnerable and that there needs to be clear communication between local authorities, particularly where the placement is a long way from the placing authority. These children are particularly at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation when they go missing. It is often a struggle to achieve compliance with OLA’s around the completion of RHI’s and information sharing.”

“Robust and tenacious methods of securing interviews should be advised and best practice offered”

Conclusions and recommendations

The responses to this freedom of information request show that provision of return interviews across England is inconsistent and there is significant confusion amongst the local authorities who provide or commission services about how best to ensure they are delivered.

Previous research 'A Safer Return'³⁰ has shown that RHIs:

- *Can identify ongoing risks and harm that has already been experienced or are being experienced by young people.*
- *Can identify risks and harm previously not known to services.*
- *Can provide an opportunity for getting help to children at a point when they might need it most.*
- *Can help to inform police investigations and wider safeguarding efforts to reduce future risk of harm to the interviewed child and other children."*

It is therefore vital that they are delivered to a high quality for every returned missing child. To ensure this the statutory guidance and the oversight of how return interviews are delivered needs to be updated and improved.

Recommendations

1. The Department for Education should review the guidance on return home interviews in 'Children who run away or go missing from home or care'. This review should include:
 - I. A focus on the child's choice in who provides their return interview, including an independent option for those who don't have a positive relationship with the professionals already in their life
 - II. Greater clarity about the meaning of independence in regards to who provides return interviews
 - III. Consideration of whether the 72 hour timeline should be changed
 - IV. Greater clarity about how the timeline, whether the existing 72 hour model or a new one, should be implemented operationally
 - V. Consideration of how instances of children or their families declining return interviews is recorded, monitored, and where appropriate, used to inform safeguarding
2. Ofsted and the Department for Education should set nationally agreed standards for how local authorities record and report the delivery of return interviews. This should include detail of what constitutes a completed return interview and should allow for better benchmarking amongst local authorities regarding the rates of offered, declined and completed interviews in their area.
3. Local authorities should consider the offer of follow-up support available in their area following return interviews that have raised concerns. This should not consist solely of referral to children's services which may have high thresholds and therefore not be appropriate for early intervention.

³⁰ Missing People, 2019. A Safer Return https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/files/PandR/A_Safer_Return-full.pdf

4. All local authorities and return interview providers should ensure that anyone delivering a return interview has adequate training to do so. This training should be periodically updated to ensure that skills and awareness of emerging issues remain up to date.
5. All local authorities should review their return interview process to:
 - I. Ensure that a focus is given to building trust and effective processes are in place to engage children and families who may not initially agree to take part in an interview
 - II. Assess whether there are effective information sharing processes in place with the police, education and other relevant agencies when a return interview is completed
 - III. Ensure that information from return interviews is reviewed and analysed to map emerging issues and areas of particular concern

Scotland

The provision of support for returned missing children in Scotland is different to that in England. These differences include the fact that returning missing children are offered a 'return discussion' not a 'return home interview,' and this discussion does not have to be provided by the local authority. The guidance is also less prescriptive than that in England, with more flexibility around the provision of the discussion within 72 hours and an emphasis on the child's particular circumstances.

The [National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland](#)³¹ includes a commitment for "Agencies to hold return discussions with young people and adults after they have been missing."

"A return discussion can help to support a person following their return, provide a platform to identify underlying issues and obtain information that could prevent future missing episodes... There is no set time for the discussion to occur but, when possible, first contact should be made within 72 hours, with the discussion taking place within one week, at a suitable time for the individual. The discussion should take place in a safe environment with a trained professional of their choice when possible. It is important that a person who has been missing is given the opportunity to speak about it as soon as they are ready to do so."

Nineteen local authorities (59%) in Scotland responded to the freedom of information request regarding the delivery of return discussions.

Who delivers return discussions?

Who delivers return discussions	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
Police or local authority staff	9	47%
Police only	7	37%
Police or Barnardo's	1	5%
Barnardo's only	1	5%
No response	1	5%
Total	19	100%

Local authorities who said they use their staff to deliver return discussions mentioned a range of different professionals who would do this including social workers, children's home staff and care providers.

Missing and the delivery of return discussions

15 local authorities in Scotland provided information regarding both the number of missing incidents and missing children reported in their area. In total, there were 5,396 incidents across all 15 areas, involving 1,311 missing children.

³¹ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/publication/2017/05/national-missing-persons-framework-scotland/documents/00517676-pdf/00517676-pdf/govscot%3Adocument>

Only 11 local authorities were able to provide figures on the number of return discussions offered. In total, a return discussion was offered for 4,249 incidents in these 11 areas, with the proportion offered ranging from 27% to 100%. Positively, 9 of the 11 local authorities offered a return discussion in response to 98% or more of the missing episodes.

Only 8 of the 19 local authorities could report on the actual number of discussions carried out. Their responses showed an average of 78% of missing episodes being addressed in a discussion.

Due to the low rate of response from local authorities, and the number who stated that because return discussions are largely delivered by police the questions should be directed to them, a freedom of information request was also sent to Police Scotland.

The response received from Police Scotland was as follows:

Missing episodes: 14,782

Missing individuals: 6,143

Return discussions offered: 14,044 (95% of episodes)

Return discussions carried out: 13,682 (93% of episodes)

Police Scotland's figures indicate that 93% of missing episodes were addressed with a return discussion. However, it is not possible to compare this to the numbers of return interviews carried out in England because the model is so different, and the majority of discussions are offered by police officers which is not reflected in England.

Although this figure represents a high rate of return discussions being carried out, the content and quality of these discussions is unclear. The National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, published in 2017 and which is not statutory, outlined the inconsistency in delivery at the time of its publication and also suggests some potential issues with the police being the most common provider.

Relatively little research has been done to understand which professionals are best placed to deliver return discussions. However, it is suspected that some children will not want to disclose information to police officers. An evaluation by Dr Karen Shalev Greene of a pilot telephone return interview service delivered by Missing People in London found that those receiving a return interview delivered by Missing People provided four times as much information as they would usually have following a police-delivered safe and well check. Although return interviews are different from safe and well checks, the evidence suggests that return missing people may disclose more to non-police providers. More research would need to be carried out to better understand if this is true.

As the only country in the UK offering return discussions to adults, Scotland is ahead of others in its focus on the importance of responding to a missing person's return. However, it is important that more work is done to see the implementation of the National Framework – ensuring children are given a choice other than the police in who delivers their return discussion. It would also be helpful if local authorities were able to more comprehensively report on the numbers of children going missing in their area and how many receive a return discussion.

Wales

The provision of support to returned missing children in Wales also varies from the provision in England and Scotland. The *All Wales Protocol - Missing Children*³² states that:

“It is important to give the child the opportunity to talk about their experiences as well as to ascertain why they ran away. This interview/de-brief should take place as soon as possible but at least within 3 working days. It should be determined and agreed as to who is the most appropriate person to talk to the child. This could be a police officer or social worker but where local agreement exists a suitable independent person should be utilised.”

15 local authorities (68%) responded to the freedom of information request.

13 provided details about who delivered their return interviews in 2017/18, while 12 did so for 2016/17 and 2013/14.

	2013/14		2016/17		2017/18	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Local authority	3	25%	3	25%	6	46%
Mixture of local authority and independent	2	17%	2	17%	3	23%
Police	1	8%	1	8%	1	8%
Independent provider	6	50%	6	50%	3	23%
SUB TOTAL	12	100%	12	100%	13	100%
Information not given or held	3		3		2	
GRAND TOTAL	15		15		15	

The figures show that return interviews are increasingly being delivered in-house, with fewer local authorities using an independent provider in 2017/18 than in 2013/14.

³² <http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/All-Wales-Protocol-Missing-Children.pdf>

Missing and the delivery of return interviews/debriefs

14 local authorities provided the figures for the number of missing incidents reported in their area which ranged from 26 to 1,552 and totaled 7,229.

Very few local authorities gave information regarding the number of interviews offered or completed. The numbers of responses and averages for each are as follows:

	Number of responses	Range in responses	Average percentage in responses
Return interviews offered	5	35% - 100%	74%
Return interviews accepted	6	14% - 93%	46%
Return interviews declined	3	2% - 6%	4%
Return interviews carried out	5	14% - 79%	46%

It is difficult to draw any findings from such small numbers of responses, particularly with such significant variations in the range in answers to each question, but it is a concern that relatively few hold a record of these figures.

Although some excellent practice was cited, it appears that there is significant inconsistency in the delivery of return interviews in Wales which could mean that children are receiving a 'postcode lottery' of response depending on where they go missing from.

A number of local authorities mentioned that return interviews/debriefs are offered after a child's first missing episode, and then again if there are five episodes in any given month which would mean there is no expectation for interviews to address every episode.

Follow-up support

The majority of local authorities who responded to the questions about what happens after the return interview mentioned the option of follow up support, most commonly referrals into existing services, on a case by case basis. Particular emphasis was put on the value of multi-agency working when responding to missing children.

Appendix

Freedom of Information request

ECRC Freedom of Information request

December 2018

Delivery and outcomes of Return Home Interviews

Delivery:

- 1) Are Return Home Interviews (RHIs) currently delivered to children who have been missing from home or care in your local authority area by:
 - a) A third sector agency? **Yes/No**
 - i) If yes, please tell us which agency:
 - b) A team based within your local authority? **Yes/No**
 - i) If yes, please tell us which team and/or the role of the professional
- 2) In the year 2016/17 RHIs delivered to children who have been missing from home or care in your local authority area by:
 - a) A third sector agency? **Yes/No**
 - i) If yes, please tell us which agency
 - b) A team based within your local authority? **Yes/No**
 - i) If yes, please tell us which team and/or the role of the professional
- 3) In the year 2013/14 were RHIs delivered to children who have been missing from home or care in your local authority area by:
 - a) A third sector agency? **Yes/No**
 - i) If yes, please tell us which agency
 - b) A team based within your local authority? **Yes/No**
 - i) If yes, please tell us which team and/or the role of the professional

Offered and completed interviews:

- 4) a) How many incidents of children going missing from home or care were reported in your local authority between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018?
- b) How many individual missing children does this figure relate to, during the same time period?

- 5)
 - a) For how many of these missing incidents did you offer an RHI to either the young person or a parent/carer?
 - b) How many of those offers of interviews were accepted by the child/young person?
 - c) For how many of these missing incidents was the offer of an RHI declined by the young person or a parent/carer?
- 6)
 - a) For how many of these missing incidents reported between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018 did an RHI get carried out?
 - b) How many of the missing incidents were addressed in an RHI within **72 hours** of the child returning from being missing?
 - c) Please explain briefly how this is measured and any assumptions the 72 hour calculation is based on including:
 - i) whether you calculate from return or police referral date
 - ii) if you use hours or days, and if days is this calendar or working days
 - iii) if you make any adjustments for incidents where the young person goes missing again before an RHI can be offered (e.g. exclude these or calculate time after most recent incident only)
- 7)
 - a) Do you provide or commission any follow-up support for children and young people following an RHI? **Yes/No**
If yes please give details:
 - b) What happens to the information collected during an RHI?
 - c) What steps are available when vulnerability has been identified?
- 8) Please tell us more about your return interview service. Would you like to see any changes in national guidance? What are the barriers to effective provision? What is working well in your area?