APPG on Missing Children and Adults

Event briefing note: Impacts of COVID-19 on missing people - 22nd March 2021

Summary

The APPG on Missing Children and Adults held a virtual meeting on the impact of the pandemic on missing people. It was the first open meeting of the APPG on Missing Children in Adults with new Co-Chairs Rehman Chishti, MP, and Baroness Hamwee.

The purpose of the meeting was to consider the learning from the unprecedented year of the Covid-19 pandemic on issues related to missing children and adults and to gather evidence from frontline practitioners on the impact of the pandemic on the people they support.

The APPG was spilt into two themes: theme 1 examined the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and wellbeing and the impact on missing incidents and theme 2 examined the impact of COVID-19 on missing and exploited children.

The event heard presentations from Professor Allan Young from Kings College London, Josie Allan from Missing People, Iryna Pona and Francesca Nyman from The Children's Society and Alan Rhees-Cooper, Staff Officer to ACC Catherine Hankinson, NPCC Lead for Missing People.

Discussion related to the themes as well as an overarching discussion on issues that the government need to prioritise to improve responses to missing children and adults.

The event was attended by representatives from over 19 police forces, 31 local authorities, care providers, Ofsted, UK Missing Persons Unit, a range of national and local voluntary organisations and Her Honourable Gloria Epstein, the chair of the National review into Missing persons in Canada.

Summary and recommendations to the Ministers

Mental health

With the rising risks of mental health issues, including the long-term effects of covid on people's wellbeing and the likelihood of an economic impact on increased suicide rates, it is more vital than ever that we seek integration between mental health care and the response to missing.

Currently there is little connection between services and people are left to fall through the gaps.

A first step is the adoption of the [National Framework: The multi-agency response for adults missing from health and care settings](#), developed by a Task and Finish Group commissioned by this APPG, to ensure that the right response is in place for people who go missing from those settings. This is an issue that is being considered by the Prime Minister's Implementation Unit and there is support amongst key agencies across the police, health and social care in getting it right.

Recommendation: We are asking the Minister to support the framework and consider how the Home Office can encourage its use throughout local areas in England.

However, this will only impact the estimated 16% of adults who go missing from a health or social care setting. Long-term, to provide support to those who go missing from home as well, we need Cross-Government leadership on ensuring a multi-agency response for missing adults with clear roles for all the most relevant agencies. Without this we risk leaving the response to missing adults to the police alone who are not best equipped or trained to deal with the complexities of why people go missing or the harms that they experience while away.

Recommendation: We are calling on the Minister to lead the development of this Cross-Government approach.

Missing and exploited children

It is clear that the pandemic has impacted on risks to vulnerable children who go missing. The risk of exploitation has not disappeared during the pandemic. Many children continued being exploited during the time when they were less visible to services who are there to identify and help them.

It also resulted in more children spending time online and being exposed to grooming for sexual or criminal exploitation. Issues that have contributed to children going missing during the pandemic will remain a concern in months to come. These issues affect children living at home with families and children in care.

We must ensure that people have the right support in place, that missing is understood as a moment of intervention, triggering that support for those who need it, and that all the agencies involved in the response to missing are equipped and trained to give the best help possible.

This meeting raised again issues that this APPG highlighted in its previous work: out of area placements, placements in unregulated accommodation, transitional safeguarding for missing and exploited children.

The recently announced Care Review and the programme of reforms around unregulated accommodation provide an opportunity to address these issues as well as the Home Office work on CSA strategy and CCE work. .

Recommendation: DFE should work with local authorities to map the provision for children in care, understand sufficiency issues and address the lack of local placements for adolescents with complex needs by supporting local authorities to commission sufficient number of placements

Recommendation: Notifications between local authorities and police when children are out of area need to take place for children who are at risk of going missing and being exploited with clear actions agreed on how to safeguard children

Recommendation: Register of unregulated accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds needs to be developed to prevent the pop up accommodation being used where children are at risk

Recommendation: Transitional safeguarding for missing and exploited children need to be developed and included in the guidance for children and adult social services and safeguarding partnerships on missing children

Recommendation: online harms bill to address risk of children being groomed online for criminal exploitation

Theme 1 – Mental Health

Professor Allan Young

- Professor Allan Young noted that the pandemic has caused a spike in anxiety and depression. Depressive disorders before the pandemic were the 3rd leading cause of disability worldwide for women and 5th for men.
- The pandemic has caused indirect negative effects on people from loss of income, and unemployment as well as the psychological impact of social isolation. Those who are already vulnerable or marginalised are going to be most affected and likely to be in a worse position than before.
- Noted that suicidal behaviours are very sensitive to economic indicators, citied the increase in economic suicide following the 2008 recession in Europe, USA and Canada – 10,000 additional economic suicides across these countries following the recession.
- During the first wave of the pandemic, suicide rates did not increase, but the Professor noted suicides are likely to rise after the economic consequences of the pandemic are felt.
- Long-covid is also having significant impact on mental health.
- Important to remember the impact on healthcare professionals themselves. Among the negative effects can be PTSD, burnout and alcohol misuse.
- People can be very anxious about returning to work but actually much of the time it can be a good thing – not least because it can disrupt someone's social isolation. There needs to be a good infection control policy though.
- Covid has exposed the vulnerability of health systems – including mental health systems.
- We need to think beyond covid. There will be a decline in people's mental health during the lockdown that will then be "played out" during the next five to ten years. However the impact of Covid on the long term mental health trends in the UK is notoriously hard to predict.

Josie Allan, Missing People

- Nearly 100,000 adults are reported missing in the UK each year in over 130,000 incidents.
- Prior to the pandemic:
  - Up to 80% of adults who go missing will be experiencing mental health issues
  - 1 in 20 will go with the intention of taking their own life
  - Not only is missing linked directly with mental health, but also with a range of intersecting issues:
    - 1 in 50 are experiencing financial difficulties
    - 1 in 50 again are escaping violence
    - And 3 in 10 are experiencing relationship breakdown
  - Sadly we can be sure that these issues have worsened over the past year and will continue to affect people more than ever.
- The impact of the pandemic:
  - There was initially a decrease in missing episodes reported during the first lockdown:
    - People we spoke to on the helpline were scared to go missing, even when they didn't feel safe or happy at home
    - The closure of services meant people had nowhere safe to go
    - Possibly some unreported cases
  - Despite that reduction, for those who did go missing there was increased risk. Police statistics for last summer showed that 24% of missing adult incidents were assessed as high risk compared to 15% in the same period the year before. This means the police thought there may be a risk to life or very serious injury.
  - In addition to the increased risk, research on two police force's data found that missing adults were almost twice as likely to suffer harm during the first 6 weeks of the first lockdown in comparison to the same 6 weeks in 2019.

- o The same research, led by researchers from the University of Liverpool and University of Portsmouth, found that Adults were 1.4 times more likely to be at risk of suicide or self-harm.
- o We suspect that people have been less likely to be able to communicate that they are going into crisis. They are seeing loved ones and professionals less and are less likely to have private space to speak to anyone external to their home. This increased pressure can further drive worsening mental health whilst also preventing people from accessing help.

- o A survey we carried out in the autumn found that, amongst people who had been missing or thought about running away:
  - 67% said that covid-19, lockdown and other related measures had affected their mental health for the worse
  - 50% said their access to support services was affected for the worse
  - 44% said their financial situation was affected for the worse
- o There is also a lot that we still don't know but it is likely that there will be even worse impacts:
  - A report by the Centre for Mental Health and supported by 12 mental health charities has suggested that "Groups of people whose mental health is at greatest risk include those with existing mental health problems, people with long-term physical conditions, women and children experiencing violence and abuse, and Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities."
  - These are some of those also at greatest risk of going missing.
- We are working to ensure that a better multi-agency response is put in place for all missing people. We need the police, health, social care, the third sector and a host of other partners to work together to ensure people get the support they need to prevent them going missing, and to address any harm that those who do go experience while away.

Case Study from Missing People's helpline

A 20 year old student returned to their family home when universities closed due to Covid-19. They have a difficult relationship with their father who psychologically abuses them which has a huge affect on their mental health.

They contacted the Missing People helpline because they had run away to remove themselves from the situation but then returned when the instructions to stay at home were introduced.

They didn't know how they would cope through lockdown.

This young person was left with the choice between running away, the risks of breaking lockdown and the lack of available services, or staying somewhere that they didn't feel safe.

Missing People were able to provide emotional support and practical steps to stay safe if they did need to leave, however, the limited access to mental health support made it difficult to ensure this young person would get the help they need.

Discussion

- The impact of Covid-19 on mental health and wellbeing prompted a question around the need to include questions on mental health at the point the person is reported as missing to the police

- Missing children's coordination from Essex County Council noted that it was positive to see a reduction in children and young people going missing during the pandemic, it showed that many young people stuck to the rules. They have had to do lots of mental health referrals which has been a challenge as the CAMHS team is stretched and engagement has been tricky electronically.
- It was corroborated by experiences of services in Herefordshire where they- saw reduction in Looked After Children in residential care homes going missing.

'I think they didn't have the pull factors of visiting friends and family and they had extra nurturing within the Care Homes whilst we were all in the first Lockdown especially. Also school can be problematic for these children and with home schooling they had that pressure/stress removed'.

- Professor Young stressed it was too early to draw conclusions on the impact of the pandemic on mental health long term and what we should be concerned with as we ease lockdown. He noted there has been an increase in substance and alcohol misuse.
- A positive thing is that society has a wider awareness of mental health.
- There has been lots of problems at the beginning of the pandemic with limited availability of mental health services, either due to staff shortages or services being redirected to acute services.
- A problem mentioned by several attendees was transition services and safeguarding – a cliff edge for vulnerable people as they turn 18. It was noted that police could remove a 17 year old from the home of an exploiter, but as soon as they turn 18 and say they do not want to leave, they cannot help them.

'When young people are under 18 they are under the 1989 children act. After that they go to the "cliff edge" of adult services. Things need to be nationally improved here. More work needs to be done in this area.'

- Recommendation was to look at transitional services in Australia that work with young people from mid-teens to mid-twenties.

'Services are divided up between children, adolescents and adults. What about people who are severely mentally ill and going from one age bracket to another in our system. How joined up is their support? In Melbourne they tend to offer a continuous service for people from their mid-teens to their mid-twenties. We need to think more flexibly how we organise care.'

- Participants discussed that transitional safeguarding should be statutory for all looked after children as they transition to adulthood and that it should be in place for all vulnerable young people who go missing. Some examples of things happening in practice to address the issue of transitions were shared

'In our local area there is an exploitation hub for 18 to 25 year olds. It includes adult services and can support mental health issues. There is a clear link up with what particular risks are associated with what particular young person.'

Theme 2 – Exploitation and Trafficking

Iryna Pona, Policy and Research Manager, and Fracesca Nyman, Service Manager, The Children's Society

- In the year before the pandemic, around 70,000 children were reported missing from home or care, many on numerous occasions. Of them around 12,000 were in the care of local authorities.

- Missing incidents related to children make up around 62% of incidents reported to the police. Children go missing due to a variety of push and pull factors –such as unhappiness with care placement, conflict at home, low wellbeing. Other children go missing as a result of being groomed for exploitation. Many of these factors became more prominent during the pandemic and more challenging to address.
- Initial orders to stay at home resulted in a reduction in missing episodes, it was noted that the introduction of the Philomena protocol for children in care also resulted in were children in care reported missing to the police.
- We heard anecdotal evidence that some parents did not report their children missing due to worries about COVID fines.
- Closure of schools, youth provision, places in community made vulnerable children less visible to services. At the same time risks increased. Combination of factors such as higher number of domestic violence reports, isolation from usual networks of friends, low emotional wellbeing, more time spent on social media and gaming platforms resulted in some children becoming more vulnerable to grooming and going missing. Online grooming of children for criminal exploitation increased during pandemic.
- Children exploited by criminal groups for drug trafficking went missing for longer periods of time and experienced being trafficked to other areas.
- We have noticed that criminal groups who exploit children adapted their ways of trafficking to avoid children being visible on public transport. Private hire vehicles were being used to traffic children more often. And young people were forced to spend more time in coockoed properties.
- There have been concerns about children in care in unregulated accommodation or placed further away from home, becoming more vulnerable to exploitation due to staff shortages or reduction in contacts with support workers brought out by travel restrictions
- Advocating for exploited children have also been challenging, particularly where a child may be seen primarily as a young offender even where their offending behaviour is linked to their exploitation. For example, we were concerned that young people missing while on bail for drug related offences were seen as 'wanted' by police rather than missing, making it more likely for young person trying to avoid coming into contact with services there to help them and instead being dependent on people exploiting them.

- **Responding to children going missing has also changed during Covid -19.** Although phone and video contact was working well for some children it was not working for all. Digital poverty made it more difficult for vulnerable children to stay in touch with services . Effort was put into maintaining regular contact and relationship with young people known to services prior to COVID 19 irrespective of whether the child went missing.

- Building trusting relationship with young people who went missing for the first time during COVID 19 and were not familiar with the service was more challenging.
- Despite challenges success was also possible:

Case Study from The Children's Society – Young person A

Young person A. was known to police, arrested for possession of weapons, there were concerns that A. was criminally exploited. He was going missing regularly and for long periods of time. We started working with A virtually and as his missing episodes intensified, so did intensified 1:2:1 support we were providing. Building trusting relationships with the young person, facilitating young person's relationship with social worker, his mentor, and family as well, helping him understand his situation and aspire for better future were the key elements of that 1:2:1 support that was happening virtually and late face to face. Rebuilding these positive relationships has made a huge impact. He is set to complete his GCSE's. His behaviour and relationships with the family

improved leading gradually to the reduction of missing episodes. Last missing episode was in early November 2020.

Allan Rees-Cooper, Staff Officer to ACC Catherine Hankinson, NPCC lead for Missing People

- 35% reduction in children and young people missing to the police, when lockdown was lifted it increased but not to what was seen in previous years
- Analysed the reported missing incidents during lockdown and found a greater percentage were:
  - Categorised as low risk – reverse to adult population
  - CYP going missing tended to be older, went missing for shorter periods and many went missing from care homes
  - CYP that went missing had suffered violence, experienced domestic abuse, transphobia, increased mental health issues
  - Some CYP were found 41-80 miles away from where they went missing
- Immediate effects – breach of covid direction to stay at home.
- Some carers reported CYP missing even if they weren't, some young people had gone to see friends or were just out but carers reported them as missing. Also it was noted there were less carers about due to sickness, so carers that would usually go out and find the young person did not during lockdown. Alan explained this contributed to more missing incidents being categorised as low risk.
- Also parents were reluctant to report CYP missing because of COVID fines, this was recognised by ACC Hankinson who issued guidance on reporting incidents and fines.
- Some young people weren't missing to meet their families as contact visits were suspended, this was really problematic for young people placed 'out of area', this might attribute to the rise in young people being found miles away from home as they were going home to see family.
- Out of the remaining incidents, it was clear there was a higher percentage of CYP going missing for mental health and abuse in the home which was very worrying.
- The impact of lockdown on criminal exploitation was initially positive, children were more easily identifiable on public transport and the lockdown did initially have a disruptive effect on organised crime groups using county lines. But organised crime groups adapted:
  - Started to operate with local children
  - Used private hire vehicles
- It was noted that online grooming activity increased. Laptops provided by schools to children had *eSafeGlobal* installed on them.
- *"from 1st October to 31st December 2020, across 1650 children in care, in just 3 of our local authority customers, eSafe reported 5454 incidents of which 3327 were young people communicating with strangers with 2125 of these incidents occurring via webcam"*

Discussion

- It was noted by several attendees and Alan how that increase in online grooming for criminal exploitation was an issue of great concern. Online grooming activity might not have manifested itself yet into missing incidents, but as lockdown lifts, having formed these online relationships it is expected missing incidents and risks to children will increase.

'My experience in both Wolverhampton and Solihull where I've supported missing YP is whilst missing episodes have reduced online exploitation during lockdown has increased. There has been less instances of traditional 'county lines' however perpetrators have adjusted to the restrictions and either are exploiting YP in their home town, online or shifting to exploiting YP that are more likely to 'go under the radar''

- Challenges when lockdown is lifted will be online grooming as there is greater opportunity to meet exploiters and there were concerns about how OCGs were going to adapt their tactics again.
- Officer from a Met Borough Council asked what best practice for welfare return interviews was. The Children's Society noted that it was key to have an independent interviewer who has specialist knowledge in how to spot the signs of exploitation. Alan Rhees-Cooper noted it was about the quality of the interview and the sharing of information and intelligence afterwards with the police.
- Voluntary sector representatives spoke of the increased fear amongst asylum seeking children who may have been retraumatised by the pandemic and associated measures and most severely impacted by the social isolation. Fear of what happens to immigration status here after eighteen. The people here may well have no social or family networks. They have been in one traumatic situation and when they come to the UK the trauma continues.
  - Representative from Ofsted raised concerns about an increase in children being home educated as well as of Local authorities still not telling host authorities when they move a child into their area.
  - Placing of children out of area was an issue identified consistently in discussion, both in terms of information sharing, safety of accommodation provided and responsibility at the point the child goes missing.

'In terms of the placing children in other local authorities there needs to be extensive mapping of specialist placements at local, regional and national level. Front line staff may not understand who the providers are.

'We're having some issues in our LA with accommodation providers stating that it's the SW responsibility to locate the YP and refuse to make efforts and will only report them missing to Police when they're not actually missing...'

  - Many concerns were raised about the use of unregulated accommodation, an issue that has been highlighted by this APPG in it report 'No Place At Home' from the APPG Inquiry into children missing from our of area placements.

'Kent police have an issue with "pop-up placements" and also with unregulated placements. The placements can very quickly pop and then close down. Communication is not as good as it should be. There is a great concern about the quality of care the young people in these placements are experiencing. '

Because of the rules of supply and demand unregulated care homes have emerged as a stop gap.

Care planning is often not good enough and little thought is put into decisions. For instance many local authority children are placed in seaside towns in Kent when it is well known that these can be county lines hot spots.

Some of the unregulated care homes are in exploitation hot spots and red-light areas. The authorities themselves can be very ignorant of the nature of the places they are putting young people into.

  - It was noted by Police forces on the call that some pop up placements are being managed by OCGs and are in very unsuitable areas.
  - It was noted by several attendees that the Government need to nationally map care providers on a local, regional and national level by the type of provision, specialist support it can provide and its registration with Ofsted. – this would help with lack of engagement by some providers in the unregulated (semi-independent) accommodation sector.

- Some examples of good practice in relation to information sharing about risks to children placed in out of area accommodation were shared

'St Christopher's is working closely with LB Barnet around Contextual Safeguarding in relation to CYP being placed out of the borough. We're looking into pre-mapping and sharing intel with the host Local Authorities at time of placement being arranged, as well as holding joint Strategy Meeting.'

- Responses to children going missing during COVID-19, particularly where children were at risk of criminal exploitation were also raised by SPACE:

We flagged concerns around CCE parents' being fined to Alan as many of our parents had raised this as soon as fines were announced. There was also concern from many parents that their reporting would be seen even more as a waste of Police time given their experiences before lockdown.

- The importance of joint working was noted as an important learning from COVID 19

Just to make the point that this past year, I have known more about the national picture than ever before as we have really understood the need to talk to each other and work together. We have all had to be collaborative, agile, flexible, responsive and adaptable. I truly hope this is something that will continue.

Next Steps

- The APPG officers will reconvene and share this briefing note with Minister Atkins in the Home Office and Minister Ford in the DFE.
- The APPG will hold further meetings focussed on the issues raised

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