

# The response to missing young people during the transition from childhood to adulthood

A survey exploring challenges and good practice in supporting this group

October 2022

## Introduction

The charities Missing People and NWG Network are collaborating, alongside the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC), to better understand what happens for children and young people who are regularly going missing as they transition to adulthood. We know going missing can be a warning sign of serious harms including exploitation, mental health issues and abuse. We also know that Looked After Children are reported missing significantly more than others, and that some will go missing repeatedly.

Turning 18 doesn't necessarily change the challenges or harms that young people are experiencing, however, sometimes it can be a cliff-edge in terms of the help available.

The response for missing adults is quite different than that for children: police actions are more limited, less support is in place, and young adults may be in contact with different services than they were as children.

This work is in line with an emerging national focus on Transitional Safeguarding, which you can find more information about in this [knowledge briefing](#).

In May this year we launched a survey seeking views from professionals from a range of agencies working with young people. The survey sought information on the challenges facing young people who repeatedly go missing as they approach adulthood; on the barriers that professionals come up against; and on good practice that they have identified for responding to this group.

It is recognised that professionals are faced with difficult choices when it comes to allocating resources and children are quite rightly prioritised. However, a young person's vulnerability does not change on their 18th birthday and there are an increasing number of initiatives where children's and adults' services are working more closely together to ensure young people continue to be supported as they transition to adulthood.

This report summarises the findings from the survey and aims to generate further conversation about how we can improve practice.

## Aims & Methodology

Missing People carried out this survey with the aims of:

1. Better understanding what is happening for young people who are going missing repeatedly as they approach and pass their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.
2. Exploring whether any missing-specific services continue as children reach adulthood.
3. Exploring what barriers and challenges professionals perceive in providing a positive response to young people in this group.
4. Identifying good practice in the response for this group.

A survey was developed and shared with Missing People and NWG's existing networks, as well as on social media. The survey was anonymous and participants were self-selecting. The responses may not be representative of the views of all professionals working in this area, so the findings are not generalisable.

In total we received 96 responses to the survey.

## Summary

Responses to the survey show professionals are keen to provide better support to young people who are going missing repeatedly as they approach and pass their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. They also showed frustration with the current limitations on providing a good response.

Respondents identified a wide range of challenges that these young people face, and yet consistently spoke about the lack of services available to support them through those years.

Almost all the good practice referenced in the responses related to care-leavers, presumably due to the statutory responsibilities for that group up to the age of 25. This means we should be asking what is happening for 16-25 year olds who have not been in the care system but may have been forced to leave home, or had to leave for their own safety, or those who simply don't have supportive people around them, even if they are still living with family.

Too often we see people being reported as missing as a standalone safeguarding act with no accompanying support or intervention to address why they went missing or any harm they experienced while away. We need to acknowledge that just reporting someone missing is not effectively safeguarding them. There are surrounding actions that need to be taken to genuinely make someone safer.

Findings from the survey suggest that, in some cases, less and less attention is paid to young people who are going missing as they approach 18. However, we need to challenge that approach and reframe the response – we should be having a burst of focus as young people approach 18 – there is a short window before young people move into adulthood: an opportunity to engage them, to build relationships, to build their own self-value and resilience, and to identify and work through any risks or harms they are experiencing. Going missing is often a warning sign and we need to listen and act to try and address any issues rather than assume they will pass or won't be our problem as soon as the child becomes an adult.

Examples provided in response to the survey show that many professionals and some whole agencies are already trying to take this approach. However, almost all identified barriers and it was broadly acknowledged that the response is not consistent in local areas, let alone across the country.

With a recent increased focus on transitional safeguarding we hope there is an opportunity to change practice and ensure we get this right for all young adults.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations, if implemented, will help to move us towards a more consistent national response. It is important to note however that there is much more to be learned about what good practice looks like, and what changes are needed to ensure we are getting the response right. These are suggestions based on early findings:

- Local authorities should ensure that their children and adult services are working together, including having capacity to attend planning and strategy meetings for young people that fall within the other's remit when beneficial. Areas should explore the potential for all-age or co-located Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs or similar services.
- Local authorities should consider introducing Transitional Safeguarding Teams who can provide specialist support to 16-25 year olds who are experiencing risk or harm. Going missing repeatedly or being identified as high-risk while missing should trigger the teams involvement.
- Local partnerships should develop multi-agency protocols for the response to missing adults to ensure that multi-agency roles and responsibilities are clear. This should be supported by strategic and operational groups who are able to ensure information sharing, shared responsibility and accountability, and problem solving any issues emerging between agencies.
- Commissioners across the safeguarding sector should consider building flexibility into their commissioning expectations for services allowing them to provide support to young people as they pass the age of 18 if positive relationships are in place or if it will be beneficial to the young person.
- Agencies responsible for both education and housing should be brought into conversations about transitional safeguarding and the response to missing at both a local and national level.
- Local areas should seek opportunities to further engage frontline practitioners to identify practice and resources that they think can make a difference in their support to young people at transition age.
- Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission and HMICFRS should explore working together to ensure that transitional safeguarding, including how local partnerships are providing to support to adolescents and young adults who are at risk of going missing, is included in inspection frameworks.

- The Missing Benchmarking Tool should be further developed to include the response for missing adults. Currently it only relates to services for children.
- Third sector organisations including the NWG and Missing People should share good practice examples of how legislation and statutory guidance can be used in a way that is flexible to meeting the needs of adolescents and young adults who are going missing, as well as more good practice examples of transitional safeguarding.

## Findings

This survey was exploratory as we are in the early stages of trying to understand missing and transitional safeguarding. The findings raise more questions than they provide answers, although there are some powerful examples of good practice that could be replicated in other areas. As one respondent put it in response to a question about the many challenges facing young people as they reach 18 *“don't know the answer but we do need a solution”*.

Where possible we have included recommendations, but as of yet we are not able to provide a roadmap for how agencies should best respond. Instead we hope that the findings will trigger conversations and action in multi-agencies partnerships across the country to review their current process, any gaps in support, and what more can be done to ensure young people's safety throughout the ages of 17-25.

### ***What is happening in your area for young adults who were going missing repeatedly before their 18th birthday once they turn 18? For example, are they still reported missing?***

The question of when young adults should be reported missing is a complex one. The systems and responses are different than those for children. The police have more limited responsibilities and powers in adult missing person investigations and adults have a right to leave their home as and when they wish for the most part. However, adults very much can still go missing – the police Authorised Professional Practice (APP) definition of missing is “Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.” Any adult whose whereabouts can't be established and is at serious risk of harm may need to be reported missing to ensure their safety.

When we consider the links between repeat missing and exploitation, mental health issues and a range of other harms, it highlights the importance of having clear plans and support in place for those who are approaching 18 to ensure that they do not just disappear from the view of services.

Responses to this question varied. Some (10 of 95) respondents said that young people were much less likely to be reported missing: *“no longer reported missing as much”, “They are rarely reported missing at the point they turn 18.”* Whereas others explained that they had specific measures in place to ensure this group continued to be supported, including reporting them as missing when necessary, because of understanding of the continued vulnerability: *“The local partnership have for some time recorded and continued to engage 18 and still vulnerable exploitation acknowledgment, thus supporting MACE and other inter-agency district analysis work. We are attempting to recruit an adults exploitation social worker but 1st advert attempt did not result in appointment. For children leaving our care we keep in touch and personal advisors aim to signpost young people to adult*

*services. This cohort of children are reported given the local authority statutory requirements and where there is strong evidence of harm presenting for the young person.”*

About 19% (18 of 95) of respondents said that whether a young person continues to be reported missing would depend on the level of risk and the person’s vulnerability to exploitation or self-harm. This suggests a proportionate approach as the risk and level of concern will necessarily inform whether someone should be reported missing and whether the police will respond. However, to understand the risks facing someone, and their vulnerability, we need to know that person – there needs to be records and professionals holding a relationship with them. It is difficult to see how this kind of approach could happen in areas that don’t have services in place for young adults.

Another ten respondents explained that it would often depend on the accommodation that the young person is living in as to whether anyone identified that they were missing: *“Yes they still get reported, it just depends in what care setting they are then living and who is interested in them to report them. Some still have curfews, others do not.”*

Many of the responses suggested that young people who had been in care as they approached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday had more systems in place to identify any risks as they entered adulthood. This is due to the ongoing responsibility that local authorities should hold for those who continue to live in care, and care-leavers. It does however raise the question of who is looking out for young people who are not care-experienced but who also may not have protective factors around them in their own family or support networks.

Overall responses to this question highlighted the complexity and lack of consistency in the response for young adults who may be at continued risk of going missing. The response must be nuanced – we cannot continue to report over-18 year olds as missing just because they are out when we would like or expect them to be home. However, many of the harms facing children will persist into adulthood, and some young people will experience serious harm. We must avoid situations where they are unreported and unlooked for.

*“It depends on the level of risk - most children who turn 18 are not reported missing to the police after their 18th birthday. Children in care are reported missing to the overnight duty line if they are not at their placement as expected.*

*If a young adult is recognised to be at a serious level of risk, attempts will be made to report them missing, however, the response from the police is variable and often they will say 'they're 18 and can do what they want'.*

*This is also occasionally happening to 17 year olds who are frequently reported missing and police suggest that 'this is a pattern of persistent behaviour' and will not take on the report, despite clear exploitation concerns.”*

We would recommend every local area considers their response for this group to ensure continuing oversight and relationships with vulnerable young people through the transition age so that effective decision-making can be made about reporting them as missing.

### ***Who would be responsible for reporting young adults as missing once they are past the age of 18?***

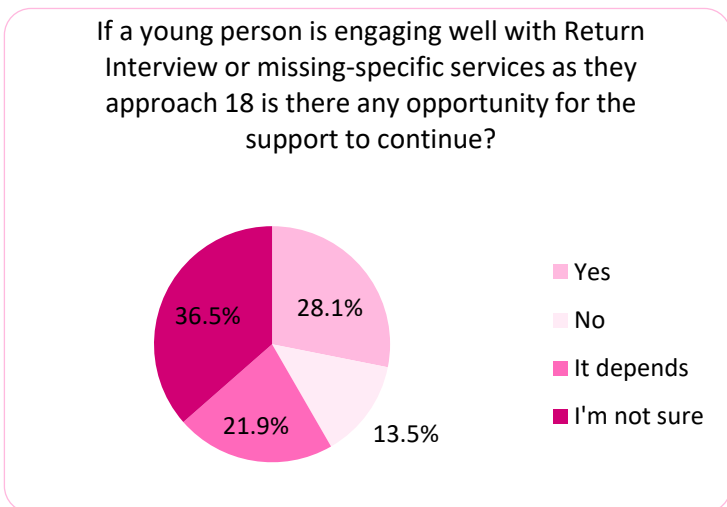
Responses to this question again were varied. The general consensus was that this would depend on the young person and their individual circumstances. The most common responses are listed below with the number of people that mentioned them in the second column:

Parents/Family /Partner/Friends	35
Social Worker/social care	21
Anyone who is concerned/involved	15
Placement Staff/ Support staff	15
Care worker/ Carer	14
Accommodation Provider	10

Generally it was felt that there was rightly no one-size-fits-all answer to this as the situations will vary so much. The range of potential reporting persons suggested that for many young people there would be a number of different professionals or people in their lives who could report if there were concerns for their wellbeing. However, a small number of respondents did flag that some people might fall through the gaps: *“It depends on the situation the young person finds themselves in. If they have a wraparound support then it may be the housing setting. In some cases it may be no one as they are ‘on their own’.”*

***If a young person is engaging well with Return Interview or missing-specific services as they approach 18 is there any opportunity for the support to continue?***

Just over a quarter (27 of 96) of respondents said that Return Interview services could continue to support young people beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, however, most responses that provided further detail suggested that this would only be the case for care-experienced young people, and would generally depend on the young person’s willingness to engage:



*“For children in care, the support can continue. They can access a Children's Rights Officer (who complete the independent RHI's) and will have a Leaving Care PA. The support could be less frequent, but this has to be balanced with the young person consenting to the service - they may not want to speak to us.”*

*“Young person can continue to be supported until the age of 25 by our Early Help and Preventative services - who complete the return interviews for children not open to Children’s Services. It is a voluntary service but the opportunity is there. Otherwise further support is dependent on referral to 18+services if they were in care as a child and fit the criteria for this service.”*

*“There may be a short intervention where children are already working with the MFH team and there is an adult social worker linked to the complex safeguarding hub who could give advice of appropriate support services post 18.”*



Just under 14% (13 of 96) said that no return interview services could continue once a child passes 18 years old:

*“The Return Home Interview Advocates stop completing the interviews once they reach 18”*

*“RHI's do not continue once the young person turns 18.”*

Some acknowledged the potential benefits of extending services:

*“Our Return Interview Service ceases at age 18 - there is a clear argument to continue this support, however, funding and capacity mean it is not possible.”*

The responses to this question again highlight the inconsistency in support for missing young people post-18. Research has shown the value of return interviews for children.<sup>1</sup> There is very little research about the impact of a similar service for adults as few pilots of such a service have been carried out. However, it is reasonable to assume that if they are helpful for children, they are likely to help those who have just passed into adulthood.

We believe national consistency should be established in the continuation of services through the transition age, and that this should include flexibility in the delivery of return interviews – continuing to provide them to young adults when the circumstances suggest that they could be beneficial.

***When a young adult turns 18, which agency would be responsible for holding information about missing incidents, including risk and vulnerability markers, about them as a child? For example, are return interview records or police missing person reports still informing the response if they come into contact with health, social care services, or the police?***

Respondents spoke about a range of agencies who would hold this information. The most commonly mentioned were police (n42), social care (n29) and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) or multi-agency partnerships (n11).

There were varied responses on how easy the information is to access:

*“Historical information is still held on police health and social care systems, shared and taken into account yes”*

*“It is our experience as police, information known to a child's social worker is not normally available to an adult social worker. However all information would be known to police and they would continue to be responsible for missing episodes as police and would inform those responsible of relevant information.”*

*“Currently no missing information is shared with my LA from misper [missing person] co-ordinators within police for over 18's. All information prior to their 18th birthday is held on social work databases in line with information retention policies.”*

*“The records of missing when the young person is under 18 years is always available for scrutiny as is social care records. These are not routinely accessed when the young person is over 18 and goes missing.”*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A\\_Safer\\_Return-full.pdf](https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A_Safer_Return-full.pdf) / <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/the-first-step.pdf>

Private information should not be shared unnecessarily but there should be processes in place in every local area for proportionate sharing of relevant information relating to missing adults.

***In your experience are there any challenges specifically facing young adults as they reach this transition age?***

Respondents spoke about a wide range of challenges young people reaching the transition age. There was clearly frustration at the limitations in support available and the cliff-edge that some young people find themselves facing with the withdrawal of many services.

The most commonly mentioned challenges were:

- Support can drop off after the young person turns 18 (n40)  
*“A significant proportion of the support they receive as a child dries up virtually overnight though the risks and reasons for that support do not disappear, there is a lot less support for adults than young people.”*  
*“Not apart from the obvious..... going from lots of agencies taking an interest in you, to almost none.”*
- Not enough preparation for independent living / Limited independence skills (n10)  
*“Yes, Many sadly. The responsibilities they are expected to have at a young age. They are not only being closed by Children Services they have lost a social worker who they have worked with for a long time and their world is opened up to Leaving Care and the uncertainty that their future holds. In 13 years I have observed the transition from 17 to 18 years old to be rather traumatic. Whether it is their foster carers who have decided to end the young person’s placement with them, having to move area, having to accept new professionals in their lives, the benefit system, the expectation that they should be independent. Their mental health suffers greatly and more often than not this is the time when their mental health difficulties become apparent.”*  
*“Some are not ready to take on looking after themselves without any support due to them not being trained / coached by social services to live independently.”*
- Risk of continued sexual and criminal exploitation but poorer professional response (n10)  
*“Yes, one example is where offending behaviour becomes priority and warrants for arrest superseded any missing report even when its exploitation related”*  
*“Possible or continued exploitation is a major concern.”*
- Less support if young person goes missing / Likely or more likely to go missing (n9)  
*“High volume of repeat MFH [missing from home] incidents relate to young people living in semi-independent accommodation. Already under reported whilst under 18 so definitely would not be reported when over 18”*  
*“From my experience young people who reside in Residential Care are closely monitored and supported, there are always adults available to search for them, report them missing, collect*



*them when they have been located and support on their return home, once they turn 18 and move to independence this level of support is no longer there leaving the young people more vulnerable to exploitation.”*

- Lack of resources/agencies to support the transition (n7)

*“I believe that there is a lack of support for the young person as they reach their 18th birthday, services in place begin to pull away from them to teach them independence, however there is limited services to help them transition into adulthood”*

*“Yes, lack of transitional support - inappropriate move on placements - not matched to the needs of the young adult”*

Many respondents mentioned a mixture of the above affecting young people, as well as other factors:

*“Continuity of care, amount of services available to them, limited independence skills, not accessing education, employment or training, limited economic support, limited family networks or support networks, and limited mental health support available.”*

Some mentioned the lack of referrals from child to adult services, or the challenges in making those referrals:

*“Yes, I work in adult safeguarding and we never get any referrals or information about vulnerable transitioning teens. This is really worrying as my background is youth offending and again post 18 there is no safeguarding information shared re these very vulnerable young people”*

*“Loads! a second after they turn 18, it is my opinion children’s services are relieved and can wash their hands moving onto the next. They don’t try and support the transition and this applies to adult services as well. Unless they have 'care and support needs' which seems to have the threshold of a peak you will never climb, the young person is left alone”*

*“Too many to list. The vulnerabilities don't end on the date of the 18th birthday, but access to services may do. We find that there is rarely a good handover from child services to adult services in the council.”*

Some respondents spoke about these challenges beginning earlier, when the child is 16 or 17, and how services can be ‘relieved’ to no longer need to provide support:

*“I feel that as a child is soon to 'turn 18' that professionals from all the agencies can... wait the time out! This is not in the spirit of transitional planning from 16 years etc. Young people feel they are effectively dropped from many professionals, left to self-manage their challenges.”*

*“Huge gaps in provisioned services for 16/17 year olds. 16 year olds being placed in hostels alongside adults who are leading chaotic lives. 16/17 year olds being placed in unregulated placements. A general lack of appropriate services for young people in their approach to adulthood. A limited supply of "personal advisors" for young people. Services not preparing young people for independent living.”*

*“Lots - resources and support drop off at an alarming rate at certain milestones i.e. 16 and 18”*

Others spoke about the challenges in providing support to young people when they can choose to refuse help or leave services:

*“Young people are reluctant to engage. Difficult to make safeguarding decisions given their age”*

*“Yes, they are no less vulnerable than the day before their 18th birthday and can chose to discharge from LA support, but do this while still at risk of CE.”*

One respondent raised a different perspective – that young people who are approaching 18 often continue to be treated like children without acknowledgement of their maturity:

*“They are often still treated as children rather than young people approaching adulthood which they find intrusive and often belittling.”*

Finally, respondents identified the need for a more coordinated response through the transition period, and specified that this needs to happen across a range of agencies:

*“So many services do not provide support through the transition, either an adult service or child service. This is the case for local authority, mental health, substance misuse, and education to a lesser degree.”*

It is clear that many professionals have identified the need for improved transition support; for better pathways between child and adult services across a range of agencies; for more continuity in the support for children who are reliant on or have a positive relationship with existing support; for more resources to ensure that this can all be provided; and for more scrutiny to ensure that children aren't being left to fall through the cracks as they approach adulthood.

### ***Additionally, are there challenges facing professional services in their response for this group?***

The responses to this question again showed frustration amongst professionals at the limitations they face in providing appropriate support to young adults.

The most common themes were the limited capacity or resources available to effectively support young people as they approach 18 and afterwards (n24); the young person not consenting to support, or adults having the right to refuse support (n12); issues relating to the rigidity of the law defining how services interact with adults regardless of varied levels of maturity and independence (n7); and reluctance amongst services to help this group of people (n7).

Some of the responses showed conflict in views on what should happen in regard to missing reports when young people turn 18. Some respondents felt that the police aren't willing to respond for this group: *“Police aren't interested once a young person is 18.” “There is a challenge for the police in that there is a perception that a child is naturally vulnerable due to age, but an adult may well not be. Just because a person changes age by a few days it does not mean their risk declines. The perception of the risk automatically lowers in the minds of responders.”* Whereas others felt that young people were receiving inappropriate care which led to them being reported missing unnecessarily: *“Many who were in the care system are placed in assisted living placements where they are free to come & go as they please. Despite this, they are still very often reported missing by support staff purely because it's protocol or because they come under pressure from a social worker. There is sometimes good reason to report someone missing, but this only indicates that the individual has been inappropriately placed and should actually been in a full care home.”* And some even felt that adults should not be reported missing: *“A young adult has the right to make choices whether*

*they be considered to be risky or not, they are also entitled to live their lives in a way that they see fit.”*

This conflict needs to be addressed through partnership working. Local areas should have regular meetings in place between the key agencies to discuss and challenge perceived inappropriate reporting and refusals of reports from the police. Positive cross-agency relationships can make a huge difference in ensuring that the right decisions are made about reporting, and in ensuring that all agencies feel confident in how young people in their area can best be safeguarded.

A number of respondents also spoke about challenges in finding appropriate placements or accommodations for children approaching adulthood, and for young adults. This is a much wider issue that has been considered in the recent Care Review. While there are limited suitable placements this will continue to present a challenge for good safeguarding.

Finally, one respondent identified that we need *“A cohesive plan around transitional safeguarding. It’s a bit hit and miss at the moment. We are working on this at the moment.”*

***Do you have any examples of good practice for 18+ year olds who go missing? Including any planning or work prior to their becoming an adult.***

Responses to this question showed that there is some excellent practice already happening for young people who go missing as they approach adulthood. We could not include all of the responses but have tried to identify themes alongside some examples.

Centring the young person – creating opportunities for them to share how they are feeling and what they need to ensure a positive transition to adulthood, and ensuring that they know who they can still talk to after turning 18:

*“I believe communication and support is key so that they know that if they do face any difficulties then they have someone to engage with rather than them having to make their own way through this difficult stage in their life and being open to potentially being led down the wrong path.”*

*“Supporting young people to find their routes, help them work out their priorities and spend time understanding what they need and what they want.”*

*“I supported a young person who was known for going missing from home. Prior to them turning 18 we involved them in all their transition meetings, helped them reduce their substance misuse and also ensured they understood their own risks. This young person has since gone on to get their own property and a job and has been living risk free for over a year.”*

*“Work needs to take place from the age of 15/16 to prepare young people for independence and the outside world. Keeping safe and learning about issues you can face would be part of this work. Phone numbers for support would be provided from us in order that they would have a directory of aid they can access.”*

Having the capacity and agreement to hold multi-agency meetings with representatives from children’s and adult services:

*“We now have adult MACE meetings which are jointing with our adults services to offer Vulnerable adult risk meetings (VARM)”*

*“Bradford Child Exploitation (CE) Hub collate 18 and still vulnerable data and present to MACE, this endorsing our all age exploitation ethos. Risk management meetings are still held despite being 18, with the aim of assisting young adults to navigate services they might need going forward.”*

*“Good practice has seen adult social care attend risk management meetings prior to the young person reaching 18 so they are aware of the ongoing issues and able to offer a more stable transition.”*

*“Our district contextual safeguarding meetings and the Complex Adolescent harm meetings are very good multiagency meetings looking at missing, exploitation and other risk of harm concerns for persons up to 25. It means they can access a wraparound service, and all professionals can understand risk and vulnerability to highlight within their own organisation to appropriately adjust their intervention and actions when interaction occurs - i.e. noting the young person will remain high or medium risk when missing and does require a proportionate or immediate response and which professionals or trusted adults should be involved in the investigation. For Kent police the work of the Missing Adult Liaison Officers - police support staff within Missing and Child Exploitation Teams. They act as tactical advisors whilst linking in with professionals and having knowledge of a variety of services and or good information/ intel resource within the community. Likewise the Vulnerable Adult investigation Officers - PCSO's within the multi-agency community safety units that engage with vulnerable adults to assist in signposting and problem-solving for them - whilst both roles cover all adults for transitioning adults this can be a crucial and very relevant service.”*

Flexible support provided by those who have a positive relationship with the young person:

*“One example, a young person, regular misper [missing person], taken into care at 16. She was offered a PA and regular care team meetings took place prior to her 18th birthday, when she turned 18 she still received support from her placement staff even when she could no longer live in the Ofsted registered placement. this was something the staff offered themselves as they recognised the gap in the service and had formed good relationships with her, this was not protocol or 'the norm'”*

Trialling new support for adults:

*“We are currently trialling a process whereby the local PCSO's contact adult mispers [missing persons] to have a conversation regarding reasons for going missing and any help that is required.”*

Planning ahead of them turning 18 to ensure appropriate safeguarding and responses to missing episodes when they become an adult:

*“Yes. a vulnerable young person in our care completed capacity assessments prior to turning 18. from these assessments their level of needs were established and their risks. this was communicated with local police when there was missing episodes and responded to accordingly.”*

It is hugely positive to see good practice already in place, despite all the challenges that were shared in response to previous questions. It is clear that professionals across the country are actively looking for ways to better support this group. However, the support is patchy and even within these responses people identified that sometimes this was staff going 'above and beyond' rather than something that can be routinely offered.

We recommend that all local areas review the examples above and consider whether similar practice could be replicated in their services. As mentioned earlier in this report, we are in the early days of exploring this issue so we would also encourage new and innovative projects and pilots to test what works to support young adults who have been regularly missing.

***Do you have any other comments about young people going missing as they transition to childhood and the response from professionals?***

We ended the survey with this question to gather any additional comments from respondents. A few of those which raised issues that haven't been discussed so far have been included below.

One person spoke about the urgency of doing this work now:

*"The level of risk is increasing and the number of missing reports for those close to transition also appear to be increasing.*

*The number of children coming into care aged 16 or 17 is increasing and risks are primarily related to exploitation worries.*

*The scale of mental health issues and the need for mental health services is increasing.*

*The services available to those close to transition are not keeping up with the level of need due to lack of funding and high turnover of staff within services."*

Another spoke about the urgency of better responses for the child themselves: *"If there are problems with the child before they turn 18 they need the intervention before the 18th birthday as it becomes so much harder once they are an adult."*

Two people suggested that there should be specialist teams in every area: *"I believe every LA should have a transitions team that works with young people who are vulnerable up until the age of 25, this should be a multi-agency team so that all areas of a young person's health and social needs are met", "I would like to see a transition team for 16 - 21 year old people. This team could support with housing, financials etc to remove the pull to crime and missing."* And another at least wanted to see support extended to 19 year olds: *"It has been recognised widely that 16-25s are vulnerable due to the transition into adulthood and what this means in terms of support, but services still have a cut off limit of 18. I feel all support from professionals should be up until age of 19 to support the fall out once someone turns 18."*

One person said that *"National Guidance would be helpful"* and another spoke about the need for clarity on who is responsible *"I think there is a gap in services and confusion on who should be responsible for identifying issues early when a young adult turns 18."*

Another respondent highlighted the issues of agencies not taking responsibility for young people in this group and, vitally, the impact that this can have: *"I don't know what I'd suggest as an adequate response, however I'd like to flag that there's a widespread sense of "It's not my problem" upon the*



*transition from childhood to adulthood as legally speaking there's a limited amount of support that certain services can offer adults due to their remit. This perception from the perspective of the young adults results in further feelings of abandonment by society and frequently compounds the problems they face as well as lack of trust in authority figures or services intended to help them."*

Finally, one respondent encapsulated how we need a nuanced approach going forwards: *"Just that the risks for the young person do not suddenly disappear with the slight change in age. The risk level should be based on the needs at that time not necessarily on the age."*

## Roundtable discussion: additional themes

On 7 July 2022 a roundtable meeting was held with representatives from the police, child and adult services, third sector and a range of others. Attendees were given a summary of the findings from this survey and discussed good practice and next steps in developing a more coordinated national approach to transitional safeguarding for missing children and adults.

Key themes from the discussion are included below as they help to further develop the learning from the survey findings.

### Multi-agency culture change

Attendees discussed the need for culture change with all agencies who work with young people understanding and taking responsibility for their role in supporting children and young adults who continue to be at risk of going missing.

Health, education and housing were specifically mentioned in addition to police and social care who have been more involved in discussions so far.

Currently there is a sense that the response for adults is fundamentally separate to that for children, and that we should not intervene in adults' lives in the same way. However, discussion centred around the need to see services for the two as connected, and although we should absolutely respect adults' rights to autonomy and privacy, we shouldn't withdraw offers of support purely due to age.

There was also acknowledgement that we need to have more focus on disruption and early intervention: proactively trying to break cycles of exploitation, worsening mental health or abusive situations as young people approach adulthood. This supports the idea that came through in the survey of stepping up support at 16-17 rather than stepping back.

### The need for an improved response to missing adults

It was acknowledged that we broadly need to improve the response to missing adults. Adults who are reported missing are often at higher risk, with a greater percentage dying while missing; and some evidence that young adults are being regularly targeted by exploiters *because* there is a less coherent response than that for children.

Attendees spoke about the benefits of bringing in missing adult protocols that reflect some of the good practice we already have in place for children. This can improve information sharing and



partnership support and interventions for adults who are going missing which would necessarily benefit young adults as part of the wider group.

However, attendees agreed that repeatedly reporting adults as missing, with no accompanying safeguarding action to address harm and prevent other episodes is unlikely to help and is not in the best interests of the young person. It was acknowledged that there are circumstances where an adult very much does need to be reported missing – if they are believed to be at risk of immediate harm. However, in other situations it was suggested that good practice is a more flexible approach, with case-by-case decision making that could include: making a missing report, engaging specialist services to address ongoing harm, using disruption tactics, making a referral to exploitation teams within policing, or taking alternative safeguarding action. This approach would also then need accompanying action from partner agencies, based on who is best able to engage the person and what type of support they need.

When a missing report is made, and the police do attend, they need to understand their role in adolescent and adult safeguarding and feel confident in their response. There is a sense that some frontline officers do not always recognise the vulnerability of this group and consider police intervention as unhelpful. Training and supervision for frontline staff should ensure that officers understand their role in the partnership response to missing adults; should challenge compassion fatigue or frustration that might impact decision making; should outline the positive impact that officers can have when investigating missing adult cases and supporting partners in any subsequent safeguarding actions; and should encourage professional curiosity, exploring what is happening for the young adult and how the police may be able to help them.

Attendees also spoke about the challenges in defining a 'child' versus an 'adult', both because people mature differently; but also because many of the adolescents we work with balk at being treated like a child. It is not as simple as one response for under-18s and another for over-18s as this denies the growing independence of young people who deserve to be treated with respect while also being offered support. We should therefore ensure there's flexibility in our systems so we can work with young people in a way that suits them.

### **This is not just an exploitation issue**

The group spoke about the importance of remembering that when we talk about better responses for missing adolescents and young adults, we are not just talking about those being exploited.

Exploitation is closely linked to going missing and for many it may be a driver. However, there are multitude other reasons why young people go missing. Mental health is one of the most common: for adults up to 80% of missing incidents related to mental health issues, and self-harm and suicide are serious risks associated with going missing. Any transitional safeguarding response needs to be holistic, ensuring that any causes for someone going missing, or any harm experienced while away, are addressed by an appropriate team. Missing responses should not be conflated with exploitation responses.

### **Legislation – limiting or enabling?**

Findings from the survey, as well as discussion at the meeting, highlighted difficulties in providing appropriate support within quite rigid legislative and statutory frameworks. Attendees spoke about the fact that laws about safeguarding should be an enabler not a disabler for positive practice. It was suggested that we need to agree and share good practice examples of how the legislation can be used in a way that meets transitional safeguarding needs, rather than limiting what can be done.

### Good practice

A number of good practice examples were given which are briefly summarised below:

- All-age MASHs or co-located children's and adult MASHs which provide opportunities to manage transition more effectively and encourage information sharing, multi-agency decision making and appropriate responses to risk. This should support earlier intervention and prevention work.
- Joint meeting involving both children's services and adult's services to discuss young people 16 – 25.
- Areas utilising more flexibility over the interpretation of the Care Act by Adult's Social Services.
- Services that provide support to improve the relationship between the missing person and their family (for example mediation). We know that in exploitation cases the exploiters are trying to distance the person from their circle of support. Rebuilding those relationships may be a step towards reducing that vulnerability and can develop more protective factors as children reach and pass their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.