

# Experiences of Reporting a Child or Adult Missing to the Police

*Survey 2022*

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lots of support,  
worked together,  
reduced the time  
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missing.

## Introduction

Each year, 170,000 people are reported missing in the UK in more than 350,000 incidents. Many children and adults are at risk of harm before they are reported missing, and at even higher risk while missing when they are hidden from help and more likely to be a victim of crime, exploitation or otherwise come to harm. Tragically, 955 people died while they were missing in 2019/20<sup>1</sup>.

Some groups of children and adults are disproportionately likely to be reported missing, for example:

- Children in care are twenty times more likely to be reported missing than the national average. In 2021 over 10,000 looked after children went missing in more than 70,000 incidents<sup>2</sup>.
- Approximately 15% of all adults who are reported missing are reported from health and care settings, in 2020/21 these totalled almost 25,000 incidents.

In some cases this is because those groups may be at increased risk of the harm that can lead to missing episodes. However, there are also concerns that some people are being reported as missing inappropriately. This can be due to misunderstanding of, or a lack of accountability in, different agencies' roles and responsibilities in relation to someone being away or missing.

A range of work is taking place nationally to address issues of inappropriate reporting. At the same time there is increasing concern that genuine missing reports, where there is real concern for the child or adult, are being inappropriately refused by police forces. If this persists there are real risks that people will fall through the safety net by not being searched for when they are at risk of serious harm, and by not receiving any follow up support when they return.

It is vital that a balance is found, with better monitoring and oversight, to ensure the right approach to reporting and responding to missing person reports is put in place.

## Aims and methodology

Missing People has carried out a survey with both professionals and families to better understand people's experiences of these issues.

The charity carried out this survey with the aims of:

1. Better understanding people's experiences of reporting children and adults as missing.
2. Exploring any issues in the current response from the police when people try to report someone as missing.
3. Exploring what people with experience of reporting think can be done before a report is made to the police, and any good practice that can help to reduce disagreement about whether someone should be reported missing.

A survey was developed and shared with Missing People'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.

<sup>1</sup> NCA UK Missing Persons Unit Data Report 2019-20

<sup>2</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2021>

## Key findings and recommendations

Many respondents spoke about the positive response when reporting someone as missing. They highlighted the focus on safeguarding that is shared across their local partnerships; police forces' understanding of risks and vulnerability; and the timely action taken to find missing people when they are at risk of harm.

However, responses also showed that there is still a need for improvement, with some experiencing significant challenges when trying to report someone in their care or a loved one as missing.

Some of the themes that came up most strongly in people's responses were:

- I When taking a missing report, the police should listen to the concerns of the reporting person.**

Respondents spoke about wanting their professional or personal expertise, 'knowing the person best', to be understood and acknowledged in police decision-making about the level of risk and what action needs to be taken. If the police are not going to take the action that the reporting person wants, this needs to be clearly explained with a justification of why.

- I Local partnerships should focus on building multi-agency working to address issues of inappropriate reporting or refusals of reports.**

Respondents consistently spoke about the importance of multi-agency work in the background to ensure effective decision making in the moment that someone goes missing. Recently developed frameworks for reporting children missing from care and adults missing from health and care settings should be adopted but with a focus on the partnership working and taking a more person-centred approach to decisions about a missing person. They are only frameworks and will need to be accompanied by flexible decision-making, professional curiosity and open communication. They should not be used as a justification to push responsibility back and forth between professionals while a missing person may fall through the gaps.

- I Local partnerships should monitor perceived inappropriate reporting, and refusals of reports, to help both the police and the people making the reports to address the issue constructively.**

Preventing and responding to missing episodes is not just police business, it is the responsibility of all professionals. Some responses showed that the police do not always feel that enough is being done by carers and other professionals responsible for looking after the person before reporting them as missing to the police. However, this was not

reflected in many of the responses from professionals who spoke about a range of steps they would take before reporting; often being clear that they are best placed to carry out these early actions and wouldn't report to the police before doing so.

There is obviously some disconnect or inconsistency in what is happening in some cases. This suggests there is a need for better oversight to monitor when appropriate action is not being taken by care or healthcare settings, and when police responses are insufficient. Currently there is significant anecdotal evidence of the inconsistencies, but almost no way to monitor how often inappropriate reports are made, or how many attempted reports are refused by the police.

- I Respect is vital in all communications.**

Professionals who are working with vulnerable people should not be made to feel dismissed or that they are failing to do their job, especially when the police may not fully understand their role and the rules in which they must function. Similarly, reporting persons should be respectful to the police and give consideration to the pressures facing forces and subsequent difficulties in responding when they are provided with limited information or if reasonable action has not been taken by the reporting agency.

Finally, this survey largely focussed on reports of missing people by professionals (for example from health or care settings) and therefore only received a small number of responses from members of the general public who have reported a family member missing. Due to this the sample size is too small to make any broad assumptions but those families who did participate generally reported a worse experience than professionals in care or health settings. It's important that forces consider how they communicate with families, both when a report is taken forward, and when the decision is made not to. The police should bear in mind that families are not always able to advocate for themselves in the way professionals are likely to.

## Findings

### Professionals' experiences of reporting

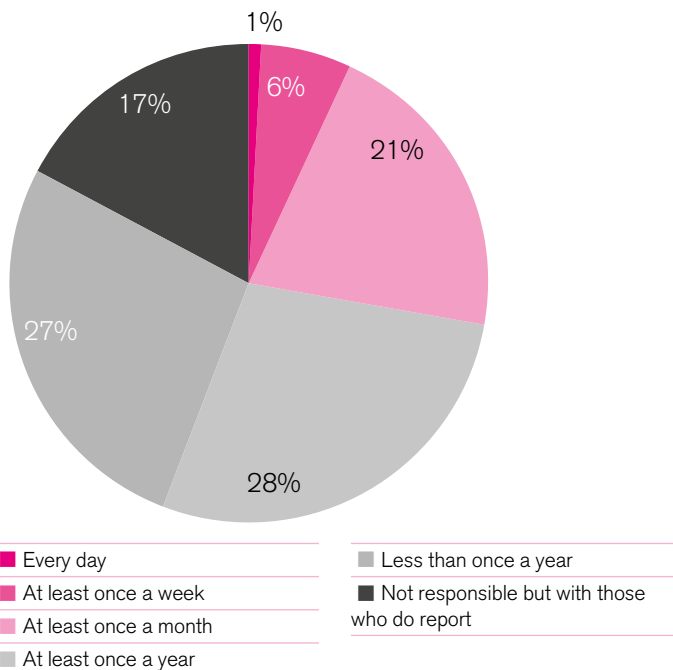
In total 119 professionals responded to the survey from 32 different geographical areas<sup>3</sup>.

The respondents held a range of different roles in different agencies. The most common roles were 'staff in a children's home' (n43) and 'healthcare worker' (n40) but there were also smaller numbers of respondents from many other services working with children and adults. A full breakdown is included in appendix two.

Due to small numbers from each area and type of agency, this report does not break down responses but provides overall findings.

We asked respondents how often on average they would be likely to report someone missing. The following analysis combines all the responses.

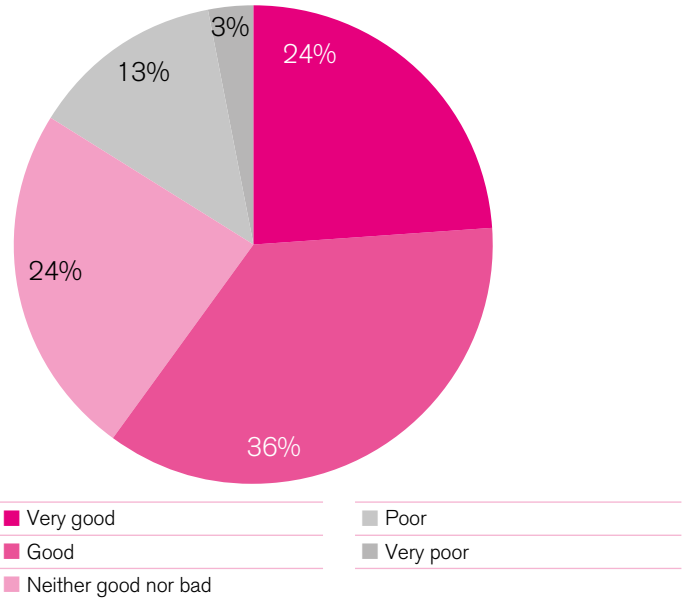
### How often would you be likely to report someone missing? (n. 117)



### The response when making a report

We asked professionals to rate the response they received from the police when reporting someone as missing:

### How would you rate the response from the police when you last reported someone missing? (n. 95)



60% (57 of 95) reported a very good or good response from the police and only 16% (15 of 95) had had a poor or very poor experience. The remaining 24% (23 of 95) said that they had received neither a good nor bad response.

Amongst those who rated their experience as very good or good respondents spoke about a number of themes:

### Timely responses with the police understanding ongoing risks that the missing person is facing

*"I feel that over the past few years, that the police responses have changed for the better, there used to be this general attitude towards young people in care, that they didn't matter, they were naughty and it felt like we were wasting police time, but this culture seems to have changed for the better."*

*"Quick response from police. Interest in what was going on for young person."*

*"I was listened to about the concerns and risks the young person can be exposed to."*

<sup>3</sup> Full list of the areas and numbers of respondents from each is included in Appendix 1.

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**Good multi-agency working**

*"Fast response, lots of support, worked together, reduced the time young person was missing."*

*"Over a course of several years we have been able to develop a positive working relationship [with the local police force] with a good mutual understanding of the risk our young people face and the response we often needed with the Police. With the addition of the Philomena Protocol the response time has heavily reduced and often the reporting Officers are understanding of the situation at hand on arrival to our service - which aids the search in finding our service users."*

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**Good communication**

*"Police provided a quick response and kept in regular contact with myself and family members."*

*"We have a process in place that supports both the responders in the locality and work closely with police Scotland, clear communication pathways have been set up to ensure information is sent direct to the either the responder or the investigating officer, the information sent is collated at time of referral for a community alarm and door contacts, the information is in formulated "All about me" and includes a up to date photograph",*

Amongst those who rated their experience as bad or very bad respondents most commonly spoke about:

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**The police not taking the risks to the missing person seriously enough, including not accepting that the person is missing at all**

*"Because we were told by the operator that the Police were very busy, we explained that our Young Person was likely with a person who was subject to a CAWN in relation to our YP, we were then asked why our YP was vulnerable, this was unnecessary as there was a CAWN in place."*

*"They took brief phone contact with the vulnerable adult as proof that they were safe and well, when in fact they were very unwell mentally and required hospital admission."*

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**A focus on policy rather than taking action to safeguard the missing person**

*"The police did not take the report seriously and felt like it was not their job to look for the service user who was potentially dangerous, but ours as Mental health staff. I attempted to raise concerns that the service user is settled when not on drugs, however that they had admitted on the phone that they had taken drugs and that in the past they committed their index offence when on drugs. The police did not however, see this as a concern and started speaking about their Hospital policy for us and disregarded the current risks."*

*"A vulnerable adult with dementia had absconded from the hospital. We had no idea where she had gone and felt she did not have the mental capacity to travel home on her own. When I reported her missing the call handler advised we sent an ambulance. This was totally inappropriate as we didn't know where she was so couldn't give the ambulance service a place to attend."*

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**Poor attitude from the police**

*"Sometimes however Police's attitude when attending ward can be quite dismissive or rude, however appears to be their lack of understanding around informal patients etc. Comments such as "why do you even let them out" have been made on more than one occasion within my career."*

*"The Police responded to an incident whereby a young person was missing and was at risk of harm, the Police response to this was negative and they spoke to the team in a derogative manner."*

Respondents who said their experience was neither good nor bad talked about inconsistency in the responses they have received in the past, often mentioning that it depends who you get through to, or variations in the amount of action taken despite quite similar circumstances.

*"No consistency in who you deal with/ response received. Sometimes very responsive, sometimes feels like a number of barriers are put up to avoid the police having to take action. Often left between the police saying we need to contact the ambulance service and the ambulance service saying it is the role of the police."*

*"It depends on the Police who respond. Sometimes they are very helpful and supportive and other times they are very judgemental and negative."*

### Challenges when trying to report

We wanted to explore more thoroughly with participants what challenges they had experienced when trying to report someone missing, if any. We provided a list of possible issues and asked respondents to select any they have experienced, as well as asking them to share any other challenges.

#### Challenges experienced when reporting someone as missing (n. 114)



We also asked how often people experienced challenges when reporting someone as missing:

How often do you / do you think people experience challenges?	Responses	Percent
Very often	9	8%
Quite often	23	20%
Sometimes	31	27%
Quite rarely	15	13%
Very rarely	16	14%
Never	22	19%

A third of respondents hadn't experienced any challenges.

Amongst those who had, the most common was difficulty getting through to speak to the police at all which is unlikely to be specific to missing incidents but indicative of a wider issue in resourcing emergency service phone lines.

Half of respondents felt that the police response didn't reflect the level of risk.

A significant number had been told they couldn't report the person as missing yet, or without taking action themselves first. We asked those who answered the latter whether they felt the expected actions were a reasonable expectation. Most respondents felt that they were not:

*"Not always as we would take local actions first as per policy."*

*"Not appropriate. Explained out of character behaviour and high level of concerns in regards to this behaviour, however was dismissed on the phone until the young person didn't return after their curfew."*

*"Each incident has to be treated individually. That being said, with all staff having read and signed the MFH policy, combined with all young people at risk of missing having a R/A [risk assessment] in place and holistic support plan surrounding this, it's hard for someone who have never met the young person to be giving you advice on them."*

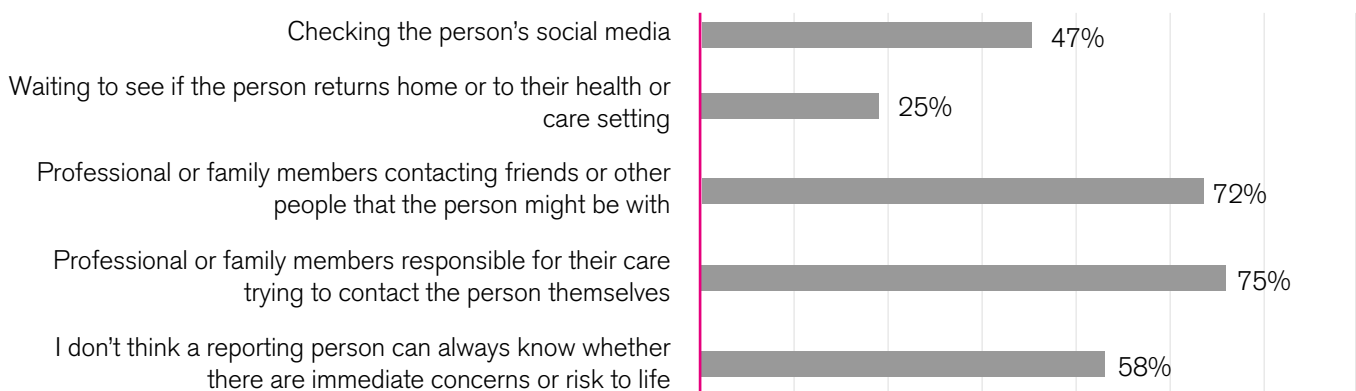
*"Patients attending emergency care who have left without assessment are potential to be extremely high risk and have not been missing for hours but most have attended with mental health, drug or alcohol problems, but equally appreciate significant reduction in police resources and the frustration of using police time to locate a patient we have been unable to retain."*

*"To suggest a family member go looking for a MISPER themselves, is not appropriate in the context of exploitation or risk of suicide. What harm could they too come to, etc."*

Recent national discussion has identified concerns that sometimes professionals are reporting people as missing without taking reasonable steps first to find them. This is seen as an over-reliance on policing which can put pressure on resources, and can possibly have a detrimental impact on the missing people themselves as it over-involves the police in their lives when other professionals would be better placed to contact or find them.

As part of the survey we explored what actions professionals think it is reasonable to expect to take place before a report is made to the police. It is broadly agreed that if there is immediate concern that the person's life is at risk or that they will come to serious harm, then they should be reported as missing straight away, so we asked about actions to be taken when this is not the case.

***If there are not immediate concerns that a person's life is at risk, or that they may come to immediate harm, what steps do you think should be taken before a person is reported missing to the police (n. 114)***



Some respondents also highlighted that, if possible, staff should look for the missing person themselves, in the immediate area and in places that the person is known to attend.

These responses show that most professionals do think that it is reasonable to expect some action to be taken before a police report is made. The open text responses suggest that frustration with push-back from the police at the point of reporting is often due to a perceived under-estimation of the concern driving their report, or because they have already taken all reasonable action.

Multi-agency partnerships should have oversight of both inappropriate reporting, when reasonable actions haven't been taken or when the person is only being reported missing because of policy rather than genuine concern, and of inappropriate push-back from the police, when they do not accept or delay missing reports that need investigation.



A 15 year old child with severe learning disabilities went missing at 16.30. Carers searched the area for 30 mins before reporting him as missing.

The child had never been out in the community without a carer and was in a strange town. A patrol car met us at just after 23:00 to begin searching as the information hadn't been handed over due to someone not recognising the risk, police had the information at 21:00, but waited until after the 22:00 handover before coming to meet us. A team of carers from across the region had been searching for 6 hours. He was located outside a nightclub having taking some unknown tablets.

*A case study provided by a respondent to the survey*

## Other challenges

We asked respondents to share any other challenges that they had experienced when trying to report someone as missing. The most commonly mentioned were:

### **Misunderstanding other agencies roles and responsibilities**

*"Lack of understanding from the call handler / police in regards to residential rules and constriction in terms of what we have to follow and do."*

*"I once had an officer repeatedly lecturing me about letting someone 'escape'. Hospitals are not prisons and this wasn't helpful."*

### **The police under-estimating the risks to staff in their expectations**

*"They did not see or attempt to understand the presenting risk and expected the health care staff to do their job and go out and look all over [name of town] for the service user that was potentially dangerous."*

*"Especially for detained patients, the level of risk is often played down by the police."*

### **Negative attitudes about the missing person**

*"The Police when visiting the home will be very negative about the young person stating that they should be moved and demand that the Placing Authority move the child. The Police lack knowledge and understanding of residential child care."*

*"If my young people are involved in county lines they are seen as perpetrators and there doesn't always seem to be a sense of urgency to look for them."*

## How we can improve reporting processes

We asked respondents for any examples of good practice in their area that helps to prevent disagreement between professionals trying to report someone missing and the police.

Respondents gave a range of examples that fell into the following themes:

### **Good multi-agency communication**

Respondents spoke about regular communication with the police in their area allowing constructive discussion about reporting and any disagreement. They also spoke about this helping with decision-making as all agencies better understood the processes around reporting someone missing and risks facing individuals in the area.

*"Regular wider partnership panels to share good practice and discuss processes in order to streamline things and to avoid disagreements."*

*"We have been liaising with our local force for around two years, having meetings to discuss each others protocols, policies and challenges with missing children. This has raised understanding on both sides and has improved relationships."*

### **Effective processes for recording refusals**

One respondent spoke about the need for internal monitoring processes in cases where a missing report is refused, and of a pathway for escalating concerns if the reporting person thinks that decision was wrong.

*"We follow a trust policy & so if police decline to look for the patient they would know that we would document it, take their name etc so that police personnel is responsible for taking action/or not if we feel we have had a disproportionate response we could escalate to senior managers in the trust for advice"*



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### **Understanding and communicating the risks facing the missing person**

Some respondents spoke about the importance of sharing comprehensive information to ensure the police understood the person's risk and vulnerability.

*"Explaining the person's difficulties in a human way, normalising what they are going through, helping others to hold compassion for the person despite their behaviour being challenging at times."*

*"Working together with open communication, being clear of the risks to the child and to others including the wider public. Ensuring that all information in terms of risk and vulnerability is shared."*

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### **Effective planning for missing incidents to ensure an appropriate response**

A small number of respondents spoke about sharing information and creating plans that inform the response in the case that the person later has to be reported missing.

*"Liaising with the local police force/PCSO and sharing information at point of admission."*

*"Risk assessment/Care plans"*

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### **Taking appropriate action before reporting and communicating what has been done**

Finally respondents spoke about taking reasonable actions to risk assess, contact the missing person, and to try and find them before making a report to the police to ensure they know everything possible has been done.

*"Good communication and interpersonal skills/being pleasant whilst assertive; fully risk assess the situation before contacting police; prepare details of missing report/potential questions prior to call to minimise time"*

*"By informing the police of actions which a carer has already done, such as searching local areas, contacting family and friends and given as much detail as possible about the young person."*

### **Changes that could improve the response when people are reported missing**

We asked respondents how the process could be improved when reporting someone as missing. Respondents spoke about a range of issues which generally fell into the following themes:

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#### **Guidance for people who may be making a report**

Some respondents felt that more guidance would be helpful for people who are likely to need to make a missing report.

*"Further information/guidance for the reporters. Simple online form to complete and submit - with a timeframe for a response back with and update on your concern and advice on what the reporter could do in the meantime."*

*"Providing a guideline of the process."*

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#### **The police taking account of professional expertise and concern**

Some respondents felt that the police or call-takers need to better understand and trust the expertise of professionals who are concerned enough to make a missing report.

*"If the police took the nursing staff more seriously. However, I understand this is not all the police staff."*

*"For call handlers to be receptive of information being shared and having an understanding that the people reporting a young person as missing know this young person well, and wouldn't be reporting as missing if there was no need"*

*"Police should not treat everyone like they are doing nothing themselves to find the missing person - it is a mandatory last resort to call them, for us at least."*

Some felt there were poor attitudes amongst some forces:

*"A change of culture of when a person is reported from a children's home. From experience when the address has been linked to a children's home the response can somewhat change and become less important or as the caller you can feel that you are 'wasting' time due to our service users typically return home before police attend the service."*

*"As this is a very infrequent occurrence at this home, police being more supportive of the request of help and not be branded as troublesome homes."*

And others felt that there is a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities in different agencies:

*"Full understanding within police department of processes within healthcare."*

*"The police having a better understanding of the role of carers within a residential setting. So, they understand that they are following a protocol and safeguarding measures and not just ringing the police to pass on the work."*

### Information sharing and planning protocols

Respondents spoke about the value of protocols for risk assessment and information sharing about individuals who are at high risk of going missing. These were seen as a valuable tool for ensuring well-informed decisions about the response for a missing person:

*“Streamline the system of reporting so that a vulnerable person is red flagged immediately”*

*“If all agencies use a shared approach before it gets to trigger points using all information at hand including historical we could eliminate risks early and plan using a proactive approach and all agencies are aware of the process and use it to support that young person if missing. Every risk assessment for young people who may go missing should be shared with the police as I do but sometimes the assessments are not shared.”*

One respondent made the important point that these protocols need to be well understood by all partners for them to be effective:

*“From personal experience the roll out of protocols such as Philomena could of been better explained to those reporting Officers or call handlers. Often either myself or the team around me would have to explain what it was, going against the reason it was designed.”*

### Waiting times for reporting and the benefits of a dedicated team

A significant number of respondents spoke about their frustration with the time it takes to make a report through 101. Many suggested that it would be helpful to have a dedicated phone line or team to speak to when you do get through.

*“If there was a specific local number to contact police on re: missing persons. This would help build up a good professional working relationship between the “regular reporters” & also the police on this number would get familiar with the “regular absconders/missing persons” & perhaps places they have been found previously etc”*

*“Direct Line for missing persons only with trained individuals who manage the process from start to finish whatever the outcome.”*

*“Perhaps a specific line to contact as we have been known to be on hold for in excess of 1 hour before the call was picked up”*

### Planning and prevention

We know that some groups of children and adults are at increased risk of going missing including Looked After Children and adults experiencing mental health issues. A number of processes, projects and recommended policies have been developed to try and reduce incidents of missing amongst

these groups, and to reduce the harm experienced by those who do go missing.

In the survey we asked some additional questions to explore how widely different tools are being used and respondents’ perceptions of them.

### The use of protocols

The introduction of the Herbert Protocol, Philomena Protocol and other similar tools have been notable steps forward in how we can improve the response for those at highest risk.

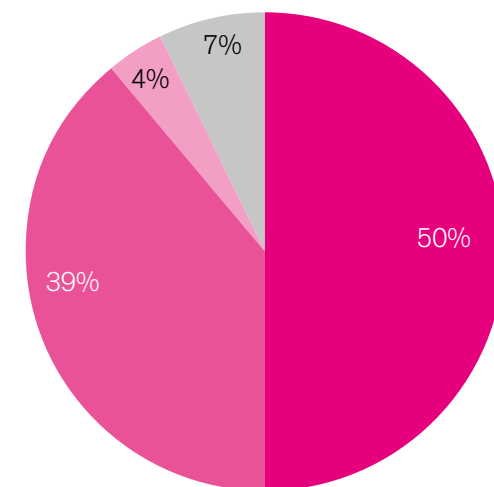
**Philomena Protocol:** A scheme that asks carers to identify children and young people who are at risk of going missing, to create plans for appropriate action to be taken if they go missing, and to record vital information about them that can be used to help find them quickly and safely.

**Herbert Protocol:** A form for families and carers of people living with dementia to fill out with relevant details that will help the police if the person they care for goes missing. The information helps to facilitate an effective search, but can also trigger preventative plans when completed as it helps the family member or carer to think through potential risks.

We asked respondents to this survey whether they have used schemes like the Philomena or Herbert Protocol, or whether they had worked with the police to develop other agreed actions through care or trigger plans for missing.

Of the 98 people who responded to this question, half had used these types of plans:

### Have you worked with the police to create plans for people at risk of going missing? (n. 98)



■ Yes  
■ No  
■ I'm not sure  
■ N/A

Much of the feedback about these types of plans was positive. Respondents spoke positively about their use in being able to share information quickly where the person is reported missing, and in agreeing what steps would be taken by multi-agency partners if the person does go missing.

*"I think it is a helpful response to ensure that all of the detail of the missing young person is shared with police so that the proportionate response is considered."*

*"Depends if the person has limited or fluctuating capacity then Herbert protocol has been good."*

*"Discussions, with social worker and other professionals agree protocols that have meant that we are not just reporting children MFH for the sake of it putting more on us to try and locate the children especially when they are not deemed as risk in this situation. Other times agreeing report really quickly as we did have concerns about risk levels and safeguarding children."*

*"Not used specific protocols but in multi-agency meetings agreed alterations to safety plans. These earlier interactions allows us to 'negotiate' with local authorities about specific individual MFC plans and responses rather than have a draconian specific time in which protocol dictates we must report a child as missing to the police."*

*"Ensures there is no complacency around when there is a need to report a child as missing and what that actually means to the child and the front line police."*

However some feedback about the actual implementation of the protocols suggested more work needs to be done to ensure they are effective:

*"Completely depends on the call handler and what they do with the information given."*

*"It doesn't reduce the need to report them missing. The Police who attend don't seem to have access to that information and we have to repeat it anyway."*

*"Sometimes professional opinions clash e.g. what we feel is life threatening - police do not feel is life threatening."*

### **Policies regarding reporting someone missing**

We asked whether the organisation that professionals worked for had any specific policies about when they have to report someone as missing. Of the 98 respondents that answered the question, 90% of professionals said that they did have specific policies. We asked whether these were helpful: of the 74 people who answered, 66 said they were helpful, 3 said they were not and 5 said sometimes or provided other information. Amongst those who felt they were helpful the following reasons were most commonly given:

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***They help to give staff guidance on what they should be doing and don't leave people with sole responsibility for decision-making.***

*"We have a local missing persons policy which is very helpful when in a stressful situation, like finding a patient is missing from the ward. It is informative and easy to read and follow."*

*"Yes they are. It happens very frequently and it is reassuring to have policies when supporting people at very high risk. I would not want to make a decision alone on whether or not to report someone missing."*

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***They ensure consistency across the service.***

*"Yes then all the team work consistently to safeguard the child and themselves."*

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***They are useful when they are used in line with personalised plans for individuals, not as a one-size-fits-all policy.***

*"Yes gives us a basic guide to work from and then individual plans give further support"*

*"Yes we have our own company policy for MFC [missing from care] and robust risk assessments that are unique to every young person."*

It is clear that policies can be reassuring for staff and can help with the safeguarding process. It is positive to see the number of responses that mentioned individual plans ensuring a person-centred response rather than an over-reliance on generic policies. However, it is not possible to say from the responses what proportion of organisations are taking this approach.

A small number of open-text responses suggested there are some problems with the missing policies they work within:

*"I don't think they are helpful due to the fact that the police are always in disagreement with the policy and make the policy hard to follow."*

*"These policies within my organisation are helpful, however on occasion when needing to report a MISPER following our policies they have been frequently questioned negatively by police responding"*

These responses suggest there may be frustration within the police at policies that are perceived to result in inappropriate reporting. However, without more detail it is not possible to fully understand the issues that might be driving disagreement.

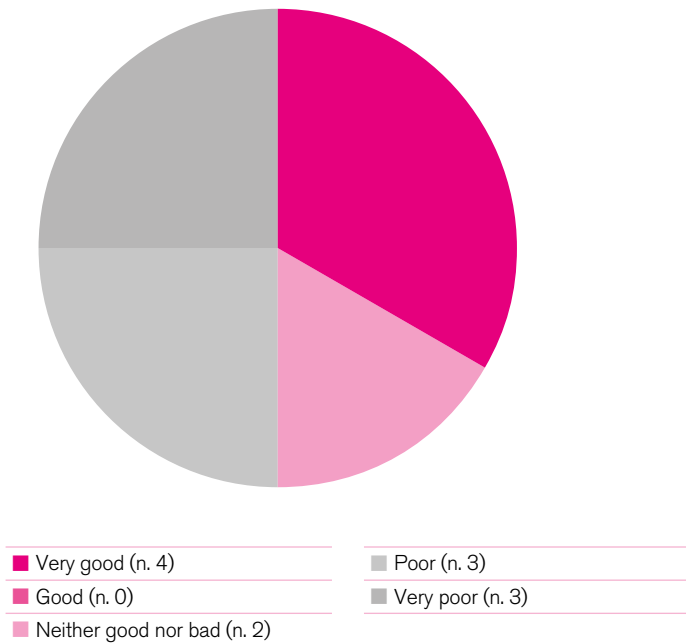
### Families' experiences of reporting

Although this survey was largely aimed at professionals who have reported someone as missing, due to the over-representation of reports from some health and care settings, we also sought some responses from families who have reported a loved one as missing. It is vital to include their views as the majority of missing incidents are reported by members of the public.

In total 12 people who responded to the survey identified themselves as a 'Parent of family member of a missing person'.

We asked those families to rate the response from the police when they reported their loved one missing:

#### Could you rate the response that you have received when reporting someone as missing to the police? (n.12)



Half of the respondents said that they had either a poor or very poor experience. This is significantly higher than poor experiences reported by professionals (which was only 16%). The sample here is too small to make any meaningful assumptions but this disparity suggests further examination is needed of the response from the police when members of the public are trying to report someone missing.

Amongst those who said their experience was poor or very poor the reasons given generally fell into two categories:

#### The police refusing to accept the missing person report:

*"I didn't get to report or fully explain what had happened."*

*"The police said that because my son is an adult he had the right to disappear and not be in contact with us and refused to file the report."*

#### The police underestimating the risk:

*"Poorly risk assessed and inaction by officers. Lack of interest and assumption my child was a run away"*

*"Sensed that the police treated everything as a family dispute (it isn't) rather than treating my son as a vulnerable adult with serious mental health condition."*

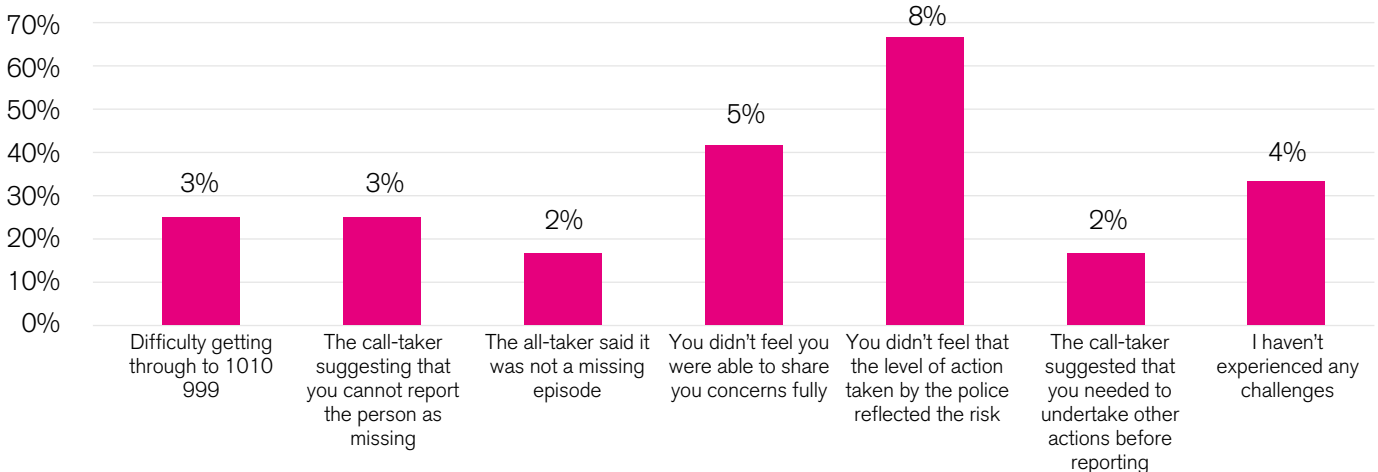
Four people said that they had a very good experience. Their reasons generally focussed on their concerns being taken seriously and action being timely:

*"Response was immediate, excellent communication with 999 call handler and immediate call back from the appropriate team."*

*"My daughter has significant mental health problems and they took our concerns seriously even though she had only been missing for a short time, she was a significant risk to herself and they took that on board. They were not dismissive."*

We then asked families what challenges they had experienced when trying to make a report:

#### Challenges experienced when trying to report a loved one as missing (n. 12)



We asked the respondents who were told they needed to take action themselves whether they felt the expectation was appropriate. The following answers show some of the frustration that this response can cause:

*"No. They told us to wait and they [the missing person] would turn up."*

*"I had already done all the logical things, by the time you call the police it is normally a last resort."*

Another respondent spoke about the internal turmoil at making the decision to report a loved one as missing:

*"The main issue is an internal one, wondering if you are doing the right thing. When is the right time to call? Will you be wasting their time? What if you wait too long and get it wrong and they do harm themselves."*

Others spoke about their concerns that some people are less likely to be considered a missing person because of prejudice, despite their concerns about their vulnerability:

*"If you mention your dad might of slept rough or been in prison."*

*"If a person was known to go 'missing' more than once."*

*"When it is an adult, and when the missing person is a drug addict"*

For many members of the public calling the police is a significant escalation. It is not a step they take lightly and normally means they are really worried about the person they are reporting as missing. These concerns should be taken seriously and families should be supported in a way that reflects the feelings of fear and crisis that they are likely experiencing.

It is clear that families want their concerns to be listened to and taken seriously when they are worried enough to report a loved one as missing. The police need to assess the situation based on the individual circumstances and should avoid making assumptions about what might have happened.

If a missing report is refused families will likely be frustrated and upset. The police should make every effort to explain why they are taking the decision, to agree when the person should be reported if new information comes to light, and to signpost the family towards alternative support.

Finally we asked families what they would like to see in the response when someone is reported missing. Here are some of their responses:

*"Empathy would be a great start."*

*"Take every report!"*

*"Clear information on what next for everyone reporting, depending on a range of outcomes."*

*"Perhaps dealing with people especially trained to understand the fear and anxiety that a parent faces instead of the officer who happens to be on duty"*

*"Simple info so you know what is being done, not technical waffle. Reassurance that as much is being done as possible."*

*"It only happened to us (parents) once and I was very impressed with the police response to a missing vulnerable child"*



## Police views on reporting

A small number of police respondents also completed a select set of questions in the survey. The aim of this evidence gathering was to understand experiences of reporting so the survey was largely targeted at professionals who would hold that responsibility. However, it is important to understand police perspectives on the reports made to them so below we have included a brief analysis of the responses from the seven police officers who took part.

Firstly we asked whether officers had experienced people being reported as missing when, in their opinion, they should not have been. Six out of seven respondents said that they had experience of both children and adults being reported missing inappropriately.

We then asked what they think generally causes reports to be made when they shouldn't be. Six officers responded to this question. All responses spoke about a lack of responsibility being taken by professionals in care settings for both children and adults, and of reasonable actions not being taken by the reporting person before calling the police:

*"For children, it is often care homes not taking any responsibility for the care of the child. They set curfews knowing that they'll be breached and admit they know where the child is, however they refuse to go and collect them, citing 'policy' to report it to the police and make it our responsibility.*

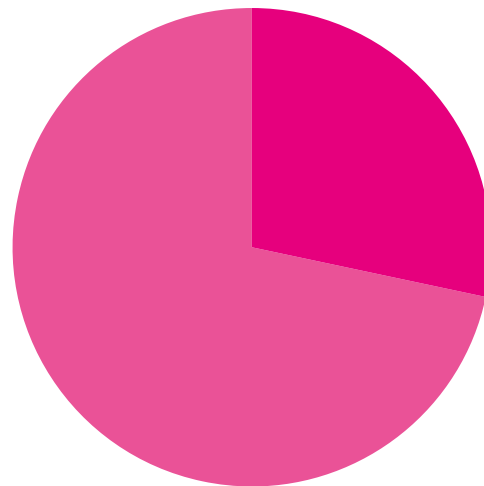
*There are similar cases for adult, who are reported missing when there are no concerns or need. Or mental health professionals who call police as a patient is walking away from them instead of stopping them themselves.*

*There is a culture of shifting the responsibility and blame to someone else rather than accepting that they need to do more about it."*

*"Other professionals aware of the persons location but seeing the police as having a duty to return the person, having made little or no effort to resolve it themselves. When the person is subject of a care order or section and there is a legal responsibility and powers for Police to intervene that's fine but too often there just is not."*

Next we asked whether they thought the police should refuse some missing reports. Five said that the police should not refuse reports.

### **Do you think the police should refuse to accept some missing reports? (n. 7)**



■ Yes (n. 2)

■ No (n. 5)

When asked why they gave these answers the respondents spoke about:

### **Needing to make a record but in some cases not carrying out an investigation until agreed action is taken by the reporting person:**

*"We should accept them all but where another agency needs to do more tell them and record the fact we are waiting for them to act first. Clearly where it does require police to intervene we shouldn't delay we should only do so where it's evident there is no risk to the missing person."*

*"I don't think they should refuse but I do think there should be some onus on those reporting to have done some sort of enquiries first."*

**The need to assess all reports:**

*"They all need to be assessed if they're reported."*

The two respondents who said some reports should be refused, felt that this should happen when the police don't think the report meets the definition of a missing person:

*"Clearly some people are not missing."*

We next asked whether respondents felt there were any risks in refusing any missing reports. All respondents said yes. Their answers spoke to the unknown risks in any situation. Some suggested that this is a tolerable level of risk that shouldn't prevent the police from refusing reports if another agency hadn't fulfilled their responsibilities. Others, however, felt that the potential risks mean that reports should never be refused as additional information will only come to light through the assessment and investigative process.

The respondents were then asked how the risks in refusing reports could best be managed. Some officers felt that the report could be logged but no further action taken by the police:

*"Still logged by the police but with a full rationale of why we are refusing and why the risk should sit with the person reporting."*

*"Just record them all, make a decision on the action we intend to take, which can be zero and review it when circumstances change or new information is available"*

One acknowledged that the responsibility for managing the risk needs to be held by someone and that this can only be shifted away from the police if another agency steps up in their role:

*"Difficult. Only by someone else accepting the risk."*

Other respondents spoke about the need for thorough, ongoing risk assessments:

*"Regular reviews by trained investigators who explore all evidential / intelligence information."*

*"They need to be assessed properly."*

Finally we asked the respondents how they feel conflict about decisions on reporting between the police and a reporting person can best be managed.

A few respondents spoke about the importance of communication:

*"Missing people in the [police force] are managed by a Police inspector who is often a good arbitrator between the police and agencies reporting people missing. Perhaps the missing persons charity could offer an on call advice line to help manage disputes however I know this would be resource heavy."*

*"Regular contact and updates between investigators and family."*

*"By police and organisations speaking to each other about the risks and being practical about the actions of each agency. For example refusing to come home and stating the intention to do so is very different from a sudden unexplained or out of character missing person. The first example could be managed by a risk assessment created prior to a person going missing to make all involved comfortable with steps and actions to take and make clear when reports should be made."*

Others spoke about the need to accept the report but then being clear about what action will then be taken, and that this decision ultimately lies with the police but needs to be well recorded:

*"It should be reported and then a judgement made on the veracity of the claim. A self reporting tool (with prompts and mandatory fields) would allow the creation of the report but then allow police to justify why they are not investigating it. It stays reported / recorded which is vital."*

*"I do not think the police should refuse the report I think their response should be proportionate that may range from doing nothing through to a large scale search."*

*"Accept the report."*

It is clear from the police responses (albeit a small number) that there is some frustration within forces at perceived inappropriate reporting. However, there is also concern about risks being missing or inaction leading to children or adults coming to harm.

Their responses suggest that the police want to see clearer responsibilities for professionals who are responsible for children and adults' care in the response to missing, rather than an over-reliance on reporting to the police.

As with the findings from the professionals' responses laid out earlier in this report, multi-agency working and communication are both identified as key to ensuring that each partner plays their role, that missing reports are made and responded to appropriately, and to ensuring that any disagreements about reports are managed constructively.



## Conclusion

The responses to this survey show a great deal of positives in people's experiences of reporting someone as missing. Many respondents praised the process, citing examples of thorough, timely responses and good working relationships with their local police force that allow effective safeguarding.

However, there were a number of issues identified both from the perspective of people making the reports, and from the police taking them. There is clearly ongoing frustration with unnecessary or inappropriate reporting, but also with a perceived disregard or disinterest from the police in response to some missing reports.

The findings in this report should be reviewed by key stakeholders and further consideration should be given to how we can implement a better response so every missing child and adult receives the best response, centred to their individual circumstances, with the right person providing the right support at the right time.

With a range of work happening nationally to agree appropriate frameworks and processes for reporting people as missing, we have an opportunity now to get this right for missing people in the future.

## Appendix:

**Appendix One**

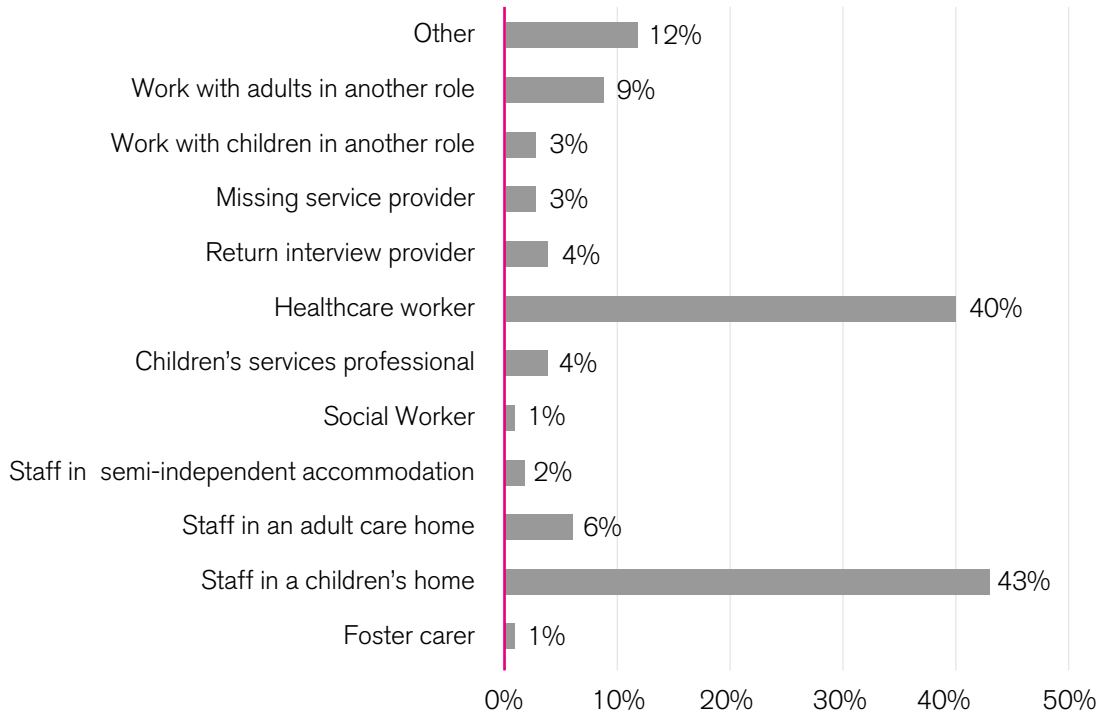
Locations of professionals who responded to the survey

Police force area	Response Total
Avon and Somerset	2
Bedfordshire	1
Cambridgeshire	7
Cheshire	5
Devon & Cornwall	2
Durham	3
Essex	1
Greater Manchester	4
Hampshire	3
Humberside	1
Kent	1
Lancashire	1
Lincolnshire	3
Merseyside	4
London	10
Norfolk	4
North Yorkshire	1
Northamptonshire	3
Northumbria	5
Nottinghamshire	1
South Yorkshire	3
Staffordshire	3
Sussex	2
Thames Valley	2
Warwickshire	1
West Mercia	10
West Midlands	4
West Yorkshire	15
Wales	14
Scotland	20
Total	143*

\*The number of responses here is higher than the number of professionals who responded to the survey as some people selected that they worked across more than one area.

## Appendix two

### *Professional respondent roles*







Norton Rose Fulbright LLP supported  
the design of this briefing.