



Good Practice Guidance

Supporting unaccompanied children who
arrive in the UK and are at risk of going
missing

**missing
people**

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419)
and in Scotland (SC047419)

**The
Children's
Society**

Foreword

“Unaccompanied children may have lost or been separated from their families while fleeing conflict, violence, or other danger. Most will have experienced trauma, either in their home country or during their journey to the UK. Once they arrive, these children are amongst those at highest risk of going missing. They are more likely to stay missing for longer than other children, and can face serious risks while they are away. Few others are as likely to be victims of trafficking and modern slavery.”

Unaccompanied children may not have any support networks in the UK. They may not know the language well. They may be experiencing cultural dislocation and not know how to access help or how to stay safe in our communities.

We know that preventing and responding to missing incidents for this group of young people can be challenging for professionals. Children may be newly arrived, with very little trust in figures of authority, and little known about their circumstances. But it should never be seen as inevitable that these young people will go missing. We all need to work with other agencies to understand each child's unique needs and aspirations, how to keep them safe, and how to help them thrive. Crucially, we need to work with the child themselves, giving them a voice and understanding what it is that they need.

Professionals have shared with us that recent changes in legislation could create new challenges. Children who are in fear of being deported, or who are excluded from applying for asylum, may be more likely to go missing, and more reluctant to engage with professionals. Professionals may find it more difficult to build trusted relationships and provide meaningful support. We intend to update this guidance with emerging practice once the impact of new legislation becomes clearer.”

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Background: Missing and Unaccompanied Children

Previous research has shown that unaccompanied children are at high risk of going missing. This was first evidenced in 2016,¹ and little has improved in recent years, with research in 2020 finding that 1 in 7 unaccompanied children go missing from care in the UK.²

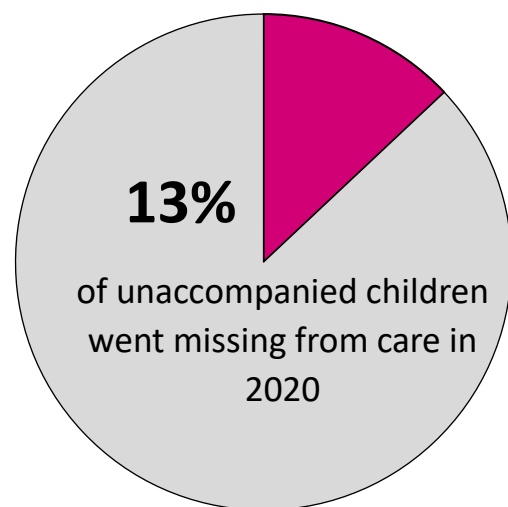
This means they are at higher risk of going missing than almost any other group of young people.³

Unaccompanied children may be placed in local authorities all over the country, so it is crucial that services in every area are prepared to support these young people, including understanding how to help prevent them from going missing.

Children can face significant harm when missing, so it is vital that appropriate support is put in place to prevent these incidents and to safeguard and protect those who do go missing.

The use of hotels to house unaccompanied children, and reports of the number of children who have gone missing from those locations has brought public attention to the issue.⁴ However, the risk of going missing affects every unaccompanied child, not just those accommodated in hotels.

It is likely that the full implementation of the Illegal Migration Act will impact on the response to unaccompanied children at risk of going missing, and therefore what good practice looks like in supporting them. When possible this guidance will be updated to reflect that.



¹ *Heading Back to Harm: A study on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK*, Missing People and ECPAT UK, 2016. https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HBTH_Report2016_Final_web_version-1.pdf

² *Still in Harm's Way: An update report on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK*, Missing People and ECPAT UK, 2018. <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/StillinHarmsWayFinal.pdf>

³ 1 in 200 children go missing nationally, and 1 in 10 looked after children go missing, see Missing People, <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/missing-from-care>.

⁴ The Guardian, 'UK minister admits 200 asylum-seeking children have gone missing,' 24 January 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jan/23/uk-minister-admits-200-asylum-seeking-children-missing-home-office>

Aims of this guidance

This guidance aims to help professionals from local authorities, police, foster and residential care, education, third sector, and a range of other agencies, to explore good practice and to consider what support could be provided in their area.

This guidance will cover:

- Why unaccompanied children go missing
- What professionals can do to prevent unaccompanied children from going missing
- How professionals can work with children to prepare them to stay safer if they do go missing
- What can help the investigation if an unaccompanied child does go missing.

This document should be read alongside the NPCC Guidance to Police Forces on Migrant Children.⁵

Methodology

The evidence gathering for this guide took place via a mixture of interviews, focus groups, and a survey:⁶

- Focus groups and interviews were conducted with representatives from 22 local authorities in London, the Northeast, and the Southwest
- Interviews were conducted with 3 police forces, and 4 further forces completed an online survey
- Interviews were conducted with third sector organisations including Aberlour Guardianship Service, ECPAT UK, Safe Passage, and Baca

Findings from the interviews and focus groups have been analysed to identify key themes and areas of good practice in preventing or responding to missing unaccompanied children. Quotes used in this report will be attributed to the type of organisation but not to the specific organisation or person.⁷

⁵ *Guidance to Police Forces on Missing Migrant Children*, National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023.

<https://www.npcc.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/publications/publications-log/national-crime-coordination-committee/2023/npcc-guidance---missing-migrant-children.pdf>

⁶ The survey was targeted towards police forces and was shared widely, however there was very little engagement with the survey.

⁷ In some cases direct quotes have been edited for clarity, or shortened (where this is the case '[...]' has been used to denote this).

Findings: Why do unaccompanied children go missing?

Previous research has explored why unaccompanied children go missing, finding that exploitation, fear of immigration processes, a lack of connection with the local area or people they are living with, and a lack of trust in professionals all contribute to these young people going missing.⁸ These findings were confirmed by the participants in this research.

Pull factors

A range of factors can influence a child going missing, for example wanting to get access to something or being pulled away from their placement by an external factor:

- **To go to a community they feel they can better identify with.** This was particularly the case for children placed in more rural local authorities, and those further away from places like London and Bristol. In some cases seeking out these communities may not be safe, although the child may not recognise the risks.

"They've kind of found somewhere where they, you know, kind of feel seen, where they identify with [...] their culture" Local authority participant

- **To go to friends and family,** or contacts they already had. It was recognised however that these people may not be safe contacts.

"In terms of why they're going missing, it's usually to do with locating someone that they already know. So it could be where they've got family already in the country they are looking for." Police participant

- **Exploitation and trafficking,** which can include re-trafficking by the people who brought the young person into the UK, or associated contacts.

"They are involved in trafficking and, yeah, criminal exploitation investigations. You know, they've been later arrested in cannabis farms, or we've had some that have been stopped driving and, you know, they've been locked up for possession and they've been locked up for theft. And so it's, for us, it's that pull of being, it's being trafficked and exploited." Police participant

⁸ See, for example, *Heading Back to Harm: A study on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK*, Missing People and ECPAT UK, 2016. https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HBTH_Report2016_Final_web_version-1.pdf

Push factors

Many push factors were identified which influence the child to leave or want to get away from the situation they are in, and therefore to go missing.

Some of these push factors are systemic and therefore difficult to address on an individual basis:

- **Fear of immigration procedures,** including concern about the processes surrounding applying for asylum and fear of being deported. Changes as a result of the Illegal Migration Act are likely to increase fears for some young people who are deemed to have arrived in the UK illegally and via safe countries, as their claims for asylum will be judged inadmissible.⁹

“It is important to recognise that in the context of unaccompanied children, their fears around what can happen to them within [...] immigration procedures are actually quite legitimate. So it’s not a misunderstanding of procedures.”

Third sector participant

- **The transition to adulthood can be a cliff edge,** with a significant downgrade in the level of support available. This can cause some young people to go missing, particularly when combined with fears about immigration procedures that may be impacted by them becoming an adult. This push factor may become more persistent in light of the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

“It’s an age where that impending or possible refusal of asylum or protection can be present again with increased risk. There’s just that fundamental disengagement from a whole range of support services suddenly leaving their life, leaving them then in a place where like, they may then want to return back to what they know...”

Because I think the risks of them going missing at that point or of being re-exploited is very present, and that’s where, from my [experience], the few young people I worked with who did go missing and were not found, [it was at] that age that it happened. It was often like at that point when they lost faith in the system, they were losing relationships, they were worried about things that were about to happen, and they just disappeared.” Third sector participant

⁹ For further information on how the Illegal Migration Act will impact children see, Illegal Migration Bill: children factsheet, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-migration-bill-factsheets/illegal-migration-bill-children-factsheet>

- **Poor relationships with their carers and / or professionals around them**, and a lack of information about what might happen to them. This includes a lack of social networks, education and future plans being made, and a lack of trusted relationships with carers.

“The push factors are massive instability, insecurity, lack of information, lack of understanding where they are and not feeling like accommodation is adequate and feeling quite afraid where they are”

Third sector participant

“We’ve realised with partners that they’re not necessarily giving the young people information as to why they’re here, what will happen next, and given that kind of reassurance, and that’s a vital element sometimes as to why they go missing if they just simply don’t understand the impact of doing so” Police participant

- **Unhappiness with their care placement**, including hotel accommodation. This includes not understanding why they do not have complete independence in their placement, or conversely, feeling a lack of caring relationships or struggling with a non-familial environment. Some may also not be happy in the geographical location in which they have been placed.

“You have some young people that have, you know, traversed half of the world before they get here, who are used to not having anyone in kind of parental responsibility, who kind of see themselves as an adult. And then all of a sudden we try and impose this kind of very, for them, quite infantilising system onto them that they find deeply patronising. They don’t understand why it’s happening and they don’t trust any of the people that are putting it on them.” Third sector participant

“Just being generally quite fearful of being or remaining within those hotel environments because they don’t feel like they’re safe. So they naturally leave.” Police participant

Preventing missing

Good practice in preventing unaccompanied children from going missing was explored, with four broad themes being identified.

These often link directly with the reasons why unaccompanied children go missing as set out above.

1. Placement suitability and security

Finding a safe and secure placement for unaccompanied children is vital. The needs of young people should be listened to on arrival, and where possible a placement identified which can best meet those needs. This includes factors like being placed somewhere with links to their own culture, having access to education opportunities, and being close to family and friends if possible. The young person's voice should be emphasised as much as possible throughout this process.

- **Specialist placements should be used whenever possible.** There can be an over-reliance on semi-independent or independent accommodation for this group, in part because of national shortages, but every effort should be made to find appropriate options. This can include training foster carers and placement staff with a focus on relational working and understanding a child's full identity, including the importance of cultural competence.

Specialist services should also be commissioned when appropriate.

“Safe and appropriate accommodation is one of the most important considerations to prevent the risk of this group of children from going missing, in particular consideration of appointing specialist foster carers rather than just placing all unaccompanied children in unregulated semi-independent, independent or supported lodgings accommodation, where they might not be receiving the type of support needed to prevent the risk of missing, particularly in cases where that missing is linked to trafficking and exploitation.” Third sector participant

- **Consider placements that meet the child's cultural needs, if the child would want this.** It can be helpful to ask the young person if they would want to be placed with a family of the same heritage as them, or with other young people with a similar history and background. Where this is not possible, carers who understand the young person's culture can be a good option.

It can be helpful for professionals to seek out learning regarding the young person's culture, including through engaging with specialist community organisations.

“Good examples of placements included where young people had been placed with a family with the same heritage as them, or with another young person who had a similar history and background. [Local authority] emphasised the importance of youth voice within this process, such as discussing with the young person whether living with another child of the same religion, but a different cultural heritage would work for them.” Notes from a focus group with local authorities

- **However, ensure that a placement with someone from the same nationality or heritage wouldn't be harmful.** Some young people might not feel safe or comfortable with people from the same cultural background as them, this can depend on their experiences in their home country alongside any potential experience of exploitation whether in their home country, on their journey, or once in the UK. It is vital that the child's opinion is taken into account when deciding the suitability of a placement.

“I've seen young people placed with carers from the same culture without enough consideration of their past experiences, simply an assumption this will always be positive. Young people leave their country for a reason, whether by choice or as part of being trafficked and many migrant children I worked with had experienced persecution from others in their community or had experienced significant abuse within the family

home. Sadly, some of these found being placed with a family of the same nationality deeply re-traumatising and were at risk of going missing because of it.” Third sector participant

- **Ensuring the child understands what being in care and their placement will be like.** When transferring from one local authority to another, the host local authority should communicate with the young person about the reality of life in the area in which they will be placed and manage their expectations about where they will be living. This should include providing information in their own language about key services, education, cultural centres, and places of worship.

“[Local authority A] also gave the example of trying to work with authorities in [Local authority B] to inform young people about the reality of living in [a rural area] before they arrive in the area, and they had provided a leaflet about this for professionals in (local authority B] to share with young people, so as to manage their expectations about hoping to live in a large city.” Notes from a focus group with local authorities

- **Creating a welcoming environment.** Ensuring that every effort is made to make the child feel comfortable in their new placement area, such as having welcome rooms, welcome packages including food from the young person's culture, and information leaflets in their native language. This was identified as particularly important when restrictions must be placed on a child, for example taking their phone away or preventing them from using the internet to limit the likelihood of them contacting their trafficker.

"So they talked about getting the young people out of the police station as soon as possible and they had a welcome room in their local authority with a pool table, tea, biscuits, all that kind of stuff. They used to give packages of clothes to all children..., and they had certain nationalities where they'd get a lot of children from, so they invested a bit of money in resources for young people getting them translated into these languages and then they would provide these packs to foster carers. They also required their foster carers to have, like packages of familiar food in that foster placement as well. And they even provided foster carers with things like signs, translated signs... They kind of combined that with this very sort of trying to be a welcoming approach and they had a dramatic reduction in their missing rates of unaccompanied children." Third sector participant

- **Accommodation when transitioning to adulthood.** It's important for placement planning to still focus on what is most suitable for a young person as they reach the age of 18. Rather than making decisions purely based on age, the focus should still be on what is in the best interests of each individual child. Many will still be at increased risk of missing and exploitation even in adulthood.

"The one big thing around placements, and it's a transitional safeguarding issue that we've been banging a drum about, is not automatically assuming that because a young person is 16+ that they're therefore less at risk, and to put them in an unregulated placement with less safeguarding. I think if we could do one thing, and I know there's an issue around care placements in general, but I think that even if people were stopping to think about that decision, that would be an improvement. I think sometimes it's an automatic thing of age 16+, unregulated placement or supported accommodation with very little supervision, rather than thinking about the context of that particular child."

Third sector participant

Good practice examples

- Newcastle City Council introduce interested Muslim young people to the local Imam on arrival, as well as giving them a Quran, a prayer mat and showing them where local Halal shops are, as a part of their welcome to the city.
- In Darlington, pre-placement meetings between the young person and their new carer help them to get to know each other and builds a picture of the young person's needs for the carers in advance of their arrival.
- Supported accommodation provider, Baca, emphasised the importance of providing a "holistic model" which caters to each of their young people's individual needs, taking account of their culture, language, background, interests, and hobbies. This creates a welcoming home environment and living space; and gives focus to working with the young people to develop their strengths and work towards their aspirations.
- In Northumberland, a bespoke integration support scheme called 'Get on Side' was created for unaccompanied children to meet and play football to help get more of the young people active, improve physical and mental wellbeing and provide a space to socialise in a safe environment.

2. Understanding the child and helping them to stay safe and thrive

Failure to meet the needs of unaccompanied children in relation to their personal and educational development and aspirations can lead to a sense of frustration and can lead to an increased risk of going missing. An individual's needs should be considered at the point of their entering care and all professionals involved in supporting them should consider how they can support that development.

When professionals are working with unaccompanied children they should be open and transparent about how information shared in those conversations could be used. Professionals should be aware that under the Illegal Migration Act, the Home Office can request certain information that is held by the local authority on the child¹⁰. Professionals should be clear about what information will be recorded and how it might be shared.

- **The voice of the young person is central** to understanding their individual needs. Professionals should take time to listen to what a young person wants and needs and strive to ensure that those needs are met in the best way possible. This should include understanding their views in relation to cultural needs, religious needs, health needs, and aspirational needs.

Not all children will feel able to express what they want and need,

particularly at an early stage when initial trust is being built, particularly if they are from a cultural background where children are expected to be compliant with adults and not assert their own needs. It is therefore important to be sensitive, make effort to build confidence, and to keep providing opportunities for the child to say what they want.

"It's around making sure that young people feel a sense of community where they are, whether that be your friendship group or cultural community, and there's opportunities for them that are meaningful to them...especially like post-18 education and/or employment, talking about housing, you know, so people have got a sense of what they can do like any young person, what they could get access to." Third sector participant

- **Access to translators** will be vital in ensuring that young people understand what is happening, and can share their concerns and views. Skilled translators, who have experience working with young people, can play an important role in engaging a child and should be seen as a key part of communication and trust building, beyond just overcoming the language barrier.

¹⁰ Clause 18, [Illegal Migration Act 2023 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/12/section/18). At the time of publication this provision is not yet in force.

- **Building trusted relationships** is consistently identified as vital to preventing unaccompanied children from going missing, and in providing support to them in general.

Key things to think about include:

- Ensuring that the child understands that you are a safe person they can turn to about any concerns they might have, or to talk through any trauma they might have experienced
- Mitigating the pull factor of traffickers by demonstrating that the child's personal and emotional needs are better met by the professionals in their lives than those who might wish to exploit them
- Being honest with the child about what you are and aren't able to do for them – not overpromising and underdelivering – in order to avoid the young person feeling let down and a subsequent breakdown of trust, which might precipitate a missing episode.

"Young people just have no idea about what you're really there to provide them, right?"

Like they just don't know who you are, and you've got this real need to like, at rapid speed, [make sure that they know that] you see them, that [...] you know enough that you're not stupid, that you are aware of some of the stuff that might have happened to people who suddenly find themselves in the UK in this way, that

because of that they can [trust you], that you don't come across like you can't understand or relate to any of their experiences, that you kind of get some of it. And that you really genuinely care about wanting them to have the best possible kind of situation they can in the circumstances now." Third sector participant

"One of the things professionals do sometimes is saying: 'Oh yeah, we hear that, we understand that, we will get it sorted, it will be fine.' And people mean really well when they say that, but unfortunately for the young person when they hear that they're like: 'Well, why should I trust you?' They will say: 'What does that mean?'"

So then what we did was we broke down the next steps into smaller steps and saying: 'OK, this is what X, Y, Z would look like in terms of actions, and these are the areas where we can't do anything.' So we were very honest with him and said, you know: 'I can do these things but I can't do these things and these things. What we can do is we can advocate and influence' and say, you know, 'we will call the social worker every day and say to them: 'Please can you do something about this?'" And so when we kind of broke that down, what it did was it kind of enabled him to start to think: 'OK, let me see what happens.'"

And then he started seeing small results with certain things and he didn't see results with other things, but because he saw the results with that and things it gave him confidence to be like: 'OK,' you know? And he didn't leave again after that. [...] It's important that they know that we follow through and that what they say is really important, you know, and [that we] do not overpromise and under-

deliver. Because for most of them, they have had their trust broken repeatedly, and so the last thing they need is people who are meant to be a safe adult in their life to continue to do the same" Care placement provider participant

- **Being able to have fun, meet peers, and pursue interests and hobbies** are vital for all children and can be key to keeping young people happy in the area in which they have been placed. Safe, supervised social spaces can help to reduce the likelihood of a young person going missing. Examples include a space created and supervised by a local authority, care placement staff, third sector organisation or an existing youth centre in the local area.

"I used to lead a group like this for a number of years, but like it was so noticeable the impact that it had, and the young people used to repeatedly share what a lifeline it was. And they were like, at times when they were doubting wanting to kind of continue to stay where they were or to not disappear, that like knowing that there was a group that kind of helped them, that they were doing fun stuff together, that like they just had joy, they got to do activities. They basically got to live a little bit like a normal child for a bit." Third sector participant

Good practice: Spotlight on Baca

Care provider Baca use a model based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs¹ with a focus on 5 main outcomes to enable long-term success: 1) Personal safety; 2) Emotional wellbeing; 3) Physical wellbeing; 4) Social engagement, and 5) Engagement with education and employment. They provide a "holistic therapeutic supported accommodation model."

"Internally we have this phrase around, let's not talk about asking young people why they should not run away, but we should be saying 'why you should stay.' You know, this idea of actually how do we create an environment and living space, routine, way of life that actually reduces your vulnerability, reduces your risk factors and increases your... You know, 'what are your strengths and what do you wanna do with your life?' Then actually when they hear other messages [from exploiters offering them a 'better deal'], all those other messages become very unattractive. They know the power and the weight of those other messages are not really strong enough for, you know, driving them towards an exploitative environment."

Good practice: Spotlight on Bristol

Bristol have implemented a range of specialist services to ensure that any children being placed in the city are welcomed, heard, and supported. This has helped to reduce the number of unaccompanied children going missing, with only 8 missing incidents reported in the last year, significantly less than national averages.

Bristol's diversity, status as a City of Sanctuary, sense of community, and range of networks for people of all nationalities, all help in their efforts to support unaccompanied children.

One example of services for this group is the Station youth centre. Each week they hold Welcome Wednesdays, a dedicated youth club for unaccompanied children. Attendance is voluntary but Personal Advisers and social workers will make sure that children are aware of the club and are supported to attend if they want to. The group is popular, with children often attending regularly when they first arrive, and slowly decreasing attendance as they get more established in Bristol and build their own networks. The group has been so popular that they have extended to have Welcome Thursdays as well.

"There's some fantastic resource and yeah, it really helps people with that transition and settling into Bristol and feeling part of the community. That's really key I think because of that kind of integration."

3. Disrupting trafficking & exploitation

Many unaccompanied children arriving in the UK will have been victims of trafficking and exploitation which will increase their risk of going missing. Traffickers can hold a powerful influence over children, resulting in them going missing shortly after arriving in the UK. Even if they were not trafficked during their journey to the UK, unaccompanied children can be at high risk of grooming and exploitation once in the country.

- **Trauma-informed practice.** All relevant agencies should be aware of the trauma unaccompanied children may have experienced, and professionals should adopt a trauma-informed approach in their interactions with them. Access to quality mental health services is also crucial.

"How you are when you're sitting with a young person, how you're picking up on the different things that are communicated, both by what's said and what's not said, by where gaps and absences are. Like often when I was trying to build a picture of people's experiences, their past experiences, where there were gaps in their journey or what they were telling you, or where they went near a subject that you could tell immediately, something happened.

So much of that is not about disclosure, is it? When we know this is about a broader point, this is about sometimes exactly what isn't disclosed,

exactly where people pause, exactly where they stopped making eye contact. And these are just like core skills, aren't they? That I think you need to have when you're working with complex, often traumatised young people." Third sector participant

- **Helping the child to understand their experiences.** All relevant agencies should be aware of the risks of trafficking and exploitation, and the fact that children might not be able to identify that they have been exploited. Professionals should take time, with the help of interpreters as necessary, to help children understand safe relationships, abuse, and the risks that exploiters pose.

"They might have had some really messy experiences they're still trying to get their head around and don't even know how they feel about any of it.

But like, that's OK, and that you're there to kind of just be present with them through that journey and to try to help them to think about what they do want and where they want to go in life and try to meet some of their basic needs. [...] And at the same time, you wanna kind of do it like a very empathetic sales pitch on why you can offer them something that may be better than what they're getting currently from the people that are exploiting them." Third sector participant

- **Limiting opportunities for traffickers to find children.** Some children may have been coached to, or coerced into, contacting their traffickers once they arrive at a placement. If there are concerns a child may not be safe, social workers or carers may need to put certain restrictions in place to try and prevent that contact, this might include taking their phone away, not allowing them out alone, or limiting unsupervised access to the internet. However, it is important those supporting these children make case-by-case decisions on whether this is necessary. It is likely that children will feel punished and limiting their access to communication may cut them off from loved ones. This can damage attempts to build a trusted relationship. It's also possible that leaving them without a phone could increase risk if they do go missing and have no way to communicate or seek support. It is therefore vital that decisions are made with the individual's best interests in mind. If limitations are put in place, the professional should explain to the child that it's being done for their safety, listen to their wishes as much as possible, and regularly review the decisions.

"I tend to be of a position that if you have that initial restrictiveness that it has to be time limited, and it has to be accompanied by really good, welcoming practice [...] It gives you an opportunity to prove yourself, to earn trust. So just that restrictiveness by itself is not going to work. But it does give you that opportunity at the start.

And I think in circumstances when children are arrested in cannabis farms and those kinds of situations where the rates of missing after that are just so incredibly high, I think that restrictiveness is necessary. [...] And it has to be communicated. People need to know why. Young people too often feel like it's a punishment to them.

And again, this is kind of linked with social workers or other practitioners being afraid of talking to young people about trafficking and exploitation. So if you're not talking to them about trafficking and exploitation, how do you explain to them why you're taking the phone away from them? And then if you're not explaining to them why you're taking the phone away from them then they think it's a punishment." Third sector participant

4. Support with asylum process & preparation for transition to adulthood

Another significant push factor for unaccompanied children going missing is fear around their asylum application and the lack of clarity about their future and right to remain in the UK when they turn 18. Professionals should remain mindful of this anxiety and do all they can to support young people through immigration and legal processes, clearly explaining how the process works, ensuring they have access to legal advice, and identifying a safe person with whom they can talk through any concerns. It is important to support young people to navigate and make informed decisions regarding staying in the NRM as they transition to 18.

For those young people who have arrived since 20 July 2023, the date the Illegal Migration Act received Royal Assent and became law, the situation may be more complex. The Act will introduce strict limitations on people applying for asylum. Anyone who did not arrive through a safe and legal route will not be entitled to apply for asylum in the UK, regardless of whether they have come from somewhere unsafe, or whether they have been trafficked.

At the time of publishing this guidance some elements of the Act have not been implemented. However, if and when they are, there may be additional considerations to bear in mind.

- **Supporting children through immigration and asylum processes.**

Unaccompanied children will need help to navigate complex immigration systems. They should be referred to specialist support and it is essential they are provided with an immigration lawyer. Their social worker should also familiarise themselves with the process so they can support the child to understand what will happen at each stage and advocate for them if necessary.

"Setting children up to resolve their legal issues in a timely manner so that we can reduce that immigration precarity that can be such a driver of missing. The social worker keeping an eye on the legal process and really pushing both the solicitor and/or the Home Office around timely decisions, understanding the process. Having social workers that do have that expertise. Appointing an immigration lawyer pretty early on can be very helpful. Making sure that the lawyer has some kind of specialism regarding children." Third sector participant

"[It's important to] have an understanding of the legal rights and entitlements and how the asylum process is supposed to work for that young person" Third sector participant

- **Helping children to navigate refusals and appeals.** Key moments in the immigration process can be triggers for some children to go missing. Professionals should be aware of those triggers and, as much as possible, make sure that the child is aware of any challenges before they happen, and that they feel supported in what will happen next.
- **Transitional safeguarding¹¹** ensures that we protect and safeguard young people during their transition to adulthood. For all children this can be a difficult moment: there can be a cliff-edge in support, professionals that they trust may no longer be involved in their care, and in some cases young people may feel left to fend for themselves. Ensuring effective planning, with the young person, to understand what will happen when they turn 18 and how they can access help, as well as smooth transitions between children's and adult's services (including mental health services) can help to ensure young adults are set up to thrive.
- **The National Referral Mechanism and turning 18.** A child can be referred into the NRM without their consent if a professional believes they may be a victim of trafficking or modern slavery. Adults must give their consent for the referral. Professionals should speak to the young person before they turn 18 to ensure they understand what the NRM is for, and support them to make informed decisions about giving their

consent as they transition to adulthood. There is a risk that otherwise decision-making processes will be suspended and young people will not receive the protection they may need.

"There used to be, I think, some real investment in that particular transition period for refugee and migrant children, which is why it's one of our focus areas for transitional safeguarding. Because I think the risks of them going missing at that point, or of being re-exploited, is very present and that's where, from my practice, the few young people I worked with who did go missing and were not found, [it was at] that age that it happened. It was often like at that point when they lost faith in the system, they were losing relationships, they were worried about things that were about to happen that they just disappeared... And we talk a lot about the early critical moment, but maybe not enough about that sort of 16 and 18 kind of transition point." Third sector participant

¹¹ If and when the provisions of the Illegal Migration Act are put into effect which place a duty on the Secretary of State to remove relevant persons on turning 18, this will raise fears and concerns for young people. It is important to keep lines of communication open and help the young person understand what may happen next.

Good practice examples

- In some local authorities, dedicated drop-in spaces are provided where young people can go to seek advice on all topics, from housing to immigration.
- Assigning a Guardian to the young person. In Scotland, there is a statutory service provided by Aberlour called 'Guardianship Scotland,' which assigns a personal guardian to every unaccompanied migrant child that arrives in the country. Guardians develop trusting relationships with their young person, supporting them to make informed decisions about their future, provide practical and emotional support and, crucially, help them to navigate the complex trafficking, asylum, welfare, criminal justice, and age assessment processes. The Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship (ICTG) Service provides similar support and is currently provided by Barnardo's in some areas across England and Wales.
- Young people with [The Children's Society](#) are campaigning for a guardianship service to be extended for *every* unaccompanied child in England and Wales
- Some local authorities have paid for legal advice for unaccompanied children who have otherwise been unable to access services.

Returning from missing

Many children will go missing more than once. The point at which a child returns is a key intervention moment to address the drivers that contributed to them going missing, but also to identify the services and support that needs to be put in place to address issues such as exploitation, or any other harm they may have experienced while away.

Statutory guidance¹² stipulates that every child should be offered a return home interview when they come back from a missing incident. It is important that these are offered to unaccompanied children as they are to other children, and that a translator is provided if it would mean the child is better able to communicate what has happened.

Every time a child returns from a missing episode there is an opportunity to prevent them from going again. It is important to really listen to why they went missing and make genuine efforts to try and address any drivers. In some situations, it may not be possible to make changes that the child wants. However, this should be explained to them, and every effort should be made to agree compromises or small steps towards what they want.

“He basically just explained what his issues were with being in [the local area]. It's quite a remote area. He said he was facing racism and stuff like that out there. And it meant that we were able to formulate a plan and we have now moved him to London... And since he's been here, he hasn't run away.” Notes from a focus group with local authorities

Some unaccompanied children are only found after a lengthy missing episode, during which time they have turned 18. The risks and vulnerabilities they experience do not stop at 18, and any response to their return must be informed by transitional safeguarding and recognise that these young people are potential victims of exploitation..

Example of good practice

When a young person returns from a missing incident, staff at Baca will work with them to understand why they went missing and what could help to prevent them going missing again. They will be realistic with the child about what they can and can't change, and will advocate on their behalf with social care or other agencies.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care>

Preparing for missing

As discussed above, the reasons why unaccompanied children go missing are complicated, and are often driven by systemic issues or issues with the immigration system, which practitioners have very little control over. We should never assume that a child going missing is inevitable, as all professionals should strive to prevent missing incidents, however, we also need to acknowledge that some unaccompanied children may go missing, and we can better safeguard them by ensuring that we prepare with them to make going missing as safe as possible.

The professionals we spoke to identified two key ways that professionals should be preparing for the risk of unaccompanied children going missing.

Preparing for an effective missing investigation

Professionals can help to ensure that a child is more likely to be found safe by taking steps to gather information and engage partners who will be helpful if the child does go missing.

- **Gathering information that can help the investigation.** A social worker or third sector worker should visit the child as soon as possible after their arrival in the country and each time they are placed somewhere new to ensure that there are opportunities to gather relevant information that can

safeguard them if they are to go missing. This conversation should be supportive with the aim of building trust. It is important that we ensure children know why we're gathering this information, and how the information may be used. This is particularly the case under the Illegal Migration Act, where the Home Office can request information that is held by the local authority on the child¹³. Professionals should be clear with the child on what information will be recorded and how that can be used.

"I think it's really easy for us to go and say: "Right, here's our list, this is what we want to know." But it's a chat at the end of the day, isn't it? I suppose it's about almost trying to break that barrier and build that rapport." [...]
"Because if you're faced with a police officer and it's: "What's your name? Where do you come from? Where is your family?" It's, you know, it's almost like accusatory questions aren't they. It's not that: "Look, we're here to help" kind of thing. So maybe approach it slightly differently." Police participant

¹³ Clause 18, Illegal Migration Act 2023

- **Multi-agency approach to preparation.** Local partnerships should work together, including agreeing points of contact within each agency, *before* a child goes missing to ensure everyone is able to share relevant information, understands the specific risks for that child and that there is a clear plan in place for each agency's response if the child does go missing. This includes when a child is moved through the National Transfer Scheme. This is particularly the case where there are risks related to significant harm, suicide, trafficking, and exploitation.

Strategy or section 47 meetings should be held when an unaccompanied child is first placed given the high potential that they may have been trafficked into the country. Some areas already do this, and it should be encouraged as an approach regardless of whether a disclosure has been made by the child.

"I mean literally from the point of them coming in... We get a notification from the local authority to say 'we've got a young child come in, can we have a strat [Strategy] meeting?' We sort of call that as quick as we can, usually within 24 hours, we share that information, we put the plan in place that we can, and the social worker or a police officer from the Locate Team will go out and speak to them. [...] And then if they do go missing, we have that strat [Strategy Meeting] straight away again." Police participant

"Having those relationships existing in advance, having those ways of communicating rapidly set up in advance so that when something happens you're not trying to set those things up and do a missing investigation at the same time."

Third sector participant

Good practice example: Operation Innerste

Some local multi-agency partnerships, as part of implementing Operation Innerste¹, meet to map out the journey for young people in their area: from their arrival, through placement processes and their whole care experience. This allows them to plan information sharing, partnership working, and to identify any moments when children might be at increased risks of going missing and any gaps in support.

Preparing with the child to help them stay safe

Children themselves should be equipped to ensure that they can stay as safe as possible if they do go missing. Children should be empowered to make safe choices, as much as it's in their power to do so, and to know that professionals are there to help them even if they do leave.

- **Conversations with young people about the desire to run away or go missing.** It is important to speak openly about children going missing, including acknowledging why the person might want to go missing, that their safety is a priority and that they can return.

“When young people know that we know their situation, that can really help. So having those discussions about the urge to disappear, the urges of going back to this person or going here, I think those can be really important and it could help.” Third sector participant

- **Safety planning.** Professionals emphasised the need to safety plan with children so they understand how to stay safe and seek help if they do go missing. It should be noted however that while this understanding can be valuable, it cannot inherently make children safe as they may be prevented from accessing safety, including by traffickers. Safety planning can include things like:

- Ensuring they know emergency phone numbers

- Ensuring they know where to seek help if they are hurt, scared, or in a situation where they are being made to do things they are not comfortable with
- Talking about safe relationships
- Exploring what exploitation might look like

“We should be doing things like sitting down with the young person and saying we really hope you don't go missing, we really like having you here, however, sometimes children go missing and we know that sometimes it's not your fault and you might go missing and it's beyond your control [...] Some people criticise the idea of safety planning because it seems really obvious. Yes, it seems obvious to an adult who is a practitioner. It is not obvious to a child in a high-pressure situation in a foreign country where they don't know anyone.” Third sector participant

- **Compassion and making sure every child knows they will be welcomed back:** Every child should know that the professionals and carers in their life care about their wellbeing and that they will always be welcome to return if they do go missing.

“He said, I'm leaving. And he said he was getting the train. So, he went off, we followed him, I found him at the train station [...]. I just wrote our phone numbers down and gave him

some saying, I can't stop you leaving. But we're here for you and we're going to wait for you to call us. [...] and half an hour later we got a call. He was at the next train station he'd got off and he said 'I'm on my way back. Will you be there?' So you know it was just we didn't go home we waited for him you know and he did come back so that was good." Notes from a focus group with local authorities

"We are seeing young people sometimes coming back to a local authority, having gone missing, because they've had that input around that care being offered, that support being offered. They've disappeared to London, figured out for themselves that "this isn't what I thought was going to be here either," and they've come back to, or they've gotten in touch with the host local authority."

Third sector participant

The Missing Investigation

When an unaccompanied child is reported missing it can present unique challenges for the police. Sometimes little information is known about the child; they may not have many known contacts or networks in the UK; or they may be under the influence of traffickers who are intentionally keeping them hidden and hard to identify.

The NPCC have published Guidance to Police Forces on Missing Migrant Children¹⁴ and can advise on a range of tools that the police can use in the search.

This guidance focusses on how multi-agency partnerships can work better together to support those investigations.

Participants shared the challenges in investigations which included:

- Difficulty in the transfer of cases or of requesting other forces to carry out actions when the child was suspected or known to be in another police force area
- Issues in the timely sharing of information about the child that could help to inform the search
- Disagreements on the level of risk between agencies
- And sometimes bias, a sense of compassion fatigue or a lack of interest within some police forces when investigating these incidents.

It is clear there is a need for strong multi-agency working at a local partnership level, but also across different geographical areas, including through:

- **Getting the risk assessment right.** The risk assessment level will inform the action taken by the police and sometimes the resources that can be assigned to the investigation. It is therefore vital that as much information as possible informs that assessment, and that any concerns about harm the child might be facing are clearly shared. Risk assessments should be dynamic and all partners should continue to share new information as it comes to light, and continue to review the level of risk.
- **Timely information sharing.** Information about where the child might have gone, who they may be in contact with, or what might be happening for them can help inform the search for a young person. If there are delays in this information being passed on the child may have moved on or fallen further out of contact which can make it less likely they will be found. The information might be held by any agency who has had contact with the child so all need to be given an opportunity to share what they know.

“Need all professionals to be very alert to if a child is talking about going somewhere, like very promptly sharing that information and then if they go missing, acting fast to kind of look at what that location is.” Third sector participant

¹⁴ [Guidance to police forces on missing migrant children \(npcc.police.uk\)](https://www.npcc.police.uk/guidance-to-police-forces-on-missing-migrant-children)

“We've had young people who go missing and we have an idea about where they might go. We have an idea about what they're wearing. We have the photo of them. We have the two different phone numbers that they're aware of. We know that they've got a friend in Birmingham, you know, all of those things. We help and we can put into a grab pack or the Philomena protocol.”¹⁵ Third sector participant

- **Organising Strategy Meetings, and ensuring all agencies attend,** ensuring ongoing information sharing, partnership working and focus. These should take place on an ongoing basis with a child protection focus.
- **Best placed professional reaching out to the young person.** The young person may be happy to stay in touch with someone if they have built trust or have an existing relationship. Agencies should work together to identify who is best placed to reach out to them and try and maintain that contact, always reassuring the child that they will be welcomed on their return.

“The social worker had only known them for one month before they went, but built relationship and kept trying to get in touch while he was away and eventually he did reach out to his social worker.” Local authority participant

- **All potential leads should be actively pursued to find the missing child,** particularly when the child has been missing for some time.
- **Reaching out to the young person's family.** Some young people may have family inside or outside the UK who may know where they are.

“We said, well, have you spoken to the mum? The mum was in France and ‘Ohh, no, we didn't do that.’ Well, should we speak to her? And the mum didn't even realize that they were missing. And they've been speaking every day and straight away we were able to get in contact with the child and we could track their train journey and make sure that they were safe. No one thought to contact them. The mum didn't even realize that they were missing.” Third sector participant

- **Professional curiosity when a child presents or is found.** Every incident of an unaccompanied child going missing should be seen as concerning, and professionals should actively explore the circumstances, including why the child went missing and what happened while they were away.
- **Transfers and action requests between forces.** Intelligence may suggest that a child is in a different

¹⁵ For more information on the Philomena protocol please see <https://www.gmp.police.uk/notices/pp/philomena-protocol/>.

police force area, in which case officers in another force may need to carry out address checks, or other investigative actions; or the investigation may need to be transferred to the new force as they're better placed to hold responsibility. Police forces should prioritise requests from other areas that could help to find unaccompanied children and should adhere to the new NPCC guidance on tasking other forces and transfers¹⁶.

"We had someone who we believed was in [city], we had an address check for it, the [police force] went and did the address check and actually when I read the update, it was sort of: 'Attended the address and three males answered the door. He wasn't there and they didn't know him.' So I'm sat there saying: 'that tells me a lot of information'. Who are they? Where are they from? What are they called? You know, even if the males would have refused to give the details, at least document that. So for me it was just basic policing to provide a full update."

Police participant

- **Effective information sharing when a young person is found.** In some cases, reporting areas are not being informed that a child has been found in another area. This means that cases are remaining

open unnecessarily, which has resource implications for the police and partners, but more importantly means that children may not be getting the safeguarding response they need.

"We can have children who went missing summer last year and were found within a couple of weeks and we're only just being notified, sort of either towards the end of last year, I think we've even had some this year... it's problematic from the point of view that these children have actually been located. They've got no return home interviews being done. There is no prevention interviews being done. And other than sort of the safeguarding implications that might have around children, it then slows down the understanding that both police and our partner agencies have got as to the reasons for going missing and looking at ways that we can prevent missing in the first place. And certainly sort of identifying any sort of more serious concerns, whether that's around exploitation or trafficking, we're just not picking those up in a timely manner because of those delays and because of the quality of information that we then get back through." Police participant

¹⁶ Advice to police forces on tasking other forces to conduct missing person enquiries and the transfer of investigations, National Police Chief's Council, 2023, [npcc-advice-requesting-missing-person-enquiries-in-another-force-and-transfers-of-investigations](#)

Organisations, guidance, and other resources for unaccompanied children and professionals

Organisations & resources for unaccompanied children
Asylum Aid
British Red Cross
City of Sanctuary
Coram Children's Legal Centre
Freedom From Torture
Guardianship Scotland
Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship
Migrant Help
Migrant Rights Network – 'Know your rights guide'
Refugee Action
Refugee Council
Scottish Refugee Council
The Children's Society
Unseen

Resources for professionals
The Children's Society – Guide for the first 72 hours when a migrant young person comes into local authority care
ECPAT - Practical guidance on preventing and responding to trafficking and disappearances of children in migration
UK Government - Care of unaccompanied migrant children and child victims of modern slavery: Statutory guidance for local authorities
UK Government – Safeguarding children who may have been trafficked
UK Government – Operation Innerste process guidance
UK Government – Safeguarding Strategy: Unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children