

Key findings: The delivery of Return Home Interviews in England in 2023-24

Statutory guidance from the Department for Education sets out the requirement for local authorities to offer children a Return Home Interview (RHI) after they return from a missing episode. These interventions are offered with the aim of exploring why the child went missing, whether they experienced any harm while they were away, and what support they may need to have put in place following the incident.

How these RHIs are delivered varies in each local authority. The statutory guidance allows for some flexibility, and some areas struggle to deliver within the expectations that are set out. This report explores how RHIs are being delivered to try to understand what is working well, and what challenges local authorities are facing, with the aim of informing changes to future statutory guidance, and to encourage improvements in practice.

Information was collected through a Freedom of Information request to all English local authorities. A total of 124 local authorities responded, providing data relating to 40,576 children who had gone missing in 135,203 incidents. The following are some of the key findings from this data.

Limitations

Information was sought from all 155 English Local Authorities. In all, 124 local authorities (80%) provided information about Return Home Interviews. A number of authorities did, however, decline to provide a response to some of the open-text questions.

It should also be noted that not all LAs record information in the same way. In particular, previous research has suggested that there are differences in the way authorities record the delivery of RHIs for children placed out-of-area. There are differences, too, in how the 72 hour timeframe is calculated. Some count from the time of the child's return, others from when they received notification of the child return, and still others from when they processed that notification (the count, for example, might start from a Monday morning if the authority does not have a weekend service even if notification occurred on a Friday evening).

Delivery of RHIs

RHIs should be offered to every child following each incident where they have been reported missing. Statutory guidance states that they should be delivered within 72 hours. However, they are not compulsory, and some children may choose not to engage with them.

To explore how RHIs are being delivered in different areas we asked:

- How many missing incidents were reported in their local authority area (excluding those who were placed from out of area, and therefore who they would not be responsible for providing RHIs to)
- How many RHIs the local authority *offered*
- How many RHIs the local authority *completed*
- How many RHIs the local authority *completed within 72 hours*

There was significant variation in the offer and completion rates across different local authorities.

RHIs offered: Only 5 local authorities offered a RHI in response to more than 90% of missing incidents. One local authority offered RHIs after only 10% of missing incidents, and a total of 10 local authorities offered them in less than 30% of incidents.

Statutory guidance states that an RHI should be offered after every missing incident, so these rates suggest serious issues in their delivery within some local authorities.

RHIs completed: Three local authorities had completed 100% of the RHIs that they had offered. One local authority had only completed 19% of the RHIs they had offered.

On average, local authorities completed around two-thirds (67%) of RHIs offered. The average number completed per missing incident was 55%.

RHIs completed within 72 hours: No local authorities completed all RHIs within 72 hours. One local authority only completed 7% within 72 hours. Three authorities completed 90% of RHIs within 72 hours. The average percentage of RHIs completed within 72 hours across all authorities was 63%.

Who delivers RHIs

Local authorities gave a variety of responses to the question about who provided return home interviews. These responses were classified into the following categories:

- An in-house, dedicated team only,
- An independent provider only,
- Multiple providers including an independent service,
- Multiple providers NOT including an independent service,
- Social workers and/or youth workers.

Half of local authorities used a dedicated team of RHI workers. Independent providers alone were used by 16% of authorities, while 2.5% used multiple providers that included an independent service. A further 13% of authorities used multiple providers that did *not* include an independent service. Slightly less than a fifth of authorities used social workers or youth workers or a combination of the two to conduct return home interviews.

Table 1 shows the average completion rates for RHIs depending on provider type. Authorities using multiple providers that included an independent service had the highest average number of completed RHIs (91%), and the highest proportion completed within 72 hours.

Table 1

Provider Type	Provider type (%)	RHIs completed average (%)	Completed within 72 hours average (%)
Dedicated Team Only	50.4	65	62
Independent Provider Only	15.7	64	66
Multiple Providers Including Independent Service	2.5	91	73

Multiple Providers NOT Including Independent Service	13.0	71	62
Social Workers and/or Youth Workers	18.3	64	65
Overall	100	67	64

Statutory guidance says that RHIs are “*normally best carried out by an independent person (ie, someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews*”. The Coalition for Missing Children¹ suggest that best practice is to provide children with a choice of who provides the RHI, which could be someone who has an existing, trusted relationship with the child, but crucially, also the option of someone completely independent.

While social workers or youth workers might be best placed for some children, it is concerning to see that relatively few areas offer a choice of provider including the option of an independent service, especially in light of the higher rate of RHIs completed that having a choice in provider seems to result in.

Follow-up support following RHIs

RHIs are an opportunity to explore why a child went missing, and what happened while they are away. It is likely that these conversations will often involve traumatic or difficult topics and may expose serious underlying issues or risks that a child is facing. Current statutory guidance does not stipulate that RHI services must include an offer of follow-up support, however, it is broadly acknowledged that it is valuable to provide additional support when risks are identified.

The provision of follow-up support, available after a Return Home interview, was patchy, with wide variation across different authorities. Some local authorities offered no follow-up support (although all clarified that they would refer into alternative services if necessary and if the threshold for a referral was met); and one authority said, “*Brief intervention is offered to children and young people on a case by case basis if capacity allows*”. Some authorities, by contrast, appeared to have more clearly developed processes and procedures. One authority commissions an independent service to provide follow-up support and to undertake advocacy support for children in care. Another area had a team of support workers available to conduct follow-ups, referrals and strategy meetings.

The mixed provision of follow-up support is unsurprising considering that it is not a requirement set out in statutory guidance. However, the good practice being offered in some areas should act as a roadmap for wider adoption, with statutory guidance being updated to reflect the importance of providing this.

Barriers, good practice and recommendations for change

¹ [CMC key information and it's impact - Missing People](#)

As part of the Freedom of Information request we asked local authorities what they thought was working well, what the barriers were to effective delivery, and what they would like to see changed in statutory guidance. The responses² are summarised below.

What is working well

- **Effective team working:** This was mentioned in the context of both internal workings within the team delivering the RHIs and their colleagues in other safeguarding teams within the local authority; and inter-agency working, where there were good relationships between the local authority and police missing coordinators, or with partners in education.
A range of things were mentioned in relation to effective team working, including, regular inter-agency meetings, easy communication, co-location of services, and shared protocols that are consistently followed.
- **Child-centred practice:** Respondents spoke about the need to capture the child's voice in any records from RHIs; to build strong, trusted relationships; and to actively consider the cognitive needs of children and young people when planning and conducting an RHI to ensure it is tailored to them.
- **Excellent staff:** Some local authorities mentioned staff teams who had the skills and compassion to deliver excellent services, including in some cases going 'above and beyond' to build good relationships with children who regularly go missing.

Barriers

- **Out of area placements:** A few local authorities spoke about the difficulties in arranging RHIs for children who are placed out of area. The home local authority retains responsibility for providing the RHI, even if the child is placed at a significant distance away. Communication with the host authority and police force, as well as the logistics around travel can create delays and challenges in delivering these effectively.
- **Challenges in timeliness:** Some local authorities spoke about challenges in delivering interviews within the 72 hour timeframe. They spoke about delays in getting the missing notification which meant they were starting at a disadvantage; about the limitations of a 5 day working week (with one authority saying they had increased to a 7 day working week to better meet the 72 hour deadline); about challenges in arranging a face-to-face meeting within such a short timeframe, while still acknowledging a preference for in-person meetings over what were seen as less impactful phone calls.

However, it is also worth noting that for one local authority: *"children are more likely to talk about their missing episode soon after they have returned – the more time goes by the less likely they are to talk"* – an important reminder that timeframes of some sort are vital.

² As indicated earlier, not all local authorities responded to these open text questions, and the responses we did receive held varying levels of detail.

- **Too many professionals:** Various local authorities outlined their concerns that children will often be expected to interact with many different professionals, who may ask similar questions, before they even get to the RHI. Children will often have a safe and well check from the police when they are found or return, they may then speak to a carer (if in care), a teacher, and perhaps other professionals. This can be frustrating for the children themselves, and can reduce the likelihood of them wanting to engage with the RHI process. Revised guidance should consider how to reduce this duplication.

Recommendations for change

Some local authorities didn't feel the statutory guidance needed any amendment in relation to return interviews, however, quite a few had recommendations for what could be changed in the future:

Who delivers RHIs: Local authorities called for greater clarity on how 'independent' of the child's care the professionals completing RHIs are expected to be. There was also a suggestion that more focus should be put on allowing the child to choose who they speak to. One area also acknowledged the need to have a more flexible approach for children who go missing repeatedly, ensuring that the focus is on building trusted relationships.

Changing the expectations on timing: Some local authorities suggested the expectations around completing an RHI within 72 hours were unhelpful. One local authority felt the guidance was unclear and too subjective, with different areas interpreting the expectation differently. Another suggested that a strict timeframe did not allow for child-centred decision-making, as practitioners are more focussed on the deadline than on what is in the child's best interest.

Consent: One local authority suggested it would be helpful to have more guidance about what professionals should be doing if the child, or their parent or carer, refuses consent for the RHI.

Out of area placements: There were various recommendations regarding improvements to the guidance on how RHIs are delivered for children who have been placed out of area. These included calls for greater expectations of consistency across different local authorities, and improvements in the information sharing and partnership working between local authorities and the police across wider geographical areas.