

Missing Persons in the 21st Century

A response to the White Paper *Policing in the 21st Century*:
Reconnecting police and the people

Missing People

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Executive Summary

Missing People welcomes the changes proposed in the Government's White Paper *Policing in the 21st Century*. We believe the same principles can be used to create a new public service delivery framework which protects missing people and support their families, drawing on the energy, creativity and active participation of individuals in their own communities.

We urge the Government to recognise that focused and streamlined national services are an essential part of providing better outcomes to missing people and their families. Given the dissolution of the NPIA, the function of cross matching missing person cases with particular regard to unidentified bodies with missing person reports needs to be retained. Keeping this function within a police-focused Missing Persons Bureau is one option. A second option is to transfer responsibility to the voluntary sector, which may bring cost savings. Missing People would be happy to discuss providing a '**one-stop-shop**' for national 'missing' services which would include the national functions already delivered; case publicity, safeguarding and family support.

In addition there exists enormous potential to increase the role of individuals and organisations within the local community in resolving cases, safeguarding missing people, preventing disappearances and supporting families. Missing People has already made some substantial progress in creating networks of organisations to resolve cases more expediently. We believe more can be done to create a series of interlinked **local networks** of families, volunteers and voluntary and community organisations to activate communities in helping their own members and in holding statutory providers to account.

Together, we believe these measures along with the maintenance of key specialist functions including CEOP will complement the changes proposed in *Policing in the 21st Century* and will provide an infrastructure that delivers real outcomes for missing people and their families.

Missing People therefore proposes to deliver these functions to support this vision:

Local Networks: to deliver support to the police and family support functions *expediting more rapid resolution of cases and improved outcomes for missing people and their families, delivering cost savings at the local level.*

Case publicity: in order to *resolve cases expediently and minimise distress to families*, both through the investigative contribution and the reassurance provided to families.

Safeguarding: in order to *ensure the immediate safety of missing people, resolve cases expediently and prevent people going missing*, through the provision of national helplines for adults and children.

Family support: in order to *minimise distress to families*, through national helpline and advocacy. This is provided by Missing People.

And would consider taking on:

Cross matching missing person cases with unidentified bodies and cross border investigations: in order to *resolve cases expediently and minimise distress to families*, by matching across police force areas and internationally.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Government's White Paper *Policing in the 21st Century* presents a bold vision of a police service responsive and accountable to the local community. The proposals signal a step change in the power of citizens to influence and shape policing according to local priorities. We believe the same principles and approach can inform a new public service delivery framework which protects missing people and supports their families within, and by, the community in which they live.
- 1.2 This paper outlines a new approach and ethos to tackling the many challenges that arise when people disappear. Drawing on the same principles that the Government has used to re-construct policing for the 21st century, it provides examples of practical action that can be taken to create a network of local support for missing people and their families, whilst retaining essential national infrastructure. It focuses on the issues relating to the period in which a person's whereabouts are unknown and they have been reported as missing to the Police until the Police can close a case.
- 1.3 This paper also recognises the value of additional and connected services that offer opportunities for partnership, particularly where they deliver specialist resources and relate to particular dimensions of going missing, for example children who are groomed for sexual exploitation.

The proposals focus on:

- 1.4 **Increasing democratic accountability** by giving the people most affected by 'missing' – the families of missing people and people with direct experience of being missing – the information and the opportunity to influence local decision-making and to hold service providers to account.
- 1.5 **Activating people in their communities** by creating volunteering opportunities which meaningfully assist missing people and their families, and by involving the public in searching for missing people.
- 1.6 **Utilising the strength of the voluntary sector** in harnessing and coordinating local citizens to protect missing people and support their families, and in holding statutory service providers to account.
- 1.7 **Removing bureaucracy** by introducing a single information platform eliminating the need for costly and inefficient data transfer procedures.
- 1.8 **Streamlining and focusing national service delivery** to provide clear, outcome-orientated interventions only where there is a clear economic and operational rationale to undertake this role at the national level.
- 1.9 **Increasing value for money** by ensuring resources are deployed to where they can achieve the most outcome.

2. The Challenge

- 2.1 An estimated 250,000 missing person reports are made to the police annually in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2010). Approximately two-thirds concern people under the age of 18 (PACT, 2005). Three-quarters of disappearances reported to the police are resolved within two days (Tarling and Burrows, 2004). However, a significant minority – 8 per cent (approximately 20,000) – of incidents last longer than one week, and 1 per cent (2,500) last in excess of a year (ibid.). Adults are more likely to remain missing for longer periods than young people (Newiss, 2005).
- 2.2 A recent press release from the NPIA revealed that there are approximately 1,000 bodies found in the UK over the last 50 years remain unidentified. In the region of 10 new cases of unidentified bodies are registered with the Missing Persons Bureau each month (internal correspondence).
- 2.3 In a high proportion of incidents people go missing intentionally (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003). Many are young runaways (Rees and Lee, 2005). Others are adults fleeing dysfunctional relationships, experiencing problems at work, or who become detached from their families through drug and alcohol use or problems with their mental health (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003). A smaller proportion – though still a significant number – of disappearances result from a person going missing unintentionally, for example dementia sufferers becoming lost, people having accidents, and victims of abduction and serious crime.
- 2.4 One in 12 young runaways are estimated to suffer some sort of harm whilst missing (Rees and Lee, 2005). It is estimated that over 1,000 people who go missing are found dead each year (Newiss, forthcoming), including people who take their own lives, those who have an accident, people who become lost and die of exposure, and victims of crime. Families of missing people can suffer severe emotional problems, as well as significant financial, legal and practical difficulties (Holmes, 2008).
- 2.5 Evidence from one police force area indicates that three-quarters of people who go missing are found within five miles of their normal place of residence (unpublished). Only five per cent were found more than 80 miles away (although this is still approximately 12,500 incidents) and less than one per cent had left the UK.
- 2.6 Tarling and Burrows (2004) found that 2 per cent of missing persons were found in refuges, day centres and clinics and a further 2 per cent within a hospital. These data suggest that approximately 10,000 missing incidents each year could be resolved through effective joint working with health and social care providers.
- 2.7 This brief summary of some of the key aspects of the 'missing' phenomena provides the context for the critical challenges facing agencies concerned with the welfare of missing people and their families left behind.

3. The Cost

3.1 The estimated cost – to the police service alone – of responding to missing person incidents is approximately £1,500 per incident (Lancashire Constabulary, 2005), a total for 250,000 incidents of **£375 million each year**.

3.2 Some disappearances will cost considerably more than £1,500 to investigate. North Yorkshire Police estimated the cost of investigating Claudia Lawrence's disappearance to be £770,000 in July 2010.

3.3 Considerable additional expense is incurred by different organisations, for example:

- The cost to the health service of responding to missing patients and trying to identify unidentified patients.
- The cost to statutory and voluntary providers in dealing with homelessness and making emergency provision for young people who have left home.
- The cost to social and children's services and care providers in responding to young people missing from care and vulnerable elderly people who go missing.

3.4 Several reports have highlighted the capacity for local best practice and national streamlining to make considerable cost savings through:

- Reducing repeat incidents of running away and going missing.
- Improved information sharing at the local level for adults with mental health diagnosis and children missing from care and home
- Improved access to voluntary sector family support services
- Improved access to national and cross-border case publicity

4. Outcomes

4.1 Whilst there are numerous strands to the 'missing' phenomena, the efforts of all agencies involved can be grouped into achieving four key outcomes:

4.2 Outcome 1: ensure the immediate safety of people who go missing

Whilst most people who go missing are found quickly, all may potentially have suffered harm. There is an immediate need to assess the likely risk posed to each individual reported missing, and to act accordingly to ensure their safety. Whilst the police have assumed a leading role, there is a need to harness and coordinate the important contribution that can be made by other organisations such as care homes, social services, health units, local voluntary organisations, national helplines and individuals.

4.3 Outcome 2: resolve cases expediently

Whilst most missing incidents are resolved quickly, many thousands remain open for longer periods of time, increasing the risk to the missing person and increasing the emotional and practical burden on their family and friends. There is a need to develop and utilise existing and new methods of resolving disappearances. This will require creativity, resourcefulness, and a willingness to challenge preconceptions about 'who does what' and to be open and honest with families affected about what is being done to find their missing loved one.

4.4 Outcome 3: prevent people going missing

Whilst people go missing for many different reasons, and often in very personal circumstances, there is mounting evidence that both 'first time' and 'repeat' disappearances can be prevented (Home Office, 2010). The key to prevention lies in understanding local problems and developing local solutions. There is an urgent need for better local information on who goes missing, why and from where; and for a host of local organisations and individuals to act and intervene.

4.5 Outcome 4: minimise distress to the families left behind

That families suffer pain and turmoil when someone goes missing is unavoidable. That they are left unsupported and have to cope with systematic failures in relieving the burdens imposed on them, is not. There is an immediate need to improve the quantity and quality of emotional support available to families. This will challenge existing service delivery models. There is a need to alleviate the numerous financial and legal burden facing families of missing people. This will require awareness and will cross the political, social and commercial sectors.

4.6 The following sections outline how we believe these outcomes can be delivered – both nationally and locally – in a new framework that will make the response to missing persons fit for the 21st century.

5. Realising outcomes nationally

- 5.1 The majority of missing incidents will occur and be resolved locally. As a result the majority of resources are best deployed locally to ensure the most effective delivery of the four key outcomes (more on local delivery in the next section). However, experience has shown that it makes both economic and operational sense to allocate some resources at the national level, in order to realise the outcomes.
- 5.2 The findings of the Missing Persons Taskforce (Home Office, 2010) adequately illustrate the need to properly focus national service delivery in the field of missing persons. At present there is waste, duplication and a lack of leadership and coordination.
- 5.3 Our analysis highlights four key service areas which directly contribute to achieving the four key outcomes. In addition there are clear economies of scale resulting from these activities being conducted by one agency at the national level rather than 43 police forces at the local level. These services areas are:
- 5.4 **Cross matching missing person cases with unidentified bodies and cross border investigations:** in order to *resolve cases expediently* and *minimise distress to families*, by matching across police force areas and internationally. Responsibility currently rests with the Missing Persons Bureau (NPIA).
- 5.5 **Case publicity:** in order to *resolve cases expediently* and *minimise distress to families*, both through the investigative contribution and the reassurance provided to families. This is mainly provided by Missing People, with some additional provision facilitated through the Missing Persons Bureau (NPIA).

“You have also assisted with poster campaigns for missing persons, and we have had a number of positive results from using this service. Your posters are striking and you have the contacts to enable the posters to go out within a short space of time after a 'sighting' or to an area where the misper is believed to have travelled to.” Police Missing Persons Co-ordinator

- 5.6 **Safeguarding:** in order to *ensure the immediate safety of missing people*, *resolve cases expediently* and *prevent people going missing*, through the provision of national helplines for adults and children. This is provided by Missing People. We recognise other safeguarding services that deliver specialist services beyond missing persons and discuss this later in this paper.
- 5.7 **Family support:** in order to *minimise distress to families*, through national helpline and advocacy. This is provided by Missing People.

“You have assisted and continue to assist in relation to a number of our long standing cases, as you act as a Family Liaison Officer for the families. This cuts the amount of time we spend dealing with families, which can be time consuming and emotionally draining. Although we still keep contact with the families, your involvement has assisted us greatly, freeing up valuable time to progress ongoing and active cases.” Merseyside Police

Option 1

- 5.8 There exists a clear opportunity to streamline and focus national delivery in order to provide better outcomes for missing people and their families. One option is to retain and re-home the Missing Persons Bureau, though we would recommend strongly that the focus be exclusively oriented towards **cross matching cases with an emphasis on matching unidentified bodies with missing person reports**, where systemic failure is still evident and where it is known that bodies are often found 'out of area'. This should work alongside cross border and case support.
- 5.9 **We recommend the introduction of a single Missing Persons Database**, capturing information on disappearances from all police forces and available remotely by the agency charged with matching unidentified bodies to missing persons. This would provide a cost saving to the police by reducing the amount of data transfer required to undertake cross-matching and would also eliminate operational inefficiencies arising from cases not being transferred to a central agency. The duties on police forces to exchange information internationally (for example, via Interpol and via child abduction protocols) on cases of missing and unidentified people should also be consolidated into a single national unit.
- 5.10 We understand and recognise the value of both these functions being a part of the National Crime Agency, support command.
- 5.11 The ability of **the voluntary sector to provide national case publicity effectively and efficiently is clear** (Missing People publicised to 11million people over 670 cases 09/10). The unnecessary and confusing role played by the Missing Persons Bureau presents a clear opportunity for scaling back the role of the statutory sector, avoiding duplication and savings resources. We therefore recommend that Missing People takes on the management of all missing person publicity functions that operate at the national level.
- 5.12 Missing People is committed to delivering the specific missing related **helplines that effectively safeguard people who identify as missing**. We already receive in the region of 100,000 calls each year to our Runaway Helpline and Message Home service. The helplines successfully safeguarded over 6,700 people and made over 5,500 contacts with the Police last year.
- 5.13 The charity has recently introduced the **TextSafe™** service, which allows police officers to send Missing People the mobile telephone number of a missing person (either adult or child) and for the charity to then text them with an offer of assistance and support. We aim to extend this service to all police forces in the next four years, and we expect this to significantly improve outcomes for missing people enabling a larger number of people to access a place of immediate safety.
- 5.14 Missing People was awarded the 116000 helpline number by Ofcom in October 2009. 116000 is a pan-European telephone number which national Governments are obligated to *reserve and promote* for the provision of assistance to missing children and their families (European Commission Decision 2007/116/EC). Missing People will launch this number in October 2010 and will streamline all our services behind this single memorable number by April 2012.

Option 2

5.15 A second option is to bring all national missing person functions into a single voluntary sector provider, to create a **'one-stop-shop'** for local providers and families. Missing People already provides three of the national services and would be receptive to taking on responsibility for matching unidentified bodies with missing person reports. We understand that the Government has been paying between £1.1 and £1.3 million (in payments to NPIA and in central government grants to Missing People) to support these national services. We provisionally estimate that Missing People could undertake all four functions for a payment of approximately £700,000 per annum, **a saving to central government of between £0.4 and £0.6 million**. We would be pleased to discuss how any central government payment could be structured to reward delivery against outcomes.

"Missing People played a vital role for us as a family during Danielle's disappearance. Their continued help with raising awareness about her disappearance gave us the opportunity to know that Danielle was still alive as well as knowing that they were there if we needed to talk to someone. The work that Missing People carry out is vital for families such as ours when a loved one goes missing." Mother of Missing 15 Year Old

6. Specialist and Connected Services

6.1 The Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre has been a powerful partner in delivering child protection services in the UK. They have demonstrated, in their recent advent into the issue of missing persons, how specialist services can add value. By deploying their investigative resources; cases with potential related factors to the CEOP specialisms have a greater chance of resolution. By deploying their educational and training resources they can deliver key messages to both educational and police audiences providing the opportunity to reduce the overall incidence of young runaways and having appropriate police responses to children when they are missing. There is considerable value in rolling the Child Rescue Alert and other child specific resources into CEOP.

6.2 The value CEOP offers as a partner is primarily delivered by its capacity to work as an arm's length law enforcement agency drawing in valuable publicity to the issues and championing partnerships between private sector philanthropy and voluntary sector agencies, whilst also benefitting from a powerful model of strategic partnerships. No other Police agency has established such an effective model of partnership working and we strongly urge the government to protect this specialist function's capacity to continue to work in this way.

6.3 We can also see a value in bringing other child based risk issues under the banner of CEOP in order to leverage both private sector and voluntary sector capacity. For example the charity 'Parents and Abducted Children Together' has provided a historic and valued link to the issue of parental abduction and to international case publicity for abducted children. CEOP has demonstrated how valuable connecting PACT to statutory and voluntary sector partners can be in drawing in additional investment. Merging additional police functions related to children into CEOP should also be considered.

7. Realising outcomes locally

7.1 **The majority of efforts to ensure the safety of missing people, to resolve cases, to prevent disappearances and to support families are made locally.**

Whilst the police are the most visible providers, many other agencies and individuals can and do play an important role in delivering these outcomes. The challenge as we move towards a national rebalancing between the role of the state and its citizens, is to harness the skills and energy of individuals, families and the numerous voluntary groups within communities to play a greater role in shaping their own society.

7.2 The field of 'missing' presents numerous opportunities to deliver a bigger and more active society. On one level, these opportunities serve simply to benefit missing people and their families directly. At another level, these opportunities stand to build something much greater than a 'technical fix' to 'missing'. They activate and involve people in their own communities and the myriad of different reasons why people go missing, be they mental health problems, drug and alcohol abuse, problems at school, at work, with debt etc. 'Missing' is a symptom that something is wrong; a symptom which reflects many different and interweaving causes. In bringing together individuals and communities to address 'missing', we stand to activate people to better understand, cope with and ultimately reduce a whole range of social ills.

7.3 Voluntary and community organisations already provide a wealth of experience and resource in tackling the difficulties experienced by missing people. Voluntary organisations can attract non-statutory funding, and can draw on a considerable pool of low-cost, high-value volunteers and activists. Voluntary organisations also provide the essential infrastructure required to harness and coordinate local volunteers. Our proposals – which focus on extending the role of people affected by missing, other individuals and the voluntary and community sector in delivering better outcomes to missing people and their families – can be grouped into **three interconnected networks of local search and support:**



Network 1: Family Panels

- 7.4 Central to realising these opportunities is the need to give people more power and a larger say in what goes on in their own communities. Too often individuals affected by social problems have been left to rely on the intervention of those in authority. This is the time to give people with the real experience of social problems the authority themselves.
- 7.5 We propose the introduction of Family Panels to compliment the proposal in the Government's White Paper to elect Police and Crime Commissioners. Family Panels would consist of relatives of missing people, identifying their own needs and priorities, requiring information from statutory authorities to do so, with a right to **communicate their views directly to Police and Crime Commissioners**. Family Panels would shape the very services that they use, and would hold those in authority to account for their use of resources to achieve the outcomes for missing people and their families.
- 7.6 There is scope for these panels to also address issues of children who runaway, for example, scrutinising the responses in children's homes to children who go missing; supporting the Police in seeking appropriate responses from local authorities; where corporate parenting failures expose children to additional risks.
- 7.7 Family Panels would not only provide accountability but would **also create a local network of individuals directly affected by 'missing'**. These networks would provide 'peer-to-peer' support and a virtual (or face-to-face) meeting point for families to share their experiences and help each other.

Network 2: local volunteers

- 7.8 The creation of a local volunteer network could assist to *resolve cases expediently, prevent disappearances* and to *support families* of missing people.
- 7.9 Our experience at Missing People demonstrates the value that 'on-the-ground' representatives can bring in resolving cases. We already have over 2,000 community poster partners, from newsagents through to pubs and libraries who publicise disappearances in their local area.
- 7.10 We propose to recruit new **volunteers across the country to provide 'front-line' assistance to police and families** in finding missing people and re-connecting them, where possible, with their families. These volunteers will be trained to follow-up the results of our central tracing enquiries, visiting potential addresses of missing people and offering confidential help and support to reconnect missing people with their families where possible. Our volunteers will forge close links with local police officers, and would be able to undertake 'safe and well' checks where required, for example, when a missing person calls Missing People and requests us to stop publicising a case but does not wish to have any contact with their family or with the police. The provision of independent but formally verified 'safe and well' checks could enable the police to close their enquiries on missing people, savings resources. Our own research estimates that around one quarter of missing people, when found, do not return home and may benefit from an independent case closure process. **This could provide further cost savings to local Police forces.**

- 7.11 Local volunteers can also play a crucial role in preventing disappearances. **Missing People volunteers could provide awareness raising and prevention sessions in schools and other community groups.** Our volunteers could mentor young runaways to reduce the incidence of repeat running away. We also propose to examine the feasibility of offering return home interviews to young people and adults via our national helplines providing direct referrals and signposting to local sources of support that can reduce the likelihood a person going missing again. Return home interviews are all too often seen as an 'expensive luxury' and this could prove a cost-effective model of prevention and intervention for many local authorities.
- 7.12 Missing People's network of local volunteers will also be trained to provide face-to-face family support, where required.

Network 3: voluntary and community organisations

- 7.13 Voluntary and community organisations play a key role in achieving better outcomes for missing people and their families. The opportunity to extend this role is significant.
- 7.14 Missing People has partnered with **Department of Health to pilot the creation of an information exchange network between agencies** from both the statutory and voluntary sector dealing with people with mental health problems in the Westminster area. Preliminary research has shown that this scheme is having a real effect in giving support to vulnerable people who are missing and providing a mechanism for letting police and families know that the missing person is safe and well. **This has a cost benefit to police forces** which no longer have to continue their search for a missing person. Missing People aims to extend this scheme nationally over the next four years, creating a network of organisations better equipped to assist their own service users and resolving missing person cases in the process.
- 7.15 As part of our local networks programme, Missing People will also look to establish partnerships with **other local voluntary providers in order to assist missing people** who have been found to reintegrate back into the family home and address the underlying causes of their problems. These partnerships will aim to prevent future disappearances and provide more comprehensive support to families.
- 7.16 **Missing People has also partnered with the Department for Education to develop the 'Turn 2' directory of local services** which can help young runaways find a place of safety in their local area. This online directory will be publicly available from December 2010, and will allow both young people and providers from all sectors to identify the most appropriate source of help for young people, wherever they may be. There is scope to develop this further to facilitate access to the huge range of services missing people and their families might require when faced with the trauma of a loved ones disappearance.
- 7.17 The potential to draw resource from the community and to harness the energy of families, individuals and voluntary sector providers in supporting missing people and their families is enormous. We believe that **our local networks programme will be instrumental in delivering better outcomes**, whilst activating people in their own communities and holding those in authority to account.

7.18 Delivering the local networks programme will be a challenge and Missing People will need to increase its capacity in order to realise these benefits. In the longer term, we're confident that the cost of implementing and delivering the programme can be met through local sources of income, including grant and trust income, philanthropy and charitable giving. **In the short term, however, we request that Government consider providing a modest amount of transition funding to enable the charity to establish this local infrastructure.** Again, we would be ready to discuss how funding could be structured to reward delivery of outcomes and performance and to provide a show case of how national centralised organisations can organise differently to deliver the Big Society.

8. Summary

8.1 Missing People welcomes the changes proposed in the Government's White Paper *Policing in the 21st Century*. We believe the same principles can be used to create a new public service delivery framework which protects missing people and support their families, drawing on the energy, creativity and active participation of individuals in their own communities.

8.2 We urge the Government to recognise that focused and streamlined national services are an essential part of providing better outcomes to missing people and their families. Given the dissolution of the NPIA, the function of matching unidentified bodies with missing person reports – the only national function not provided by Missing People – needs to be retained. Keeping this function within a police-focused Missing Persons Bureau is one option. A second option is to transfer responsibility to the voluntary sector, which may bring cost savings. Missing People would be happy to discuss providing a **'one-stop-shop'** for national 'missing' services. We provisionally estimate that we would require approximately £700,000 per year to do this, saving central government in the region of £0.5 million a year.

8.3 There exists enormous potential to increase the role of individuals and organisations within the local community in resolving cases, safeguarding missing people, preventing disappearances and supporting families. Missing People has already made some substantial progress in creating networks of organisations to resolve cases more expediently. We believe more can be done to create a series of interlinked **local networks** of families, volunteers and voluntary and community organisations to activate communities in helping their own members and in holding statutory providers to account. Delivering this vision will require a modest investment which would be sustained through accessing local funding sources in the medium to long term.

8.4 Together, we believe these measures will complement the changes proposed in *Policing in the 21st Century* and will provide an infrastructure that delivers real outcomes for missing people and their families.

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