Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013

PART ONE - INTRODUCTION

This document should be read in conjunction with the Association of Chief Police Officers ACPO (2010) Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons (hereafter known as the 2010 Guidance), as it is complimentary to that document. In addition to changes resulting from the new definition of a missing person, the content of this document contains current good practice building onto that which is already contained within existing guidance. The content is also compatible with the impending guidance from the Department for Education (DfE).

The importance of dealing with missing persons correctly cannot be emphasised too strongly. All such reports must be assessed and understood to ensure that the response is appropriate in the circumstances. In some instances it is the first indicator that a serious crime has occurred; many murder investigations start as missing persons. Going missing and being absent should be recognised as a wider safeguarding issue; as a symptom of other problems or issues. This is strongly evidenced by the accelerated report of the Office of the Children's Commissioner that shows missing as one of the key indicators of child sexual exploitation.

It is important to assess the potential risk in every situation but also to consider repeat incidents as a continuum of risk. The risk emanates from circumstances in that person's life that lead them to go missing and the risk does not go away just because they have returned, unless the cause has been dealt with. Furthermore, to consider someone who goes missing to be at risk of harm underplays the situation and it is more correct to consider them to be actually suffering harm and therefore in need of safeguarding.

It has always been a challenge to the police service to deal effectively with the high volume of missing person reports that are made every year. Data for 2010/11 shows that 327,000 missing person incidents were reported to the police in the UK. Clearly it is very challenging to be able to fully investigate every one of these cases and a new approach has been tried and approved by ACPO. This more firmly embeds the investigation of missing within a risk based approach, with an absent category to enable monitoring of those whose whereabouts is not known but who are not believed to be immediately at risk of harm. This does not mean that these cases will not receive appropriate attention. Instead they will be responded to in a more effective manner, for example through the instigation of child protection measures. Absences and missing reports will be monitored for any trends, patterns etc that may

indicate individuals' exposure to harm. The new definitions and how to manage missing and absent cases will be dealt with in detail in part 2.

All reports, and particularly those involving children or vulnerable adults, must be seen as a multi-agency investigation to identify the reasons for the person going missing, find them and take action to prevent them going missing again. It is not simply a matter for the police, nor is it just about finding and returning the missing person. A range of agencies need to be involved, sharing information and developing strategies for safeguarding those at risk of harm and those actually suffering harm or significant harm. Early identification of risk should lead to the development of a safety plan to address the causes of that risk. This information can come from a variety of sources, such as absences, going missing, not attending school, etc.

It is also important to provide the families and carers with support and guidance. It is clear where agencies work together effectively, safeguarding improves. These improvements can be found in reducing the number of repeat missing incidents, finding missing people more quickly through sharing information and combining resources to provide better care and support on their return.

The return must be effectively managed, confirming that the missing person is safe and well, together with effective return interviews leading to a better understanding of why the person went missing and what can be done to prevent it happening again. Planning for the return has been shown to be extremely beneficial and it is not sufficient to deal with that event when it arises. Firm plans should be put in place while the person is still missing to decide how their return will be dealt with, especially with regard to those that repeatedly go missing or are in the highest risk category. If this is not done, it is likely that the cycle of going missing will not be broken and the person will go missing again.

Understanding, profiling and mapping the composition of a policing area is essential for the effective response to issues that may arise. A model has been developed by Cheshire Police that gives a very clear picture of children that are 'looked after', the responsible authorities and highlights any issues that need attention. It is recommended that all forces adopt a model similar to this and the Cheshire approach can be found in part 3.

PART TWO – DEFINITION AND OPERATIONAL RESPONSE

Definition

The new ACPO definition of a missing person is:

Missing - "Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another."

Absent – "A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be."

The `absent' category should comprise cases in which people are not presently where they are supposed to be and there is no apparent risk. `Absent' cases should not be ignored, and must be monitored over periods of time with consideration given to escalating to 'missing' if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk.

Initial Report

At the point of initial report, it will be necessary for the call taker to determine whether the person is missing or absent. The following set of questions can be used to assist this decision making.

1. What is the specific concern in this instance?
2. What has been done so far to trace this individual?
3. Is this significantly out of character?
4. Are there any specific medical needs?
5. Are they likely to be subjected to crime?
6. Are they likely to be the victim of abuse?
7. Are they currently at risk of Sexual Exploitation?
8. Are they likely to attempt suicide?
9. Do they pose a danger to other people?
10. Is there any other information relevant to their absence?

Where a report is categorised as `absent', a record should be created. A time frame within which the case will be reviewed should be established based upon the circumstances of the report, and this should be agreed with the informant at the time of report. Absent cases must not be allowed to continue without regular and robust re-assessments of how they should be investigated.

Risk

The assessment of risk is often a difficult process and must be carefully considered. Questions to assist in this process are available as part of the 2010 Guidance and on the Police Online Knowledge Area (POLKA).

Out of character behaviour is a strong indicator of risk but must not lead to complacency over those who are frequently absent or missing. It is not correct to consider that these circumstances indicate no or low risk. Careful consideration must be given to all reports to ensure that an absence of information indicating that the person has come to harm isn't mistaken as a demonstration that the person is safe and well. Unless a person's whereabouts are properly established, e.g., by actually seeing them, it is not possible to be certain of the risks they face.

There is clear evidence that those who exploit children are mindful of official processes and will seek to circumvent them and this must be considered when dealing with absences. It is common for offenders to time their abuse to coincide with the normal rhythms of a person's life.

Other specific vulnerabilities for some children such as those with Child Protection Plans, disabled children, gang-associated children etc. could all result in additional risks during periods of absence or missing. Looked after children have been identified as at greater risk, and includes all of those that are within the care system, including those in children's homes and foster placement. They are inherently vulnerable, which is why they are within the care system and this should be considered when assessing risk.

Response

Missing - where an adult or child is categorised as `missing', an investigation will be initiated that is appropriate to the level of risk. See the 2010 guidance for more detail regarding the actions expected in each risk category.

Absent – constant reviews as agreed above must be carried out. In follow-up contact with the informant the call taker should determine if there is any change in the circumstances which increases the risk; if so, then escalation to missing should be considered. Safeguarding procedures should be considered where necessary, and it is important to adopt an investigative approach to all reports, ensuring assumptions aren't made about the reasons for absence.

In the case of a looked after child or adult, it is expected that all reasonable steps should be taken by care providers to locate the individual prior to making a report to the police. If the individual is located without having made contact with the police, this absence should be recorded by the care provider in order to inform safeguarding plans. The care provider should record any information gained on the whereabouts of the individual whilst absent, and this should be shared as appropriate with the police. Where the person

remains absent, and the care provider feels the individual may be at risk of harm then a report should be made to the police.

It should also be remembered that referral to Missing People via 116 000 or the use of TextSafe are additional safeguards that can be used for missing and absent cases.

All 'absent' and missing reports should be brought to the attention of a supervisor for review, and re-grading if appropriate.

See Appendix A for an overview of the management of absent cases.

Management of the return

This should be considered as part of the investigation which cannot be concluded until the full circumstances of going missing are understood and appropriate safeguarding measures put in place.

It is also important that consideration is given to the how the return will be managed whilst the person is still missing, involving consultation with relevant agencies to ensure that this process is managed effectively. This is particularly important with those that are considered as high risk, are being harmed and/or are frequently reported as missing. Consideration should be given to how the person will be dealt with on first contact, identifying appropriate accommodation (if relevant) and how they should be debriefed. It is not helpful or appropriate to express views that a missing person is a nuisance or a waste of time and the broader issues relating to their disappearance should be considered.

Safe and well – there is a responsibility on the police to ensure that the person is safe and well and has an opportunity to disclose any relevant issues. This may be conducted by the police or by other professionals, but the police must be confident that there is nothing untoward that has been missed. It is common for missing persons, especially children, to be unwilling to engage in this process. If this is the case, is important to record their demeanour, their physical state and any other factors that may be relevant later – this is part of the investigation.

Although individuals categorised as absent will not be seen by the police, it is important to identify any information indicating the person has come to harm or may be at on-going risk of harm, and take appropriate action.

Accommodation – the location the person is to be returned to should be considered at an early stage, and should form part of strategy discussions that take place to consider alternative accommodation if the place where they were living is no longer appropriate. It may be necessary to consider options that should be applied as an emergency placement to cover the initial period following recovery.   There should be a risk assessment around the residential home, e.g. to ensure that it is not targeted for exploitation purposes. Going missing and inappropriate placements can start the chain reaction of ensnaring/recruiting/grooming all those living there.

Return Interview – this is covered in existing guidance and consideration should be given as to who is most appropriate to engage with the missing person on their return. It is important to remember that building trust and engaging with the person can take a considerable amount of time due to the experiences that they have had. Consideration should be given to use of the voluntary sector to provide these interviews.

Any indicators that the individual may be being exploited or otherwise have come to harm should be noted and escalated for further investigation as relevant. A list of indicators that a young person may be being sexually exploited can be found in the 2009 statutory guidance *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Exploitation*. This interview is an important investigative opportunity to identify on-going risk factors that may impact on the individual going missing again, and should not be treated as simply an administrative procedure to close a missing incident.

Local procedures should ensure that social care are informed of when a child/young person or vulnerable adult is reported missing and on return, together with reports of absence. The Missing Person Coordinator (or person performing this function) should regularly review all incidents to ensure relevant referrals are being made, and effective safeguarding practices implemented, including the instigation of multi-agency strategy meetings where required.

Figure 1 – Work Flow Diagram for New Approach
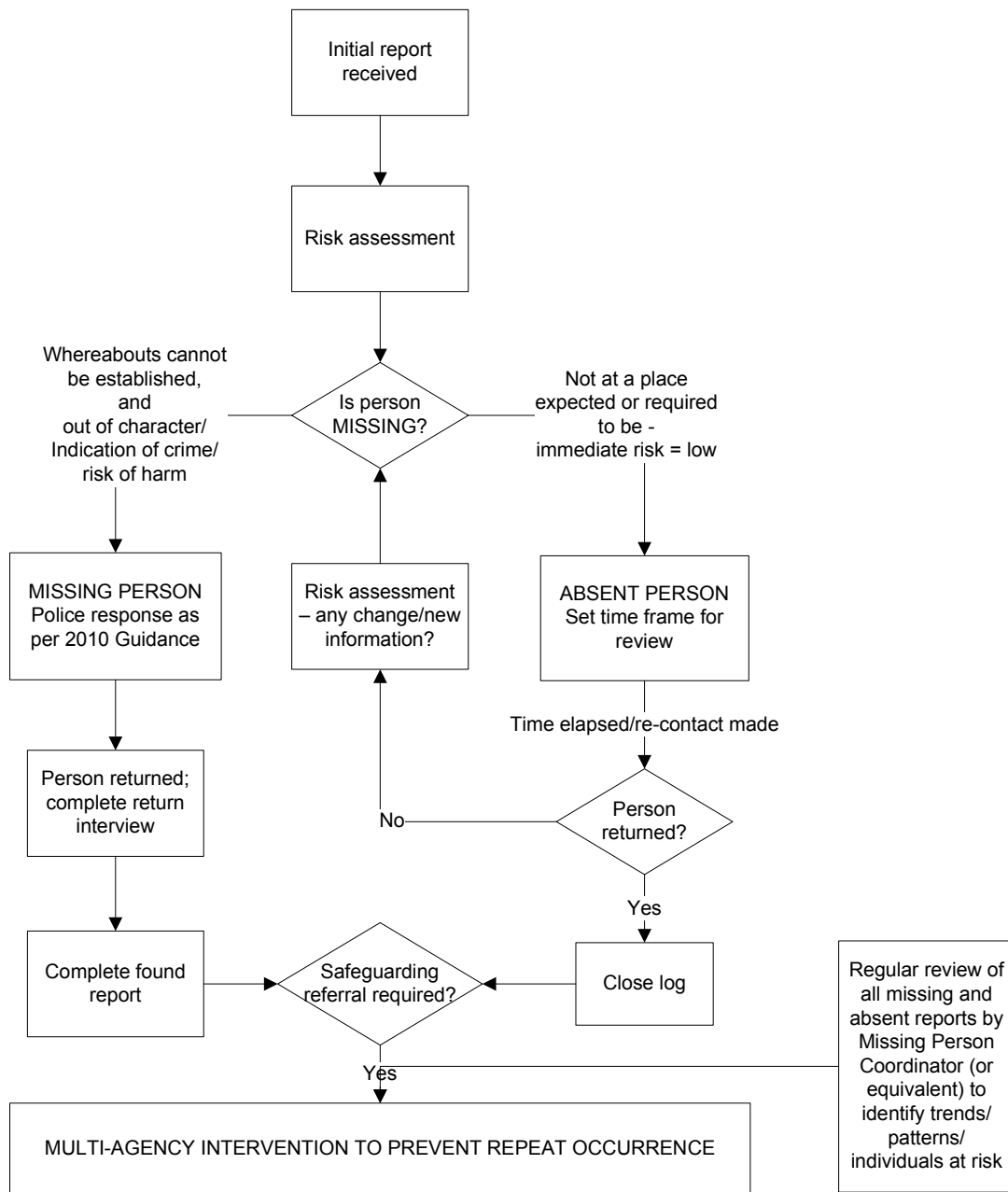
A more detailed step guide outlining the operational response has been created to aid implementation of these changes, and should be read in conjunction with this document. This step guide is available from the UK Missing Persons Bureau and on POLKA.

PART THREE – STRATEGIC REQUIREMENTS

In order to effectively implement this new approach and improve the safeguarding of these vulnerable individuals there are certain strategic arrangements that need to be in place, as outlined below. The means by which these requirements are met will vary in order to ensure the procedures are appropriate for local implementation. However, good practice examples from procedures already in place within forces are given to assist.

Multi-Agency Collaboration

Working together, sharing information and having a common understanding of processes are essential to ensure that all missing and absent incidents are properly managed. Many police forces have or are considering Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) or similar structures where working together is made easier.

Missing Person Coordinator (or those performing the function)

The approval by ACPO for introduction of the new definition is conditional on the role of Missing Person Coordinator (hereafter referred to as the coordinator) or someone performing this function existing in police forces. The number of coordinators will vary according to the size of each force. It is also beneficial if the role is co-located with the Child Sexual Exploitation coordinator.

The coordinator is required to collate information on all instances of absence and missing, ensuring records for individuals from children's and other care homes can be distinguished and reviewed. This will provide the necessary information for them to investigate the circumstances, identify locations the individual was found, and review repeat occurrences, in order to identify trends and risk of harm. Consideration must be given to children missing education, persistent absence from schools, and youth offending service data on absconding and breaching to build a picture of local absence and missing trends

Their work should inform strategies for interventions to reduce the incidence of missing and absence, assist with identifying priorities for further safeguarding work, and provide a basis for ongoing engagement with relevant partners to ensure an effective collaborative response is being received from all agencies. The role should include liaison with other agencies and care providers. Further information about the scope of the coordinator's role is referenced in the 2010 Guidance and can be found on POLKA.

Effective use of coordinators will ensure sufficient and proactive safeguarding measures are put in place, particularly in relation to guarding against child sexual exploitation.

Multi-Agency Protocols

As set out in the 2010 Guidance, police forces should have protocols with other agencies and care providers and these should be reviewed in the light of the new definitions and steps taken to ensure that there is a common understanding of procedures to be undertaken.

Protocols should be in place in any situation where individuals are looked after, and should set out each organisations responsibilities and processes in relation to being absent or going missing. Such protocols also facilitate better relationships between agencies.

Examples of such protocols are available from the Missing Persons Bureau community on POLKA, and can be used as a starting point for local implementation.

Data Collection

The new approach to data collection should enable forces to efficiently deploy police resources, but it is incumbent on forces to ensure that effective data collection practices are in place to support the necessary strategic review work.

Introduction of the new absent category should include the means by which any such reports can be recorded on relevant in-force computer systems. It should be possible to identify and collate details of all missing and absent reports received, and to distinguish reports for children from adults, as well reports relating to those missing from care.

Forces should also implement effective measures to capture information from return interviews, especially if collected by third party organisations, in order to identify early intervention and prevention priorities, particularly children and young people at risk of sexual abuse or exploitation.

Local Data Sharing

As part of the revision of the national guidance on children missing from home and care being produced by the Department for Education police forces will be expected to regularly share details with their local authority of all reports of a child or young person

reported missing or absent. It is also considered to be good practice for similar information to be shared with relevant agencies regarding vulnerable adults missing from care. These procedures should be formalised within the multi-agency protocols referenced above. These protocols should detail the information to be shared, the time frames within which this will be provided, and the responsibility of each partner in relation to the provision and response to this data.

It will be the responsibility of the local authority to then ensure that reports relating to children placed within their care from out of area are shared with the relevant placing Local Authority, in order to instigate reviews of care placements if required.

The Missing Person Coordinator should receive regular reports from all care homes of any absences not reported to the police, in order to ensure a full pattern of missing/absence can be established for all individuals.

National Data Sharing

The ACPO 2009 Code of Practice on the sharing of information in relation to Missing Persons introduced the requirement for forces to send details of all missing persons still outstanding after 72 hours to the UK Missing Persons Bureau, as well as a requirement to share high level figures of all incidents on a quarterly basis. Forces will need to include details of all missing and absent reports in the quarterly return, but will not be required to notify the Bureau of outstanding absences after 72 hours. It is anticipated that if operational support is required then an absence would be escalated to a missing incident prior to requesting this assistance. However, the period of absence should be included in the calculation of length of time missing (i.e. if a person was deemed to be absent for 12 hours, and then re-graded as missing, the case should be forwarded to the Bureau if they remain missing after 60 further hours, although can be notified immediately if the circumstances warrant immediate support).

A template to support the additional data required within the quarterly return is available from the UK Missing Persons Bureau, along with a separate guidance document detailing the specific information to be supplied.

Problem Profiling

In order to identify local priorities for strategic interventions and improvements it is deemed to be good practice for forces to

produce a problem profile of missing reports. This problem profile should identify the full extent of the impact of missing within the force area. This includes identifying the volume of reports received, examining the nature of these and determining priorities for intervention work such as high volume reporting locations (e.g. local care homes or mental health units), repeat missing individuals and regular locations where individuals are found. This work should also involve assessing the financial impact of missing for the force, which can then be used to determine the extent to which the costs associated with proactive intervention to reduce the reports (such as dedicated Missing Persons Coordinators and co-funding of return interviews) can be off set by the savings made.

Additionally, this work should not overlook the potentially hidden costs, such as the individual's involvement in criminal activity, whether whilst missing or which may be associated with the reasons for going missing. This not only has a resource implication for the force, but also has a human cost for those involved. This is especially true for vulnerable children and young people who may become involved in criminal activity and are at risk of various forms of exploitation. The positive impact of channelling resources that may be saved through a more efficient approach to dealing with missing reports should be considered at a human level, not simply a fiscal one.

Cheshire Police have undertaken a significant amount of work in this area which demonstrates how this sort of analysis can inform proactive engagement work with partners to improve the response to missing. Work was completed which mapped not only the missing incidences from children's homes and foster placements, but also indicated the level of police resources associated with these locations due to crime/victimisation. As a result of the picture developed, an individual then engaged with all high volume care placements, to highlight to them the problem and work with them to reduce these incidents. This has had a positive impact, and further information about this work is available from POLKA.

Additionally, Gwent Police have found that through profiling the impact of missing incidents on all local agencies, not just the police (e.g. costs to health through A&E admissions, STI clinic attendances etc.), they have gained additional support and funding from these agencies to develop a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub to effectively share information and assist with proactively addressing these issues (see POLKA for further details).

If not already completed, this profiling should be undertaken as soon as possible, and should be repeated regularly to identify any

changes in the profile over time. This will ensure the effectiveness of ongoing safeguarding work can be appropriately assessed and new priorities for intervention to be identified. Any profiles compiled should be shared with the UK Missing Persons Bureau.

National Support

In order to support the effective investigation of missing persons, and ensure relevant safeguarding measures are implemented, the UK Missing Persons Bureau, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre, and the charity Missing People, are available to provide operational advice and assistance. Details of the services provided by each organisation are listed in the *Summary of Services* document available on POLKA. It is considered good practice to utilise these services where relevant.

References

ACPO (2009). *Collection of Missing Persons Data: A code of practice for the Police Service on collecting and sharing data in missing persons with public authorities* [PDF only]*.* London: NPIA.

ACPO (2010). *Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons (2nd Edition)*[PDF only]*.* London: NPIA.

DCSF (2009). *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation.* London: DCSF.

Office of the Children's Commissioner (2012). *Briefing for the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education, on the emerging findings of the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, with a special focus on children in care.* London: OCC.

UK Missing Persons Bureau (2012). *Missing Persons: Data and analysis 2010/2011* [PDF only]*.* London: NPIA.

Appendix A – Absence Management

Discovery
- Person is not at the place they are supposed to be

Enquire
- Make reasonable enquiries to locate
  - RESPONSIBILITY - PARENT OR CARER

Still not located
- Report to police
  - RESPONSIBILITY - POLICE CONTROL ROOM OR CALL CENTRE

Police actions
- Determine if suitable for absent category
- Agree review and call back times
  - RESPONSIBILITY - POLICE CONTROL ROOM OR CALL CENTRE

Oversight
- Supervisor to check categorisation
- Keep under review - should it be escalated to missing?
  - RESPONSIBILITY - RESPONSE INSPECTOR OR CONTROL ROOM SUPERVISOR

Return
- Is the person safe and well?
- Are there any concerns that need to be investigated?
  - RESPONSIBILITY - POLICE IN CONJUNCTION WITH PARENT OR CARER

Monitor
- Oversight of reports
- Consider referral to multi-agency forum
- Look for trends and patterns
  - RESPONSIBILITY - MISSING PERSON COORDINATOR