



The All-Party Parliamentary Group for
Runaway and Missing Children and Adults

**Inquiry into the safeguarding of ‘absent’
children**

‘It is good when someone cares’

Final Report

May 2016

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who submitted evidence, attended roundtables, responded to our information requests or assisted this inquiry in other ways.

Foreword

We decided to do this Parliamentary Inquiry because we feared that many children who went missing were being left in danger and not safeguarded properly.

Unfortunately, according to the evidence we have collected over the last few months, our concerns appear to have proved correct.

Under the controversial new police recording system, introduced in 2013, children began to be classed as either 'missing' or 'absent'. Crucially only those categorised as missing receive an active police response.

It turns out that at least 10,000 children a year were classed as merely 'absent' and were effectively 'off the radar' in a massive 21,339 missing incidents.

The last thing any parent or carer wants when their child goes missing is for no police action to be taken.

The words of one anguished parent, who was left to cope alone, sum up the nightmare:

"I was driving around the whole night to look for her. I did not sleep".

We heard evidence that children reported as absent - for whom the police decided there was 'no apparent risk' - ended up falling through the safety net, exploited by adults for sex or criminal activity such as running drugs across county lines.

Alarm signals started to ring for us as soon as the 'absent' category was proposed because our 2012 All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into 'Children who go missing from care' had strongly highlighted missing incidents as an indicator of risk of child sexual exploitation.

In this new inquiry, we were given evidence of police call handlers being put under pressure from superiors to classify children as 'absent' and not missing.

There was the case of a 15 year old girl reported by her family as missing but who was categorised as absent. The family were told to stop wasting police time because she was 'residing with an older boyfriend'. The girl was away from home for four long weeks and yet it turned out that there were problems with child sexual exploitation, trafficking, criminal gang involvement and drugs.

In another area of the country, we learned that there had been an increase in the number of missing boys who had been exploited. However, these cases did not originally come to light because the boys had been recorded as absent.

None of these cases were picked up in the original risk assessment. We want to see risk assessments carried out jointly by the police and children's services. We also want to see better sharing of information so that dangers, such as those of children being trafficked out of his area to sell drugs or for sex, are picked up.

All this evidence led us to conclude that the new absent category is not fit for purpose and should be scrapped. It was introduced to save police time but has turned out to be a blunt, crude assessment tool that leaves children at risk.

Missing children should instead receive a risk based response based on a new system of low, medium and high risk. No child should be allowed to be classified as low risk without prior joint assessment of risk undertaken by the police and children's services.

At the moment the initial risk assessment is not informed by all the available intelligence about a child's life. Children categorised as absent typically do not get safe and well checks or return interviews and therefore it is not always recorded what experiences they had during their absent episodes. This means valuable intelligence is lost.

A National Police Data base that builds up intelligence and a picture of the child's whole life and which allows information to be shared across police lines is badly needed.

We also want to see a 'nominated person'- a sort of guardian who will take an interest in them – to be appointed for children who go missing from home and who may not be on the children's services radar.

From Rotherham to Rochdale we have seen a pattern of young people and their families not being taken seriously. The absent category as it is implemented now is sending a message to absent young people that "no-one cares". We need to show as a society that we do care and are determined not to leave vulnerable children 'out there' unprotected from adults seeking to exploit them.



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Introduction

A missing child is one of the worst nightmares of any parent or carer. When a child does go missing everyone wants the child to return home soon, safe and unharmed. When this does not happen the response that we all want to see is that of informed and speedy action from the police to find the child and bring them back to safety.

Yet in reality the response to children who go missing varies from place to place depending on local policies and protocols and ways local services work together and share information about missing children. And in the majority of police forces – 37 out of 43 at the end 2015¹ - that response will be determined by whether a child reported to the police as missing is categorised by the police as ‘missing’ or ‘absent’. The other forces have elected not to use the ‘absent’ category for missing children.

The police introduced the definitions of ‘missing’ and ‘absent’ in 2013 to allow responses that are proportionate to the risks faced by those reported as missing and to allow more efficient use of police resources.

A missing person is: *‘Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person maybe subject of a crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another’.*²

An absent person is: *‘A person not at a place where expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk’.*³

The ‘missing’ and ‘absent’ categorisations result in different actions from the police and from children’s services. In ‘missing’ cases the response is active: the police deploy an officer to the reporting person to gather information and make additional enquiries depending on the circumstances of case. When a missing person returns or is found the police will undertake a ‘safe and well’ check and children will be offered a return interview commissioned by their local children’s social care services to identify any possible safeguarding concerns.

In ‘absent’ cases there is no immediate action and police personnel are not deployed to undertake checks and searches. Police have to agree a strategy with the reporting person (usually a parent or carer) *‘which will include dynamic actions for them [the reporting person] to undertake as well as review timescales to re-assess the risk and response’.*⁴ Consideration will be *‘given to escalating to ‘missing’ if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk’.*⁵ On return ‘absent’ children are not normally given ‘safe and well’ checks by the police or offered return interviews by children’s services.

¹ National Crime Agency. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response’. Page 6.

² Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 5.

³ Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. ‘Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013’. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 5. In March 2015 the National Policing Lead updated the ‘absent’ definition to include “and there is no apparent risk”. See: National Police Chiefs’ Council. 2015. ‘Update to missing persons definition – letter to chief officers’. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/appref/ACPO-Absent-letter-March-2015.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 1.

⁴ National Crime Agency. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response’. Page 3.

⁵ Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. ‘Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013’. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 5.

The categorisation of a child as ‘missing’ or ‘absent’ depends on a risk assessment undertaken by the police both at the time when the child was reported missing and consequently whenever the case is reassessed. The quality and comprehensiveness of the information available and accessed by police staff during these risk assessments determine whether the level of risk is assessed correctly and therefore whether the correct categorisation is made. Correct categorisation also depends on how well the police and children’s social care services work together to assess possible risks to the child.

Since the roll out of the new definitions across the majority of police forces, beginning in 2013, there has been very little systematic evaluation or research examining how well the new system functions and most importantly of how well it can keep children safe. One of the principle findings in the recent HMIC report on the police’s response to missing and absent children in England and Wales was that as a result of inconsistencies in properly assessing risks, managing investigations, and providing support and help to the child, some children are being left at an ‘*unacceptable risk of harm*’.⁶

With at least 9,780 children categorised as absent in 2014/15⁷ and 21,339 ‘absent’ incidents in total, the safeguarding of absent children is an issue too serious to ignore.

This inquiry aims to interrogate the current system in order to fully understand the safeguarding responses ‘absent’ children receive and how risk assessment is being carried out in order to make recommendations about how the police and partner services should respond to ‘absent’ children in the future.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group gathered evidence from a range of sources during the course of this inquiry. A call for evidence was launched in December 2015 and resulted in 17 written submissions from a range of organisations and stakeholders.⁸ An information request was made to all Police forces and all local authorities with responsibilities for children’s social care in England.

Furthermore, two roundtables were held in Westminster bringing together a range of different stakeholders from the police and partners involved in the safeguarding of missing children at both the national and local level and the participants⁹ were also consulted on a summary of the inquiry’s recommendations.

⁶ Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary. 2016. ‘Missing children: who cares? The police response to missing and absent children’. <http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/missing-children-who-cares.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 5.

⁷ National Crime Agency. 2016. UK Missing Persons Bureau: Missing Persons Data Report 2014/2015. <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/resources/missing-persons-data-report-2014-15> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 38.

⁸ See ‘List of Contributors’. Page 54

⁹ See ‘List of Contributors’. Page 54

Executive summary

In recent years missing children have been moving up the local and national policy agenda. Increased awareness of the link between going missing and child sexual exploitation, prompted by horrific cases across the country, as well as by reports from this APPG¹⁰ and the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC)¹¹ have led to more concerted efforts across all agencies to disrupt exploitation and lessen the risks to children who go missing.

The changes that the government introduced to improve the safeguarding response to children in residential care and the publication of the revised statutory guidance in 2014 on missing children also created opportunities to review and strengthen local responses to missing children.

The greater awareness of the risks missing children face has not necessarily resulted in improved responses to missing children across the country however. Cuts to children's social care and police funding, on-going reforms and an increase in the numbers of children who require help from children's social care services has meant that often only cases identified as high risk are getting prioritised for response.

It has been acknowledged in written submissions and through the roundtables for this inquiry that there are many positive examples of agencies working well together to protect missing children, particularly those identified to be at risk of harm. There is a lot more clarity around what a good response looks like when the child is recognised to be at high risk of harm and categorised as 'missing', even though a lack of consistency in the implementation of good practice prevails. It has been acknowledged in a recent HMIC report that *'in most straightforward cases the police's response is timely, proportionate and appropriate'*.¹²

At the same time the inquiry heard that absent children, for whom the police establish there to be 'no apparent risk', often end up not being on the radar of other services, like children's social care, until things in their lives get much more serious. As one roundtable participant said, *'It is perverse, because children need to go up tariff, and things must become more serious before they can get a service and yet we know that early support reduces the risk of repeated missing incidents'*.¹³

At one of the roundtables the National Policing Lead, Chief Constable Mike Veale voiced concerns that *'risk assessments are not completed consistently throughout the service'* and that for some police forces the 'absent' category may be *'not doing very much more than recording an event'*.¹⁴ These are important concerns to address, particularly given that those in social care appear to rely excessively on the police getting the risk assessment right on every occasion and therefore believe their lack of response to absent children is evidenced.

¹⁰ All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults and All-Party Parliamentary Group for looked after children and care leavers. 2012. 'Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care'. http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/joint_appg_inquiry_-_report...pdf [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

¹¹ Office of the Children's Commissioner. 2013. "If only someone had listened" Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups: Final Report' http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/lf_only_someone_had_listened.pdf [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 57.

¹² Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. 2016. 'Missing children: who cares? The police response to missing and absent children'. <http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/missing-children-who-cares.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 57.

¹³ Jane Booth, Independent Chair, Rochdale and Lancashire Safeguarding Children Boards. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

¹⁴ Chief Constable Mike Veale, NPCC lead for missing people. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

When children's social care do not properly participate in the risk assessment, such a position is not justifiable and children can be left at terrible risk which could have been prevented.

Further evidence submitted to the inquiry by organisations providing return interviews questioned decision making around the use of the 'absent' category.

'In areas where we work where the absent category is used we are worried that children 'fall through the net' as they are not being properly identified and supported. Where absent episodes are not correctly referred to agencies, families and children are prevented from accessing preventative and early intervention support'.¹⁵

'Whatever happens to the category of 'absent' there is going to have to be changes to what call handlers base their decisions on because we all have got examples where young people are classified wrongly'.¹⁶

The inquiry identified a number of issues that contribute to making the absent category unsafe.

- *The lack of data on absent children*

Although the absent category was introduced in 2013 there is still no reliable data in place on how many children are categorised as absent. Out of 37 police forces that implemented the absent category 29 provided some information on absent children to the National Crime Agency. Only 6 police forces in response to our requests could share with us information on how many cases have been upgraded from absent to missing. The level of detail that is available both from police forces and local authorities on children categorised as absent varies from one place to another, making information on absent children incomplete and not helpful when it comes to analysing how well agencies safeguard absent children.

- *The risk assessment is not informed by all available intelligence about a child's life*

The risk assessment made when a child goes missing is not informed by intelligence that different local agencies may have about a child but is made on often incomplete information shared by the person reporting a child missing. There are examples of good practice towards absent children but they are few and far between. The inquiry heard that risk assessments are not underpinned by robust evidence about risk assessment and what works to keep children safe.

- *Different interpretations of what 'no apparent risk' means and difference in procedure*

The inquiry heard that there is no agreement on what 'no apparent risk' means when a case is assessed as absent. The absence of clear guidance on how absent category should be implemented in practice resulted in big variations in responses to absent children, frequency of reviews of absent cases, length of time a child is allowed to be absent for, and how information about absent children is shared with local agencies. The inquiry heard that in several areas there is no upper limit on how long a child may be absent for and the longest period of time the child was absent for reported to us was over 20 days.

¹⁵ Barnardo's. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Barnardo's written response'. Page 2.

¹⁶ The Children's Society. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: The Children's Society's written response'.

- *Looked after children*

Issues around children missing from care came up often. There were concerns that with the 'absent without authorisation' category used by social care some children experience long delays before they are categorised as missing. The inquiry heard that children missing from out of area placements are particularly vulnerable and are often categorised as absent despite high risk of being targeted for exploitation. The system of notification between local authorities of out of area placements may still not be working.

- *Children missing from the family home*

The inquiry found little evidence that children who reside with families and are categorised as absent receive the appropriate safeguarding response. Concerns have been raised that because they may not be known to local agencies the risks to them are not likely to be well understood and they may be left without a response until things escalate to high risk. We have heard that there is also little consistency in how information about children missing from education is interrogated alongside the data on children reported missing to the police to identify those at risk of grooming and exploitation.

- *Follow up on return*

The inquiry found out that 22 out of the 28 police forces that responded to our question about safe and well checks do not provide safe and well checks to absent children. These children, particularly if they have been reported as missing from the family home, are also often not getting return interviews. Thus, important opportunities are lost to gather intelligence about the lives of these children to inform risk assessments and offer appropriate support.

At the same time this inquiry identified that the lack of clear evidence for an informed approach to absent children has resulted in huge variations in the responses absent children receive. More needs to be done, urgently, to create an evidence base. In this report we hope to highlight some research opportunities along with best practice we have found.

Key recommendations:

1. The separate 'absent' category should be abandoned by the police and missing children should instead receive a proportionate response based on the risks they face. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) should work with the College of Policing (CoP) to design a response that assesses the level of risk to all missing children as either 'low', 'medium' or 'high'. No child should be allowed to be categorised as low risk without prior joint assessment of the risks they face being undertaken by both the police and children's services.
2. The Police and the Home Office should introduce a National Database for missing children that allows information to be shared across police lines. This database should be designed not only to provide accurate data about missing children at a national level but also to be a useful and proactive tool for coordinating and intelligently informing missing children investigations. It should include information about previously identified risks, where young people go missing from and to, and whom they go missing with.
3. A national information sharing protocol for missing children and accompanying best practice guidance should be designed by the DfE and the Home Office to allow the police and local authorities to share information about missing children for the purposes of risk assessment

and intelligence gathering for ongoing police investigations and safeguarding work. This protocol should address the sharing of information from Return Interviews.

4. Children who go missing from home should have a 'nominated person' appointed to ensure that they are properly safeguarded.
5. HMIC, Ofsted, HMIP, CQC in their joint inspections should include criteria with a focus on data sharing about children who go missing.

The Police's response to a report of a missing child



*In a few instances and areas 'Safe and Well checks' and Return Home Interviews may be conducted for absent children.

Section One – How is the ‘absent’ category being implemented?

National figures – how many children are ‘missing’ and ‘absent’

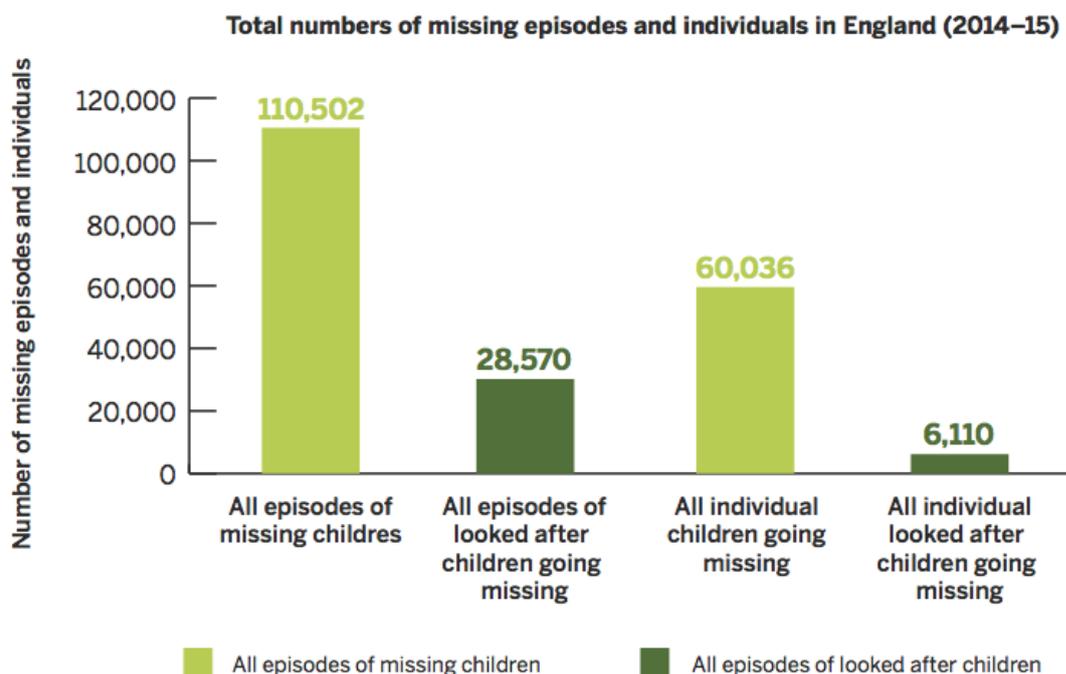
National figures from the National Crime Agency

1. Despite the increased focus in recent years on the vulnerability of children who go missing and the need to provide appropriate responses to them it is still not possible to confidently say how many children go missing every year, where they go missing from and what responses they receive. The data on absent children is even more incomplete.
2. The recording and sharing of data about missing and absent children is an issue of concern. There are a number of different systems that police forces use to record missing and absent data, which complicates the arrangements for recording data as well as for sharing it across the boundaries of police forces or local authorities.
3. Absent data is not always recorded on the same system as missing data. This is one of the key reasons why the data on absent children was often not available. Another common reason for being unable to provide complete data about the use of the ‘absent’ category was that forces were often unable to distinguish in their systems between ‘absent’ children and ‘absent’ adults.¹⁷
4. Though the absent category has been in use since April 2013 the information about children who are categorised as absent is still not available in full. The National Crime Agency’s latest report¹⁸ on missing persons showed that in 2014-15 there were a total of 60,657 individual children recorded as having been missing on police data systems in England and Wales. In total these children went missing some 127,424 times. All of the 43 police forces in England and Wales were able to report on this data.
5. Graph A shows the total numbers of missing children and episodes based on data from the NCA’s 2014/15 high level data report. To give an overall picture of how many looked after children go missing, it also details the number of looked after children who go missing and the number of episodes based on Department for Education data.

¹⁷ National Crime Agency, Uk Missing Persons Bureau. 2015. Missing Persons High Level Data Report 2014-15. <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/pressroom/high-level-data-reports-for-2013-2014-and-2014-2015> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 10.

¹⁸ The Missing Persons High Level Data Report 2014 -15 was published in December 2015 and is available at the following link. <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/pressroom/high-level-data-reports-for-2013-2014-and-2014-2015> Further to this report NCA released Missing Persons Data report 2014/15 on 16 May 2016 available from <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/696-missing-persons-data-report-2014-2015/file>. The reports covering the same period of time contain different data on absent cases although the data on missing children is the same in both reports. For this APPG report we have used the data from the latest NCA report. [Both reports last accessed 20 May 2016].

Graph A¹⁹



Based on data from 'NCA Missing Persons High Level Data Report 2014–15' and Department for Education data taken from 'Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015'

6. 29 police forces out of 37 that have implemented the absent category could provide the NCA with some data on absent children. Out of these 29 police forces only 15 forces could provide complete data on the number of absent incidents involving children. Across these 15 police forces 10,853 incidents of absent children were recorded. 14 out of 15 forces could also provide the number of individual children recorded as absent. In those 14 police forces 6,457 were recorded as absent.²⁰
7. In total across the 29 police forces that could provide partial data on absent children and adults 21,339 absent child incidents were reported to NCA by police forces involving 9,780 individual children. There are some discrepancies between the high level data from separate police forces published in December 2015 and the numbers in the Missing Persons Data report published in May 2016. Although both reports cover the same period of time some numbers in 2016 report, both those related to absent incidents and those related to absent children, appear to be either smaller or bigger than those published in December 2015. This demonstrates once again how incomplete the data on absent children is.
8. In response a freedom of information request sent to all 39 police forces in England (and achieved a 90% response rate) only 19 police forces could provide some data on absent

¹⁹ Graph A is based on information taken from the Department for Education and the NCA's 'High Level Data report' published in December 2015. As such the numbers of missing children from the NCA are slightly different from those quoted in paragraph 4 which are taken from the NCA's 'Missing Persons Data Report' published in May 2016. The fact that these numbers changed between the two publications, despite being based on the same data sets highlights the difficulties in collecting comprehensive data on missing children.

²⁰ National Crime Agency, UK Missing Persons Bureau. 2016. Missing Persons Data Report 2014/2015. <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/696-missing-persons-data-report-2014-2015/file> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 38.

children, the number of absent incidents recorded, or both. But the level of information that could be provided on absent children could not match that provided on children recorded as missing. For example, fewer police forces could share whether children who are recorded as absent were going missing from their family home, foster care placement or children's home. In addition, the data provided to the inquiry in some instances did not match that in the NCA report.

9. The poor quality of data has recently been stressed upon by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) in their report "Missing children, who cares?". HMIC's own data request to police forces found that there were 281,000 missing people (children and adults) in 2014-15. The NCA recorded 210,000 giving a discrepancy of 71,000 missing people.²¹
10. Furthermore, in written evidence submissions, one respondent pointed out that in their experience not all missing person cases are properly transferred from a police force's 'Command and Control System' which is used to record initial reports and a force's missing persons database which is used during missing person investigations. The respondent suggested that in some forces as few as 40% of all missing person reports were being transferred onto missing person databases.²²
11. In addition with absent and missing categories it is vital that there is an understanding about cases that were upgraded from absent to missing and the other way round. Currently this information is not available. Only 6 police forces could share this information in their responses to the request for information. It showed that in those police forces on average 16% of cases were upgraded to missing. The percentage of cases upgraded ranged from 6% in one area to 41% in another.
12. A focus on the collection of data about missing and absent children is needed. As David Tucker of the College of Policing pointed out: *'Collecting and understanding data is important because it can and should be used to inform evidence based practice. It is also valuable to each individual police force so that they can effectively scrutinise their decision making and processes. There is a need for both consistency and scrutiny.'*²³
13. While the headline numbers of children recorded as missing and absent is important as it may help with decisions on resource allocation it is even more crucial that the data is used to inform an intelligent approach to children who go missing by identifying locations and places children go missing from, and providing sufficient information for proper performance management.
14. There was an agreement among the participants of both roundtables as well as in written submissions that the issue of the persistent lack of data needs to be resolved with urgency. It is important that we understand how many children go missing and even more important to understand the whole picture: places children go missing from, adults and other children they associate with while missing, how long they remain missing for and what they get involved in or do while missing. It is unacceptable that in the era of technological and digital advances there is still no appropriate and intelligent system to record this information. Such a system would protect children who go missing.

²¹ Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. 2016. 'Missing children: who cares? The police response to missing and absent children'. <http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/missing-children-who-cares.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 25.

²² Mr P. Shakesheff. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 7.

²³ David Tucker, College of Policing. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

15. It is important that decision makers at a national and local level properly understand the extent to which children are going missing. As this report will go onto to demonstrate it is necessary that information about individual missing and absent children can be shared across police borders and that a history of a child's individual missing episodes is accessible when a case is assessed to allow for risks and trends to be identified. There has been recognition of the need to establish a national database for missing children²⁴ but to date progress has been slow.

Recommendation: *The Police and the Home Office should introduce a National Database for missing children that allows information to be shared across police lines. This database should be designed not only to provide accurate data about missing children at a national level but also to be a useful and proactive tool for coordinating and intelligently informing missing children investigations. It should include information about previously identified risks, where young people go missing from and to, and whom they go missing with.*

Police implementation of the 'absent' category

16. Although the response to missing and absent children in each police force area is governed by the Interim guidance on dealing with missing persons reports,²⁵ each police force area approaches the implementation of the guidance in their own way.
17. The majority of police forces have implemented the absent category. The NCA's response to this inquiry indicated that at the end of 2015 86% of the police forces in England and Wales had implemented the absent category.²⁶ This inquiry's Freedom of Information request largely confirmed this picture however there was some nuance. Five police forces that use the absent category for adults do not use it for children (under the age of 18) and one police force reported that it had ceased to use the 'absent' category in January 2015.
18. One of the key issues highlighted during the roundtable discussions and in written submissions was the lack of research or evidence to inform the implementation of the absent category. Crucially, the research undertaken in 2013 in the 3 areas that piloted the absent category did not specifically look at the outcomes for children or whether the introduction of the new category led to improvements in the safeguarding responses made to missing children.²⁷ The evaluation did state that there was no reported evidence of harm to individuals concerned or that new category would undermine the safeguarding response.
19. Submissions to the inquiry highlighted that it is not possible to confirm that no harm was suffered by children involved. Children categorised as absent typically do not get safe and well checks or return interviews and therefore it is not always recorded what experiences they had during their absent episodes.

²⁴ HM Government. 2016. Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/408604/2903652_RotherhamResponse_acc2.pdf [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 7.

²⁵ Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. 'Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013'. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

²⁶ National Crime Agency, Uk Missing Persons Bureau. 2015. Missing Persons High Level Data Report 2014-15. <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/pressroom/high-level-data-reports-for-2013-2014-and-2014-2015> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 5.

²⁷ Bayliss, A. and Quinton, P. 2013. 'Risk, bureaucracy and missing persons: an evaluation of a new approach to the initial police response'. http://whatworks.college.police.uk/Research/Documents/Missing_persons_PUBLICATION_PQ.pdf [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

20. In addition there were a number of examples shared which highlighted that the application of the absent category in practice leads to increased risks of harm to young people.
21. Practitioners from The Children’s Society shared the following example: ‘A 15 year old had been reported as missing by her family. She was classed as absent and later was found in the accommodation of an older ‘boyfriend’. Missing episodes continued but the parent of the young person did not always report her as missing as the police had told the parent ‘not to waste their time’ as they did not believe that older boyfriend posed risk to the child. As a result of intervention from voluntary services and children’s social care a child protection meeting was held concerning the young person. At the meeting concerns were raised in relation to trafficking, criminal gang involvement, drugs and CSE. Following this the young person was recorded as missing and was removed home. The young person by that time had been away from home for around 4 weeks.’²⁸
22. Barnardo’s response shares an example from one area that ‘has seen an increase in the number of missing boys who appear to have been exploited and these cases are only now coming to light as they have been previously recorded as absent’.²⁹
23. Responses pointed out that the absence of robust evidence of what the good application of the absent category should look like means that there is a huge variation and inconsistency in how it is applied in practice – from initial risk assessment, to supervision over decision making and to the length of a child’s missing episode before a police officer is dispatched to look for them.

Recommendation: National Police Chiefs’ Council and College of Policing should commission research focussed on evaluating the outcomes for children categorised as low risk or no apparent risk to underpin future Authorised Professional Practice.

Risk assessments

24. When a child goes missing a phone call is made to the police command and control centre where the operator will ask the caller a number of questions to establish the level of risk and determine the categorisation of missing or absent.
25. Call handlers have an important role to play in conducting the risk assessment that informs the decision about whether a child is categorised as ‘absent’ or ‘missing’. In written submissions, two different police forces described the kind of training they deliver to their call handlers.
26. Nottingham Police explained how their call handlers received a full day of training in the use of the National Decision Model which is the police’s tool for deciding on a course of action and is based on assessments of threat and risk. This training included cases of missing person investigations.³⁰

²⁸ The Children’s Society. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: The Children’s Society’s written response’.

²⁹ Barnardo’s. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Barnardo’s written response’. Page 2.

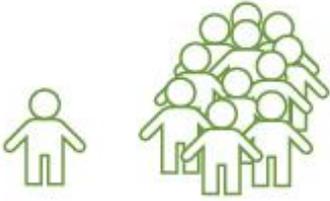
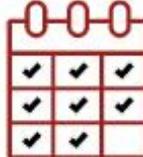
³⁰ Nottinghamshire Police. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Nottinghamshire Police’s written response’. Page 1.

27. Greater Manchester Police informed the Inquiry about the dedicated online risk assessment training package that their call handlers use for training and the additional training that the force has offered to supervisors and front-line officers.³¹
28. The importance of getting the risk assessment right cannot be overestimated. As Mike Veale put in his submission to the inquiry: *'I am not for one moment disagreeing that there are significant challenges with the interpretation of 'absent'. It is a tool for risk management not demand management; get the risk management element right and demand is effectively and professionally addressed. What we have seen is a poor understanding and judgement of risk which clearly needs to be addressed and is, indeed, being addressed within forces across the country'*.
29. The Interim guidance on missing person investigations includes 10 questions for risk assessment. Through the Freedom of Information request we asked police forces if they used a set series of questions when conducting their risk assessment. Of the 30 forces that responded to this question 28 forces did. Most forces use the ten questions recommended in the interim guidance issued by ACPO and the College of Policing³² but three forces used the THRIVE model of risk assessment.³³
30. Analysis of responses from police forces to information requests shows that there are some considerable variations and important omissions in risk assessment questions. For example, despite the recent focus on sexual exploitation only 12 forces responded saying that they ask specifically whether there is any direct risk of sexual exploitation. On other issues, only three ask specific questions about whether the child is subject to any safeguarding procedures. Only 7 ask about mental health problems, although the risk assessments do usually include questions about suicide and medication.

³¹ Greater Manchester Police. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Greater Manchester Police's written response'. Page 2.

³² Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. 'Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013'. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 5.

³³ The THRIVE concept assesses threat, harm, risk, investigation opportunities, the vulnerability of the victim and the engagement level required to resolve the issue.

 <p>Some children had been 'absent' between 11 and 137 times</p>	 <p>The longest absence reported lasted 20 days and 16 hours</p>	 <p>Children could be absent for up to six hours. In others it could be 72 hours or indefinitely</p>
 <p>Five police forces will not categorise a child under 13 years of age as 'absent'</p>	 <p>12 out of 25 forces ask whether the child is at risk of sexual exploitation</p>	 <p>Only 7 forces ask about mental health problems other than the immediate risk of suicide</p>

31. Similarly, concerns were expressed that risk assessment focussed on immediate risks despite the fact that for children at risk of being groomed for sexual or criminal exploitation it is the ongoing and cumulative risk that is of most concern. The National Crime Agency in their submission to the inquiry stressed that *'immediate risk and cumulative risks need to be well understood'*.³⁴ But such distinctions are not heavily featured in the current guidance for police on responding to missing persons.
32. Many submissions commented on the differences in understanding of what 'no apparent risk' means in the absent categorisation and how this is reflected in forces' policies, procedures and risk assessment. Written submissions pointed out that current approaches are not based on any research or evidence making it difficult to understand what good risk assessment would look like in relation to 'missing' and 'absent' children.
33. In their response, the charity Missing People argued that the risk assessment is based on a deficit model at present and that it does not allow the call handler to consider whether the child had *'the capacity to keep themselves safe'*.³⁵
34. During the roundtable discussion Susannah Drury shared her concerns about the situations of *'no apparent risk'*.
35. *'What I would question, is this idea of no apparent risk at all when we're talking about children whose whereabouts are unknown. Just because the risks are not known to the police it certainly does not mean they are not at risk. I think we all know that when a child goes missing, whether or not they are labelled as absent or missing, they're going for a reason. The most common reasons are abuse or neglect problems at home, and they*

³⁴ National Crime Agency. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response'. Page 2.

³⁵ Missing People. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Missing People's written response'. Page 2.

*become more vulnerable when they go because they are hidden from help and at greater risk of crime and exploitation. So this idea of no apparent risk, I think, is a dangerous one. They are children, they are vulnerable and this particular group of children is more vulnerable than others. So I don't have any issue having a spectrum of different levels of risk but I don't like the 'no apparent risk' – that seems to me that it can mean no action is taken both in terms of while they are gone and when they return.'*³⁶

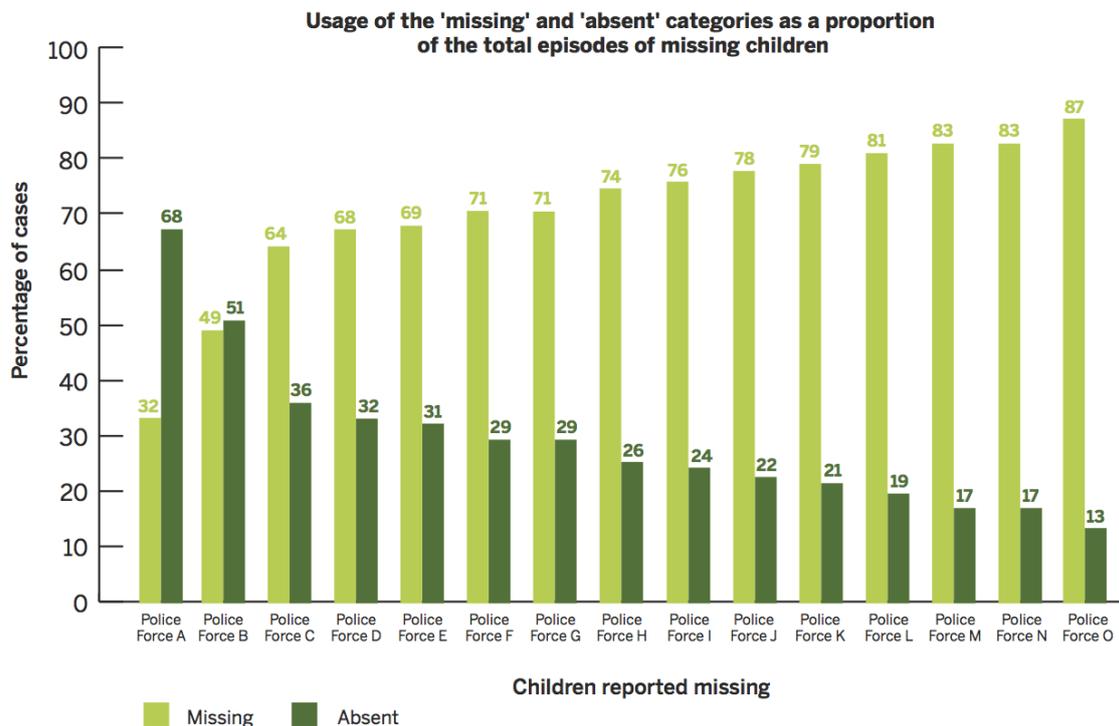
36. The Children's Society highlighted that in many cases risk assessment may be driven by other agendas (eg. tackling child sexual exploitation) and not the risks that children may actually be facing. They shared cases studies highlighting where young people are going missing and are being trafficked for criminal involvement yet the risk of trafficking is not included in risk assessment or response.
37. *A young person in care due to abuse and neglect at home who also has learning difficulties is known to being taken out of his local area and trafficked for criminal exploitation. He goes missing regularly from his placement. The risk assessment does not include any references to this young person being a possible victim of trafficking.*³⁷
38. Although on a national level more children are categorised as missing than absent, in individual police forces the application of the absent category, in most cases following the same risk assessment being applied to the case, is resulting in very different ratios of missing to absent. On average, the police forces responding to our data request categorised 27% of missing children as 'absent' during 2014-15. The range of data however was of concern. Two police forces were categorising 70% and 87% of all missing children reported to them as 'absent'.
39. The graph below is based on the data submitted to the NCA by the 15 forces who could provide complete data on both missing and absent. It visualises different approaches to the absent category showing the proportion of missing to absent cases for each police force.³⁸

³⁶ Susannah Drury, Director of Policy, Research and Development, Missing People. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

³⁷ The Children's Society. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: The Children's Society's written response'.

³⁸ National Crime Agency, UK Missing Persons Bureau. 2016. Missing Persons Data Report 2014/2015. <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/696-missing-persons-data-report-2014-2015/file> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 33 and 38.

40. Graph B



41. While there may be a number of possible explanations for such variations, written submissions and roundtable discussions also expressed concerns that the 'absent' category may be seen as a cost saving measure in some areas and that this could result in significant pressure on call handlers to record a child as 'absent' rather than 'missing'.

42. *'As part of my training delivery I have been able to speak to hundreds of police officers, PCSO and Police Staff. The categories, particularly for those taking initial calls have become very stressful. Those that have completed CSE training are abundantly aware that categorising 'street wise' children as absent carries significant risk. They are facing constant challenges from supervisors and those on the front line when they signify a child as missing'.³⁹*

43. To minimise the risk of an incorrect categorisation of a missing child as absent some police forces have also introduced additional characteristics for cases that result in them being ineligible for the absent category.

44. For example, some areas apply rules in cases where specific risks are already known to the police, for example in one area all those flagged as Vulnerable, Exploited, Missing or Trafficked must always be categorised as 'missing'.⁴⁰ In another area no child missing from the family home can be categorised as 'absent' whereas in another no child missing from care can be 'absent'.

³⁹ Mr S. Snell. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 2.

⁴⁰ Hampshire County Council and Isle of Wight Council. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 2.

Recommendation: *The CoP Authorised Professional Practice on missing children should be revised to remove the separate absent category and establish a continuum of responses based on a comprehensive risk assessment. HMIC should use the guidance to inform inspections of police forces' responses to missing children.*

Recommendation: *The DfE should update the statutory guidance on missing children to include information on risks and responses to children who go missing as a result of grooming for criminal exploitation with specific reference to the responses that should be made when they go missing across 'county lines'.*

Policies related to the age of a child.

45. The current guidance on dealing with missing person investigations allows flexibility to police forces to design their own response to absent children. One of the issues that is interpreted very differently across different areas is the vulnerability of a child as defined by the child's age. Thus, in some police forces the approach has been taken that only children above certain age can be categorised as absent.
46. According to responses from the police forces we received, in 2 police forces a child under the age of 12 cannot be categorised as absent. 6 forces will not categorise anyone under 13 as absent, one force will not categorise anyone under 14 as absent, and one force will not categorise anyone under 18 as absent.
47. Responses from organisations working with young people who go missing highlight that designating one age group as more vulnerable than others may lead to attitudes among police staff that children of certain age are less vulnerable. They indicated that it is important that risk assessments consider, among other things, the ability of a child to keep themselves safe.
48. Responses also pointed out that there may already be biased applications of the absent category. Barnardo's, for example, working in an area that has recently stopped using the absent category for children has experienced '*an increase in the number of missing boys who appear to be exploited and these cases are only now coming to light as they had been previously recorded as absent.*'⁴¹
49. Similarly a response from Hampshire and the Isle of Wight indicated that there was an operational bias towards classifying girls as missing and boys as absent. The LSCB subgroup intended to address this bias in their plans for the upcoming year.⁴²
50. The DfE data on children missing from care indicated that young people over the age of 16 are the biggest group recorded as 'away from placement without authorisation', making up 58% of all 'away from placements without authorisation' incidents recorded.⁴³
51. The Children's Society raised concerns that young people aged 16 and 17 are not always seen as vulnerable because of their age, despite the fact that many of them are not able to

⁴¹ Barnardo's. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Barnardo's written response'. Page 2.

⁴² Hampshire County Council and Isle of Wight Council. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 3.

⁴³ Department for Education. 2016. Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015: National tables: SFR34/2015: Children missing from care or away from placement without authorisation: Table G1.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

recognise when they are targeted for sexual and criminal exploitation due to their earlier experiences of neglect and abuse. They urged that all children under the age of 18 need to be properly risk assessed when they are reported missing and that assumptions should not be made that older teenagers are less at risk just because of their age.⁴⁴

Interpretation of definition: issue of whereabouts

52. Written submissions raised concerns about how the whereabouts of a young person, rather than the actual risk to a young person, often determines the categorisation they are given and therefore the response they receive. A number of responses cited instances where social media activity by a child, or instances where a child is contactable on the phone, as being interpreted as 'whereabouts known' by the police and thus resulting in an absent categorisation. The respondents questioned whether such a practice is safe:
53. *'Absent from home and care young people are equally as vulnerable as missing young people because parents and professionals have said 'even though you may know they are alive through Facebook, you may not know what they are doing.'*⁴⁵
54. *'A young person in residential care associating with risky people and being reported missing by residential home. When the police call he picks up the phone and tells them he is fine and so is assessed as absent and not missing despite the safeguarding risk.'*⁴⁶
55. Barnardo's shared an example from their work: *'A young person who was a looked after child had a high number of missing from care episodes (over 40 in a six month period) and the staff at the care home regularly called the police to report her missing. The staff at the care home knew that she stayed at her boyfriend's home during missing episodes. He was known to have controlling and coercive behaviour and was potentially linked to drug dealing. The police, however, recorded her as absent rather than missing as her whereabouts were known. This meant that she did not receive the correct response she should have been received as a missing young person in a potentially dangerous situation.'*⁴⁷

Interpretation of definition: frequent missing episodes

56. Another issue of concern mentioned in written submissions was that repeat episodes of going missing can be seen to be 'in character' allowing call handlers to categorise children as 'absent' repeatedly whilst they are being groomed for sexual exploitation or criminal involvement.
57. In his submission, Chief Constable Mike Veale explained how one of his key priorities as the National Policing Lead for Missing People was to ensure that police action in this area became more evidence-based and subject to more academic rigour. In the submission he informed the APPG of his current work with the College of Policing *'to commission an academic study into the wider understanding and assessment of risk within missing person*

⁴⁴ The Children's Society. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: The Children's Society's written response'.

⁴⁵ A. Konneh. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 1.

⁴⁶ The Children's Society. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: The Children's Society's written response'.

⁴⁷ Barnardo's. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Barnardo's written response'. Page 3.

investigations.⁴⁸ This should provide an evidence base for the risk assessment process and is welcomed by the APPG.

Length of absent episodes and review times

58. Many written submissions to the Inquiry raised concerns about the length of time that some children are allowed to stay absent for, or the period of time allowed to lapse before the case is reviewed. When gathering evidence from the English Coalition for Runaway Children, members argued that lengths of absence in excess of 8 hours could see children and young people missing overnight.⁴⁹ It was felt that this was unacceptable.
59. Although a child may be at risk even during a very short missing episode, children missing overnight is an issue of concern. To be missing or absent overnight introduces new risks and additional concerns for safety into any case. The Children's Society's *Still Running 3* research found that 1 in 4 young people missing overnight are at risk of serious harm.⁵⁰ In Wales the risks of being missing overnight are explicitly recognised for looked after children by the All Wales Protocol on Missing Children. The protocol states that *'the category of 'Unauthorised Absence' will only be applicable for a maximum of 6 hours or until midnight on the first day of absence.'*⁵¹ After such a time, and if no other risks have been identified, all looked after children must be reported to the police.
60. The London Assembly's Police and Crime Committee's report into tackling child sexual exploitation in London mentioned that, of 1,612 referrals of CSE from January 2014 to October 2014, *'20 per cent were reports with evidence of a child or young person being targeted for opportunistic abuse through the exchange of sex for drugs, perceived affection, sense of belonging, accommodation (overnight stays), money and goods etc.'*⁵²
61. Responses from police forces also revealed that there is no standardised approach to the length of time the child can remain absent for. Only 10 forces reported an upper limit on how long an individual can be 'absent' for. This ranged from 6 to 72 hours. The remaining forces did not have an upper limit. Written submissions raised this as an issue of concern, particularly with the absence of clear routes for other agencies to escalate concerns or even to ensure that additional information on risks is gathered to inform ongoing risk assessments.
62. The responses showed that the longest period of time a child was recorded as absent was for 20 days and 16 hours. Six police forces responded to this question. The other five responses stated the longest time ranging from 23 to 82 hours. The average time was 11-12 hours. It is important to stress, though, that there is no such thing as a good average absent time.

⁴⁸ National Policing Lead for Missing People, Chief Constable Mike Veale. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: National Police Chief's Council written response'. Page 5.

⁴⁹ English Coalition for Runaway Children. 2016. Facilitated discussion: The All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults' safeguarding absent children inquiry. 27 January 2016.

⁵⁰ The Children's Society. 2011. *Still Running 3*. <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/publications-library/still-running-3-early-findings-our-third-> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁵¹ All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group. 2011. All Wales Protocol: Missing Children – children who runaway or go missing from home or care. <http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/All-Wales-Protocol-Missing-Children.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁵² London Assembly. 2015. *Confronting Child Sexual Exploitation in London*. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_migrate_files_destination/Confronting%20CSE%20in%20London%20-%20final.pdf [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

Recommendation: *The CoP, in their updated professional practice should provide detailed information on the response required for each level of risk, including low risk. The guidance should particularly address the length of time the low risk categorisation can be used for, regularity of review periods, escalation to higher levels of risk and dealing with situations where others disagree with the chosen categorisation.*

Section Two – How are partners working together?

Information sharing for risk assessments

63. The need for a joined-up working to keep children safe was the golden thread running through the evidence reviewed by this inquiry. In discussions and submissions, a number of critical points in the decision-making processes and the responses made to children reported as missing were identified. At those critical points things can go wrong, allowing children to fall through the cracks in too many cases.
64. The police are the key agency making decisions about assessing and categorising the risks to missing children. Currently their initial risk assessment, and in many instances the reviews of the case, depend to a great extent on the information provided by the person reporting a child missing. As Mike Veale explained, *'it is critically important that the reporting person is able to provide the salient information to inform the assessment of risk. Unfortunately, this process is often undermined by those making reports being unable to provide the required level of detail.'*⁵³
65. In their response NCA clarified further that *'call takers should also interrogate local police force systems to see if any additional intelligence is held that may indicate risk to the individual, however it appears not always possible to complete these checks.'*⁵⁴
66. Discussions at the roundtables and in written submissions were absolutely clear that risk assessments cannot be done properly unless other agencies working with the child and their family are able to contribute information to the risk assessment. It is also important to note that because the police are the only agency delivering their service 24/7, they need to be able to access the information required for their risk assessments even at times when other agencies are closed for business.
67. Respondents highlighted that the police and children's social care do not have access to each other's systems, and as a result the initial risk assessment is rarely informed by any additional information that may be at the disposal of children's social care services or others.
68. Two of the key barriers that prevented information sharing included the variety of systems used, and lack of clarity around what data can be shared without breaking data protection laws. The different police databases and social care databases used by different forces and local authorities make automated data sharing difficult.
69. There did not appear to be any unanimous agreement on what level of information sharing is permitted between different agencies in cases of missing children. Information shared in one location may not be shared in another. Given the serious nature of the safeguarding issues often raised for missing children, it seems clear that all missing and absent data needs to be shared.
70. This APPG recognises that in the last year the Government has been trying to encourage better information sharing between different agencies.^{55,56} Yet inconsistencies and confusion

⁵³ National Policing Lead for Missing People, Chief Constable Mike Veale. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: National Police Chief's Council written response'. Page 4.

⁵⁴ National Crime Agency. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response'. Page 2.

⁵⁵ Departments of Health, Education, Communities and Local Government, Home Office and Ministry of Justice. 2015. 'Our joint commitment to share information effectively for the protection of children'.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/408843/info_sharing_letternv5.pdf

prevail about what and how information can be shared about individual children who go missing. More needs to be done to clarify how information sharing between different agencies can be implemented well at the local level.

71. In practice information about individual children is not easily accessible. In the absence of an agreed approach to information sharing about individual children, various systems have been put in place in different areas. The inquiry heard of some good examples where all local partners are working jointly to build a fuller picture about a child's life.
72. Gwent Missing Children's Team complete a multi-agency assessment of every child who goes missing for the first time. This assessment is then used to inform the police's future decision making if the child is repeatedly reported as missing.⁵⁷
73. In Camden the MASE analyst reviews unauthorised absences against their intelligence/data that is held concerning child sexual exploitation, gang affiliation or other missing episodes and if they identify any risks or concerns they flag the case as a 'concerning absence', triggering a return interview and other responses from children's social care services.⁵⁸
74. Many responses raised concerns that information sharing about individual children is not happening everywhere, particularly where that child is not assessed to be at risk.
75. *'If a child is subject to a plan – i.e. a looked after, child protection, in need plan – then the likelihood of the issues of going missing becomes much more targeted operationally. I think that we would pretty well say that in those situations we get it. But if a youngster is just not on our horizon... we are absolutely under the cosh in terms of priorities for resources.'*⁵⁹
76. In some cases it may depend on individuals in partner agencies building links and supporting each other, but when their staff change those connections disappear as they are not underpinned with sound policies and processes.
77. The inquiry heard that while the safeguarding of children is everybody's business, when it comes to safeguarding children reported missing there are still too many examples of silo working and a culture of avoiding responsibility for supporting a missing child in the hope or expectation that another agency will pick up the case and do something about it. In the cases of children categorised as absent, it is more likely for a child to be ignored because of these pressures and the perception that the police risk assessment has already ensured the correct response has been selected.
78. To better understand how local joint working happens, the Inquiry sent information requests to all local authorities in England about their approach to safeguarding children who go missing and get categorised as missing or absent. 49 local authorities responded providing an insight into how joint working happens at a local level.

[Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁵⁶ HM Government. 2015. 'Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers.'

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/419628/Information_sharing_advice_safeguarding_practitioners.pdf [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

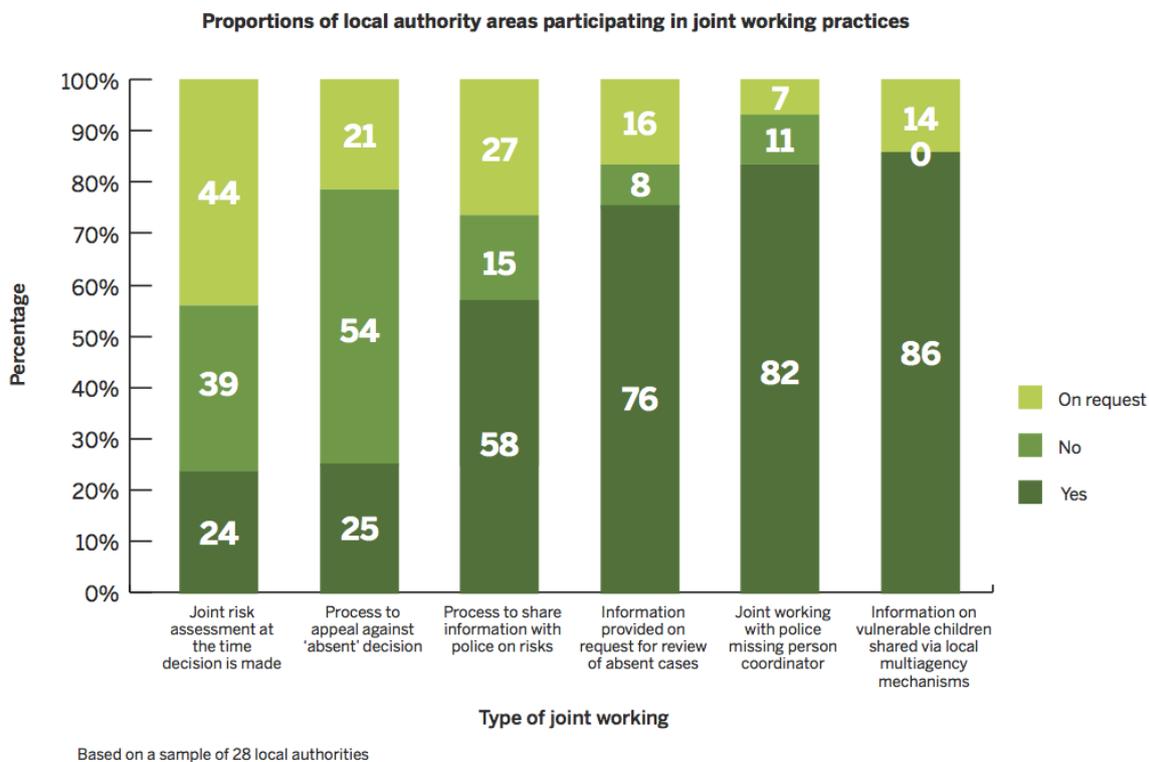
⁵⁷ Gwent Missing Children's Team. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Barnardo's written response'. Page 6.

⁵⁸ David Hancock. MASE Analyst, London Borough of Camden. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

⁵⁹ Jim Lievers. Director of Children's Services, Oxfordshire County Council. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

79. The responses indicate that very few areas have established processes to jointly assess risk when the assessment is made to determine whether the case should be absent or missing.

80. **Graph C**



81. More areas have procedures in place to share information about vulnerable children via local multiagency mechanisms. This supports the recent HMIC report which found that where risks to children are known and considered high risk, responses tend to be appropriate and effective.⁶⁰ Absent children, however, who are considered to be at no apparent risk are not likely to be recognised by services as vulnerable.

82. Responses from police forces confirm that information about absent children is not always shared with other agencies in the same way as it is for children categorised as missing.

83. There is no uniform guidance of when information is meant to be shared regarding a missing/absent child and therefore police forces approach this very differently. 8 forces shared information with other agencies at fixed points (on a weekly or monthly basis) regardless of whether the case was open or not. 4 forces only shared information when a case had been formally closed. 3 forces reported that they share information about missing children but do not share information regarding absent children at all unless in a specific context such as meeting regarding a young person. For the majority of forces (19), an automated system such as COMPACT sends a file to social care at the time a record is being made for a missing/absent young person; in most of these cases a second notification is also sent once the case is closed.

⁶⁰ Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. 2016. 'Missing children: who cares? The police response to missing and absent children'. <http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/missing-children-who-cares.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 8.

84. The interim guidance for police forces on missing persons investigations requires that in all cases where a missing person is categorised as absent there should be regular reviews and monitoring of the case. The response from NCA states:
85. *'Due to the importance of effective categorisation there needs to be effective supervision and support, with control room supervisors monitoring and reviewing the decisions being made. Some police forces implemented procedures that involve supervisors evaluating any categorisation of absent; however, it is recognised that other police forces may not have similar quality assurance procedures in place.'*⁶¹
86. Most responses from police forces indicated that they have a formal policy in place on how often review and reassessment of the absent cases must happen. Only in three cases do forces that use the absent category not have a formal policy to monitor and reassess the status of the case, although they have a working practice. In most cases a timeframe is agreed with the caller when the situation will be updated with a maximum ranging from 6 to 24 hours.
87. Review of absent cases provides another opportunity for local partners to share relevant information about the child to the police to inform the risk assessment. As Graph C shows, this is also not approached in a standardised way.
88. During the second roundtable discussion the point was raised that for some young people, particularly those known to social services, e.g. children in care and children on child protection plans, the risk assessment should be done prior to them going missing so that if they go missing the correct response would always be triggered.
89. *'But you can't do a risk assessment when that child has gone missing because you are not getting input from them. The risk assessment has to be done when the child is placed in care. The point is that they are part of the process and they know and understand what is happening. If they aren't part of that risk assessment and it is only done when the child is reported that doesn't help anyone.'*⁶²

Recommendation: *The CoP should, in their updated professional practice, specify that no child should be allowed to be categorised as low risk without prior joint assessment of the risks they face being undertaken by both the police and children's services.*

Recommendation: *A national information sharing protocol for missing children and accompanying best practice guidance should be designed by the DfE and the Home Office to allow the police and local authorities to share information about missing children for the purposes of risk assessment and intelligence gathering for ongoing police investigations and safeguarding work. This protocol should address the sharing of information from Return Interviews.*

Local partners disagreeing about absent decisions

⁶¹ National Crime Agency. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response'. Page 2.

⁶² Bob Yetzes. Chief Executive, Bryn Melyn Care. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

90. One issue that has been raised in written submissions is the lack of clarity of what course of action needs to take place when the person reporting a child as missing to the police disagrees with absent categorisation.
91. Responses from local authorities showed that very few have a process in place to appeal against 'absent' decisions they may disagree with. Often these situations arise when the whereabouts of a young person are suspected but there are concerns that the young person may be under the influence of adults posing a risk to them and it is not clear what course of action should be undertaken to remove the child from the influence of that person.
92. There were also concerns raised that while in cases where there is some involvement from children's services it may be possible to influence the risk assessment for missing children, for those missing from their family address parents and carers are left to cope with the situation on their own and may not feel able to challenge the police's decision.
93. *'A parent said that "I was driving around the whole night to look for her. I did not sleep."*⁶³

Role of missing person coordinators

94. Missing person coordinators, according to the interim ACPO guidance, have an important role to play in reviewing decisions to classify children as 'absent'. The guidance is not clear as to whether this role is strategic or performed on a case-by-case basis.
95. NCA in their response explained that *'the majority of police forces with a missing persons team or missing persons coordinator have a process whereby the control room flags any absent cases for their attention. This provides another important stage in reviewing the categorisation and enables the co-coordinator to raise concerns or highlight additional information held on the individual that may impact on the original decision.'*⁶⁴
96. The Freedom of Information request responses from police forces showed that in 3/4 of responding police forces, missing persons coordinators do play some role in reviewing absent cases; written submissions to this inquiry also stated that the volume of cases prevents them, in many cases, from being able to deal with all absent cases, to deal with them in a timely manner or to perform their other crucial functions like coordinating joint working and liaising with partners.
97. In their response, NCA conceded that *'due to the volume of both missing and absent cases received by police forces, it can be very difficult for a missing persons coordinator to effectively review all cases to ensure the correct categorisation has been made'*⁶⁵ and that a clear review process needs to be provided instead, involving supervisors at an operational level and missing person coordinators at a strategic level.

Missing from education

⁶³ A. Konneh. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 2.

⁶⁴ National Crime Agency. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response'. Page 2.

⁶⁵ National Crime Agency. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response'. Page 5.

98. Children who go missing from home and care also are known to often be missing from education or have unauthorised absences from education. The case study from The Children's Society below explains it well. If information and services about missing children are to be properly joined up it is vital that information about children missing and absent from education is included.
99. Example from The Children's Society. *Zara was brought to the attention of The Children's Society's missing service as she had previously been absent from school. Zara engaged in a return interview, which exposed a multitude of ongoing hidden risk factors such as serious substance misuse, significant self-harm and mental health issues including early indicators of CSE. A comprehensive return interview report of grave concerns was shared with relevant professions which included a recommendation to refer to [specialist substance misuse project]. As Zara had no current/historical statutory or early help services in place, she was identified as a child in need but professionals in child in need meeting in the absence of staff from The Children's Society decided that a referral to [specialist substance misuse service] was not necessary and did not link the child into appropriate services. A few weeks later Zara took a potentially lethal overdose resulting in a hospital stay. Shortly after Zara returned to school with a bottle of alcohol. An emergency child in need meeting was reconvened and The Children's Society's staff attended, all parties subsequently agreed to refer the child to [specialist substance misuse service] along with a care plan in place to support Zara during the summer holidays. Zara is 13 years old.*
100. The inquiry aimed to establish to what extent the links between going missing and missing education are taken into consideration when the vulnerability of a child is assessed, either to inform police categorisation or to inform children's services assessments.
101. We asked local authorities if they were able to tell us how many of the children reported to the police as missing in their area also had absences from education. Many local authorities had to get in touch with us to clarify this question with many stating that they could not cross reference their missing children data with those absent from education.
102. The data provided in response to our information requests is not reliable enough to draw any conclusions, but in five instances we were able to confidently put a figure on the number of children categorised as missing by the police who also had an unauthorised absence from education. Numbers ranged between 4% and 34% of the total number of missing children. From this limited data an average 20% of children categorised as missing by the police also had an unauthorised absence from education.
103. Local authorities were less likely to provide data on children categorised as absent by the police who also had an unauthorised absence from school. Four local authorities were able to do this but the data they provided was so variable that no conclusions can be drawn.
104. The Local Government Association in their response highlighted that the Department for Education's (DfE) recent proposals to strengthen the duties on all schools, including academies and free schools, to inform councils when children go missing or move school is positive.⁶⁶
105. At the same time participants of the second roundtable expressed concerns about difficulties in how information about children attending school is gathered.

⁶⁶ Local Government Association. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 4.

106. *'We have more concerns about children who come in and register and then disappear. As you will remember from our big Serious Case Review, most of those youngsters were turning up at school and then disappearing during the course of the day. So it is where they were at half past two that matters. But the data would show them as being in school. But they weren't.'*⁶⁷
107. Lisa Pascoe from Ofsted explained, *'Since November 2013 as part of the single inspection framework we have asked for data on children missing from education. Some local authorities could give it to us but a large number couldn't. And then within the pool that could give it to us, in better local authority areas, information about children missing from education is mapped and cross checked, but in other areas it is different systems that do not talk to each other. In the best authority areas that have got a grip on this locally people are starting to match up that data and map children at an individual level but this is about more than just the local authority, it has got to be about agencies working together. But it remains a mixed picture and I wouldn't say it has moved on sufficiently since we started in 2013.'*⁶⁸
108. Some concerns were expressed in written submissions and at the roundtable discussions that the ongoing drive for academisation may undermine whatever positive practice currently exists. *'Now drop into that pool the agenda of academies and the relationship of the local authority to academies and the requirements that are laid upon maintained schools in terms of that relationship. There is no such requirement in the same way for academies and it becomes hugely more complicated.'*⁶⁹

Recommendation: *Local authorities should request data from schools in their area on children who are missing from education, children absent without authorisation as well as children who regularly register for a day but do not attend lessons, and cross reference this data with children who are reported as missing to the police to identify children who may require intervention.*

Recommendation: *HMIC, Ofsted, HMIP, CQC in their joint inspections should include criteria with a focus on data sharing about children who go missing.*

⁶⁷ Jane Booth, Independent Chair, Rochdale and Lancashire Safeguarding Children Boards. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

⁶⁸ Lisa Pascoe, Deputy Director, Social Care Policy. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

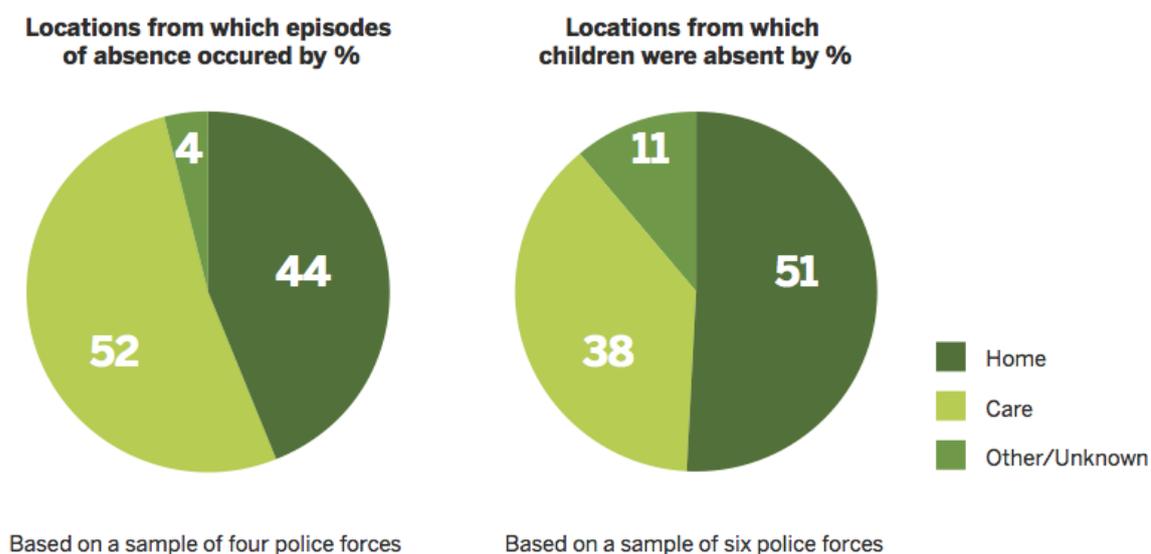
⁶⁹ Jim Lievers. Director of Children's Services, Oxfordshire County Council. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

Section Three – Responses to different groups of children

109. One of the key findings of this inquiry is that children categorised as absent will receive a different response depending on whether they go missing from their family home or from care. In relation to children missing from care, that response will be further determined on whether the care placement is within the boundaries of their local authority or out of their local authority's area. The evidence gathered makes it evident that responses to these different groups need to be considered separately.

110. We asked police forces for information on where children categorised as absent go missing from. Graph D summarises the responses received from the small number of police forces that could respond to the question. It shows that individual children missing from home made up the majority of absent categorisations but that more episodes of absence were recorded in relation to children reported missing from care.

111. Graph D



Children who go missing from home

112. The Children Act 1989 places upon local authorities a duty to safeguard the welfare of all children in their area, including children missing from their family home. The statutory guidance on missing children also makes it clear that children missing from the family home should be safeguarded and responses to them should be clearly defined in local protocols. This responsibility applies to all children who are 'reported as missing to the police', which will include both missing and absent children.

113. In our information requests to local authorities we asked them for numbers of missing and absent children in their area who reside in the family home. Out of 45 local authorities only 11% could not provide information about the numbers of children missing from home. Almost 50% however could not provide information about children absent from home – a significant gap in their knowledge and understanding of local trends.

114. The lack of information local authorities have about children missing from family homes is worrying as these children can be equally vulnerable when they go missing. Police responses to the Freedom of Information request show that more individual children who are reported as missing from the family home are categorised as 'absent' than children who are reported as going missing from care. Written responses also raised the issue of boys being more likely to be recorded as 'absent' than girls. This could be a significant bias given that the number of girls reported as missing is already higher than that of boys.⁷⁰
115. Andy McCullough of the charity Railway Children and chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children noted: *'ECRC have discussed how the use of absent category is particularly difficult when applied to children living at home. Unlike the professionals reporting looked after children as missing, parents do not have extensive safeguarding training and if they are worried enough to call the police to report their child missing should not we take the report at face value and not use the absent category for children missing from home?'*⁷¹
116. Indeed, in a small number of areas the 'absent' category is not used for children missing from home as the police do not feel confident assessing risk based on so little information.
117. During the roundtable held with Policing partners and the Minister for Preventing Abuse, Exploitation and Crime, Karen Bradley MP, we heard from Camden Borough Council's MASE analyst that in his opinion, given the intelligence that has been gathered through police debriefs, return interviews and open source social media checks when children have been missing, it has shown on occasions that children missing from home are likely to be under-reported.⁷²
118. Both of these findings are of concern. Looked after children have constant contact with child protection professionals and their lives are subject to many layers of scrutiny and oversight. For children living at home, however, going missing, or indeed being 'absent', may be the only indication to services that a child is struggling and a family in need of help.
119. During the inquiry's second roundtable with children's social care and wider safeguarding partners, there were concerns shared that children who are not known to social services may easily fall through the net when they go missing. It was suggested that there is a need to ensure that children who go missing from home but are not open to children's services have a named professional, someone who can be in contact with a child and ensure that child is safeguarded and receives the support needed to deal with any issues they face. Such a role could be designated on the principles similar to those outlined in the Children and Young People Act (Scotland) 2014 and specifically targeted at children missing from the family home who are not known to children's services.
120. This kind of provision would ensure that a child who goes missing or absent from home has someone impartial to talk to, perhaps even an adult they choose themselves. This person could play two important roles. Firstly, they could hold the system to account to ensure that children missing or absent from home do receive return interviews and appropriate follow up. Secondly, they could act as a source of advice and information for both the child and their family, signposting them to early help services to prevent further missing episodes.

⁷⁰ See page 15 for numbers of boys and girls missing between the ages of 12 and 17. National Crime Agency. 2016. UK Missing Persons Bureau: Missing Persons Data Report 2014/2015. <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/resources/missing-persons-data-report-2014-15> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁷¹ Andy McCullough, Chair, English Coalition for runaway children. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

⁷² David Hancock. MASE Analyst, London Borough of Camden. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

121. Based on our analysis of NCA and DfE data (see Graph A)⁷³ a named person could be required for up to 54,000 children categorised as ‘missing’ in England every year. Given we do not know how many children are being categorised as ‘absent’ nationally, the figure will be higher if the absent category is abandoned as recommended and these children would also be considered to be missing. Such a system would need significant planning but would ensure that all children, missing and absent, receive an appropriate amount of safeguarding based on professional judgement.

Recommendation: Children who go missing from home should all have a ‘nominated person’ appointed to ensure that they are properly safeguarded.

Children who go missing from care

122. This APPG’s joint inquiry in 2012 with the APPG for looked after children and care leavers into children who go missing from care highlighted the extent to which looked after children go missing, the vulnerabilities of these children and the risks that going missing can expose them to.⁷⁴
123. Following the previous inquiry from this APPG the government introduced some changes around how information about children missing from care is recorded and reported and specifically addressed the issue of safeguarding children who go missing from residential care. In October 2015 the DfE published, for the first time and on an experimental basis, information about the number of looked after children who went missing or had an unauthorised absence from care in 2014-15.⁷⁵
124. The Department for Education data reports that 6,110 looked after children went missing during 2014-15; in total, these children went missing 28,570 times. If a looked after child went missing during the year, on average they went missing 4.7 times.⁷⁶
125. The DfE data also records that 3,230 children were absent without authorisation from their placement in 2014-15 and that in total these children were absent without authorisation 13,080 times. If a looked after child was absent without authorisation, on average this occurred 4.1 times in the year.⁷⁷
126. The NCA have also reported on children missing from care in 2014-15. Even though only 23 police forces could provide data to the NCA on children and adults missing from care, the numbers in relation to children differ significantly from those returned to the DfE by

⁷³ Page 12

⁷⁴ All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults and All-Party Parliamentary Group for looked after children and care leavers. 2012. ‘Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care’. http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/joint_appg_inquiry_-_report...pdf [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁷⁵ Department for Education. 2016. Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015: National tables: SFR34/2015: Children missing from care or away from placement without authorisation: Table G1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁷⁶ Department for Education. 2016. Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015: National tables: SFR34/2015: Children missing from care or away from placement without authorisation: Table G1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

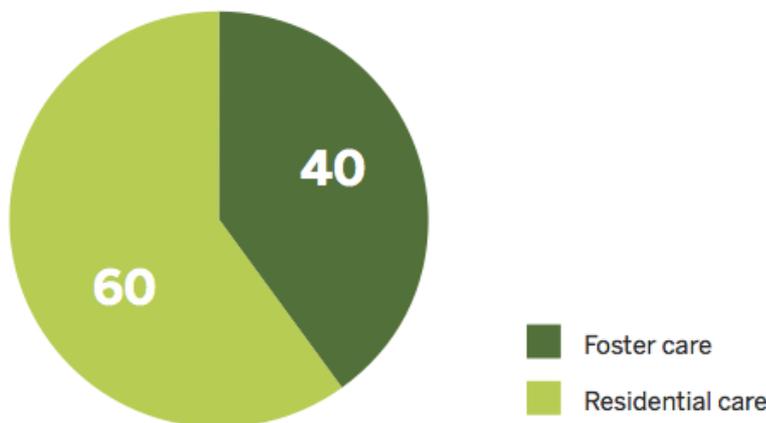
⁷⁷ Department for Education. 2016. Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015: National tables: SFR34/2015: Children missing from care or away from placement without authorisation: Table G1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

local authorities. Thus, in 22 police forces in England that provided that data, 35,147 incidents of children missing from care were recorded and 12,780 individual children were reported missing.⁷⁸ If that data was available from all police forces in England, the total number would be considerably higher than the number published by the DfE.

- 127. The submissions to the inquiry acknowledged that the changes introduced by the DfE to the data collection about children missing from care were positive and need to be built on. As the purpose of data collection is to inform responses and manage performance, the discrepancies in the data collected by the DfE and the NCA point again at issues with data sharing between different agencies and reiterate the need for an intelligent data system on missing children.
- 128. In our information requests to police forces we asked for information on whether children in care are recorded as going missing or absent from residential care or from foster care. Responses from the police forces showed significant variations in how information about children missing from care is recorded in different areas, both in terms of what is recorded and in the language used. Few police forces could provide complete information by placement types for both missing and absent episodes. Absent information was more incomplete than information about children categorised as missing. Graph E summarises complete responses from 5 police forces on children categorised as missing.

129. **Graph E**

Proportion of looked after children going missing from residential or foster care



Based on numbers of missing looked after children from 5 police forces

- 130. To supplement the Department for Education's data we also sent requests to local authorities to gain further information about children missing from care and home and responses they receive. We received responses from 49 local authorities. Despite the low

⁷⁸ National Crime Agency. 2016. UK Missing Persons Bureau: Missing Persons Data Report 2014/2015. <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/resources/missing-persons-data-report-2014-15> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 43.

number of responses, the data received offers helpful insights into the responses to children missing from care.

Children missing from out of area placements

- 131. One of the key findings of this inquiry is that children in placements outside their local authority boundaries are at high risk of going missing and are likely to be categorised as absent, despite being placed at a distance making them more isolated from their usual social networks, more likely to be targeted by individuals looking to groom them and being more likely to be running away back home travelling across transport networks and often over long distances.
- 132. Analysis of the data obtained from local authorities suggests that in those areas that responded to information requests, on average 50% of missing looked after children are children who go missing from placements outside the boundaries of their local authority. The same number for absent children is 49%. See Table F.
- 133. **Table F**

All missing and absent looked after children by proportion placed in and out of area		
	Placed in area	Placed out of area
Missing children (Based on 33 local authorities)	50%	50%
Absent children (Based on 22 local authorities)	51%	49%

- 134. In our requests to local authorities we asked about the number of looked after children who are placed within their boundaries by other local authorities and subsequently go missing. Of the sample, on average 39% of all children going missing within the boundaries of local authorities were looked after children placed there by other local authorities. For absent children that number is around 30%.
- 135. There are big differences from one local area to another in numbers of children missing from out of area placements, which can be explained by differences in the number of children placed out of area by local authorities and the fact that some have a higher number of children placed there by other local authorities.
- 136. The Children’s Society shared an example from their direct work of how children in out of area placements may find it a lot more difficult to secure help, and how easy it is for them to fall through the net due to the lack of communication between agencies in different areas. This is true in relation to children categorised as missing and even more complicated for children categorised as absent. The issue is particularly complicated if the placement is not just out of the boundaries of the responsible local authority but also in the area of a different police force.

137. Example from The Children's Society: *'During a return interview with a young person Y information came to light about child X. It was mentioned that child X. goes OT (Over There – a street terminology for going out of the local area to deliver or deal drugs). This information was shared with the local police. As the child X. was a looked after child placed in out of area placement, the local police advised that it would be the responsibility of the police in the area responsible for Child X to deal with the information that came to light. Social services also decided against any intervention as they believed that the young person was 'a frequent absconder' who sometimes got involved in low level crime but there were no reasons to suspect trafficking or drug dealing. He was known to go missing frequently but appeared safe and well and uninjured on return. It was only 4 months later that child X himself disclosed in return interview that he was being trafficked to sell drugs in a different area and disclosed different distressing experiences that he had while missing, including being robbed by adults of drugs he was given to sell. By that time his criminal behaviour escalated. Despite the police and social services agreeing at this stage that the young person is a victim of exploitation, the young person by that time was involved in the criminal justice system. At the time the evidence about this case was shared the young person had been long-term missing'*.
138. The respondents to this inquiry raised concerns about the lack of appropriate placements for children in care. ADCS in their response stated: *'We all agree that in order to reduce the risk of a child going missing from care in the first instance, the right placement should be made, but there us a lack of placement capacity for foster care placements, including but not limited to specialist, therapeutic fostering placements (eg. for victims of CSE). This lack of overall sufficiency and the concentration of residential services in the north of the country is making the use of out of area placements largely unavoidable'*.⁷⁹
139. LGA added *'In 2013, the LGA commissioned the Office for Public Management (OPM) to conduct an action research project into more effective commissioning of children's homes, working with ten local authorities and a number of providers. Nearly all participants in the OPM study said that more specialist provision was urgently needed nationally and locally, with authorities struggling to match the most complex needs with supply. This remains the case today, and the number of children presenting to children's services departments with multiple complex needs is continuing to increase. Many are concerned that the paucity of provision, including residential services, able to meet this need, combined with ongoing shortages in the availability of Tier Four CAMHS provision, often results in councils being charged disproportionately high fees for placements that may not always be of the required quality and which will often require the child to be placed some way from their existing support networks'*.⁸⁰
140. The LGA response acknowledged that recent government initiatives, such as the 2014 Quality Standards for children's homes, and a stronger focus on the skills and qualifications of the workforce are important developments that have potential to improve safeguarding responses to children missing from care but their impact and effectiveness cannot yet be fully assessed as they need time to become embedded. Some of them, such as the requirement for annual assessments of the suitability of a home's location, could, *'if implemented robustly, go some way to addressing long standing concerns about the clustering of homes in certain areas'*.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Association of Directors of Children's Services. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 3

⁸⁰ Local Government Association. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 3.

⁸¹ Local Government Association. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 4.

141. The LGA in their submission urged this inquiry to recommend that the government undertakes work to assess the effectiveness of this process next year, once all homes have entered into an annual cycle of assessment and review⁸².
142. The previous APPG inquiry highlighted how local authorities were not notifying the receiving local authorities of looked after children placed there. As a result changes have been introduced requiring that both the local authorities and children's homes should send notification when a child from another area is placed there. Although this change is still relatively new, the inquiry heard that the notification process does not always happen.
143. *'For most children and young people placed in Kent we receive a basic notification from the placing authority after the child has been placed in Kent. From the beginning of the year to date we have received 97 notifications of placements in Kent (new and changes of placements). Of these, 89 have been received from placing authorities and additionally, in most cases, the children's home or fostering agency. The remaining 8 have been advised from the children's home or foster agency only. In each of these instances the placing authority has been contacted requesting details, but these have not been received. There has been no contact made by any authority regarding pre-planning around suitability of location, education or health needs'*⁸³.
144. The issue of children in out of area foster placements was also raised. If a child is placed out of area in children's home by a local authority, the children's home has a duty to notify that local authority of this placement. With children in out of area foster placements there is no such duty and the local authority must rely on the placing authority alone to notify them of the out of area placement. If those notifications are not made the receiving local authority will not always be aware of all the children placed within their boundaries. So children in out of area foster placements may be less likely to be known to the local authorities where they are placed, unless the fostering agencies there have established a good practice to notify the receiving local authority of children placed outside the boundaries.
145. The participants of the social care roundtable noted that in out of area placements risks assessments should be done prior to a child being placed there and these risk assessments should be shared with the local police to inform decisions when a child goes missing.

Recommendation: *A requirement must be placed on fostering agencies, similar to that which is currently in place on children's homes, to ensure that fostering agencies notify their local authority when children are placed with foster carers outside the local authority which is responsible for them.*

Recommendation: *The DFE should work with ADCS, LGA and the College of Policing to develop changes to the notification process whereby the information that should inform risk assessment if a looked after child goes missing from out of area placement is shared with the police in the area in which a child is placed.*

Recommendation: *Local authorities should review the way they place children out of area to ensure that notification requirements are followed in each case when a child is placed out*

⁸² Local Government Association. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 4.

⁸³ Kent County Council. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page2.

of area. They should provide the resources and support young people need to keep in touch with friends and family, enable their voices heard through Children in Care Councils, and ensure that they have sufficient face to face time with support workers and always receive return home interviews when they go missing in order to reduce and prevent children placed out of area from going missing.

Recommendation: That ADCS and LGA facilitate cooperation between areas to ensure return interview provision for children in out of area placements.

Concerns about children ‘absent without authorisation’ from care

146. The Statutory guidance on missing children specifies that ‘a looked after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police’.⁸⁴ Children absent from care without authorisation are not supposed to be reported to the police as missing unless the carer becomes concerned about their absence.
147. Responses to this inquiry highlighted the challenges of how the ‘absent’ category interacts with the definition of ‘unauthorised absence’ applied in relation to children going missing from care.
148. There were huge variations in practice from one area to another. The Independent Children’s Homes Association highlighted how providers of children’s homes that operate in different areas have to deal with a number of different protocols to understand and implement in practice, some of them advising on quite contrasting actions in similar situations.⁸⁵
149. The lack of clear guidance on how ‘absent without authorisation’ and the police definition of ‘absent’ should interact could create situations where a child who has been absent without authorisation for a number of hours (certain protocols identify a maximum of up to 6 hours) is still categorised as ‘absent’ by the police when they finally are reported thus lengthening the period during which the child does not receive a proactive safeguarding response.

⁸⁴ Department for Education. 2014. Statutory Guidance: Children who run away or go missing from home or care. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 6

⁸⁵ Independent Children’s Homes Association. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response’. Page 1.

Delayed responses to looked after children – 'unauthorised absences'

00:00

A looked after child is 40 minutes late returning home to their placement.

00:40

**Their carer considers them to be 'away from placement without authorisation'.
They inform the child's social worker and try to make contact with the child.**

04:00

**After four hours the carer becomes very concerned. They attempt to locate the
child searching the local area and contacting friends and family. Then they call
the police and report that the child is missing.**



In this instance the police determine the child is not at risk and categorise them as 'absent'.

10:00

**After six hours the case is reviewed. The child has now been missing 10 hours. New information
suggests the child is with another young person who is at risk of sexual exploitation. The case
is re-categorised as 'missing' and officers are dispatched to locate the child.**



159. In other instances, as The Children's Society's practitioners report, unauthorised absences were not recorded or not included in the risk assessments when making a new placement for a looked after child.⁸⁶
160. Concerns were also raised that there is no expectation that a child with unauthorised absence receives any follow up to establish the reasons for such absence which in cases of multiple unauthorised absences can also be an indicator of a child being targeted or groomed.
161. Considering that the absent category used by the police was introduced specifically in response to the police struggling with the volume of missing reports made by care staff where the child was late and not really missing it seems counterintuitive and confusing to also have another category of 'absent without authorisation' that aims to deal with the same issue. Instead of simplifying and improving identification of children who are missing and need to be reported to the police it creates a three tier system potentially delaying the response to vulnerable children.
162. Participants of the social care roundtable suggested that unauthorised absence should only be recorded when a whereabouts of a child is known but the child is not where he or she is expected to be. But even then there is a need for a clear guidance on what the response should be if a child is in a place that is seen as not safe.
163. Respondents to this inquiry highlighted that the issue of inappropriate reporting can be resolved in a different way as well. The police roundtable heard that West Mercia Police made an investment into building relationships with children's homes in their areas which improved overall response. This good practice has been summarised into the case study below:
164. *Within the boundaries of West Mercia Police Force there are 137 children's homes. 51% of these are in Shropshire and this number includes 12 specialist children's homes for young people who are victims or at risk of CSE. 91 different local authorities place children in this area and in 2014 /15, nearly 1300 calls to the police were made to the police from these children's homes. West Mercia Police established the 'Care Home Team' to better safeguard these children when they go missing. The team visited and built relationships with all care home staff and worked with them to improve practice. Bespoke trigger plans were created for every child placed out of area for partners to use if they go missing. The team and the children's home then have a meeting to discuss all the risks and intelligence linked to the child being placed locally. West Mercia Police then create a COMPACT Person Record on their missing person database in advance of any missing episodes. Comparing incidents involving looked after children for the first 6 months of the project to the same period the previous year there has been a 48% reduction in missing episodes.⁸⁷*

Recommendation: *The DfE should update the statutory guidance on missing children to specify, in detail, what response should be provided where a child is 'absent without authorisation' and should work jointly with NPCC and CoP to ensure that the 'absent without authorisation' and 'missing' categories are complementary. The guidance should detail the circumstances in which a child in care can be considered to be absent without authorisation,*

⁸⁶ The Children's Society. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: The Children's Society's written response'.

⁸⁷ This good practice, including information about work done to reduce the unnecessary criminalisation of looked after children can also be found here: National Crime Agency. 2016. UK Missing Persons Bureau: Missing Persons Data Report 2014/2015. <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/resources/missing-persons-data-report-2014-15> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 26.

including the amount of time such absences can last and how they should be reported, clarifying that it should be used when the whereabouts of a child are known.

Section Four – Safeguarding responses to ‘absent’ children

Safe and well checks

165. If a child is subject to a missing person investigation upon their return home they will receive a ‘safe and well check’ from a police officer. A safe and well check is described in the interim ACPO guidance as a ‘responsibility’ on the police to *‘ensure that the person is safe and well and has an opportunity to disclose any relevant issues’*. The guidance is explicit that the safe and well check is *‘part of the investigation’*⁸⁸ for any missing person. Investigations cannot be closed until the check has been completed.
166. There is no requirement for a safe and well check when the missing person is categorised as ‘absent’ because in these situations a missing person investigation is never initiated. The guidance states:
167. *‘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’*.⁸⁹
168. In our freedom of information request we asked police forces to tell us whether or not they conducted safe and well checks for absent children. Out of 28 police forces, 22 in not perform safe and well checks.

Return Interviews

169. In 2014 the Department for Education published statutory guidance on *‘Children who run away or go missing from home or care’*.⁹⁰ This guidance sets out how local authorities and other agencies should respond to missing children.
170. The guidance directs local authorities to ensure that all missing children receive an “independent return interview” when they return home. The independent return interview is designed to give the child another opportunity, in addition to the safe and well check, to disclose why they went missing, what happened whilst they were missing and anything else they are concerned about.
171. Conducted by an independent person, in a neutral place and with the child’s consent, return interviews were designed to give children the space and confidence to disclose what has happened to someone who will not judge them and is completely independent of other agencies.
172. The guidance from the Department for Education requires that children who are reported to the police as missing should receive an independent return interview but it does not

⁸⁸ Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. ‘Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013’. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁸⁹ Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. ‘Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013’. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁹⁰ Department for Education. 2014. Statutory Guidance: Children who run away or go missing from home or care. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

explicitly state that 'absent' children should also receive a return interview. This creates certain ambiguity in relation to children categorised as absent.

173. Through an information request to local authorities we sought to establish how local authorities are interpreting the guidance in relation to 'absent' children and the provision of a return interview.
174. From a sample of 45 local authorities we learnt that over 60% always offered return interviews to children categorised as 'missing' from home or care. Less than 20% of these local authorities stated that they would always provide a return interview to 'absent' children.
175. Analysis The Children's Society conducted for its report '*Safeguarding children and young people who go missing in London*' found that 1 in 5 responding London Boroughs did provide return interviews for 'absent' children further confirming that local authorities do not routinely offer return interviews to 'absent' children.⁹¹
176. During the inquiry the group also looked to establish whether there are any differences for children who are missing and absent from home as opposed to local authority care. Based on an analysis of 45 local authorities we found that for both absent and missing children, 10% more local authorities offered return interviews to looked after children than they did to those living at home.

Listening to absent children

177. Whilst in some areas absent children do receive safe and well checks and return interviews, the general trend is that in most places they do not. As a result, children can be absent, in many cases multiple times, and no-one outside their home or placement is talking to them about it.
178. The ACPO guidance explains why safe and well checks are particularly important for children and young people. The guidance states that: '*It is common for missing persons, especially children, to be unwilling to engage in this process*'⁹² and advises police officers to be aware of a young person's demeanour and other relevant factors.
179. Independent return interviews are based on the same premise. The Department for Education guidance states that '*Children sometimes need to build up trust with a person before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they ran away*'.⁹³ And, as such, an independent return interviewer, impartial and with training in how to engage children in sharing their experiences and the reasons why they went missing, is a good way to identify hidden risk and underlying reasons that pushed or pulled the child into deciding to go missing from home or care.

⁹¹ The Children's Society. 2016. Safeguarding children and young people who go missing in London. <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/safeguarding-children-and-young-people-who-go-missing-in> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 2.

⁹² Association of Chief Police Officers and College of Policing. 2013. 'Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013'. <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf> [Last accessed 20 May 2016]

⁹³ Department for Education. 2014. Statutory Guidance: Children who run away or go missing from home or care. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care> [Last accessed 20 May 2016] Page 14

180. As we have seen, children are routinely categorised as ‘absent’ on the basis of a small amount of information. Whilst they are assessed to be low risk, services cannot be certain that there are not serious problems in an ‘absent’ child’s life. Currently services are not listening to these children. As a result they are losing the opportunity to perhaps hear vital intelligence about why the child went missing and they are not properly safeguarding them.

How should we respond to ‘absent’ children?

181. From the responses we received to our call for evidence it appears some of the best practice in England to ensure appropriate safeguarding responses to absent children involve mandatory review and scrutiny and/or an automatic referral mechanism.

182. Hampshire and Isle of Wight Councils informed the inquiry that in their area Hampshire Constabulary always refer any child with three absences in 90 days to children’s social care to ensure their case gets examined by child protection professionals.⁹⁴

183. Furthermore, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ‘Missing, Exploited and Trafficked sub-group’ of the local safeguarding children board reviews all ‘absent’ children every six weeks.⁹⁵ Such inbuilt review processes are welcome, although for a child at risk who has been categorised as ‘absent’ six weeks might be too long to wait.

184. In Wales, the Gwent Missing Children’s Team submission outlined the ways in which their local setup ensures that all children receive the same initial safeguarding response. When a child is reported missing for the first time Gwent Police will never categorise them as absent and will begin a missing person investigation. At the same time they make a referral to the Missing children’s Team who complete a multi-agency risk assessment for every child missing for the first time.

185. This assessment, informed by health, education, social care and other information is held centrally and, should the child go missing again, informs the police’s risk assessment to determine whether a child is missing or absent.⁹⁶ This greatly increases the amount of information the police have to determine their course of action.

186. When the inquiry consulted with some of the members of the English Coalition for runaway children – a group of third sector and statutory organisations working with missing children members argued that ‘absent’ children needed some safeguarding contact.

187. One of the most consistent recommendations made to the inquiry in its call for evidence however was the need for return interviews to be offered to all absent children. This recommendation was supported by Missing People, the English Coalition for runaway children, The Children’s Society, and the registered social worker who responded to the call for evidence.

⁹⁴ Hampshire County Council and Isle of Wight Council. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response’. Page 2.

⁹⁵ Hampshire County Council and Isle of Wight Council. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response’. Page 2.

⁹⁶ Gwent Missing Children’s Team. 2016. ‘APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: Barnardo’s written response’. Page 6.

188. The participants of the social care roundtable also questioned why it is an offer of interview and not a requirement that interview must be conducted. *'On the requirement to offer an interview I take the position that the starting assumption should be that a child who is missing may be at risk of harm. In no other circumstance do we ask a child who may be at risk of harm, would you like us to intervene. I think that the independent return interview is unhelpfully seen as an entity in itself. For me, if it isn't part of an assessment to consider whether a child should be considered as a child in need we're losing data.'*
189. At the policing roundtable this issue was also discussed. Some felt return interviews to be offered to those who had been frequently absent and the National Policing Lead cited providing return interviews to absent children as, in his view, effective best practice.⁹⁷
190. Clearly there is a call for 'absent' children to have some form of contacting with a safeguarding professional to ensure they are safe. Without stronger and crucially, coordinated, guidance from the College of Policing and the Department for Education about how this should be done and who is responsible, it seems unlikely to happen and the current piecemeal approach is likely to continue.
191. Requiring contact from safeguarding professionals with 'absent' children will only be helpful in keeping them safe if the contact is high quality. It is therefore concerning that during the course of the inquiry we found a significant amount of evidence suggesting that the services required for missing children, which have statutory footing, are of questionable quality and utility.
192. For example, in our information request to local authorities 27 local authorities informed the inquiry that they shared information from return interviews with the police to help them gather intelligence on missing children. Only one local authority told us that it 'rarely' provided information from return home interviews to its police force.
193. This overwhelmingly positive response from local authorities was not shared by police forces. One former police officer shared in their submission to the call for evidence that: *'received very little intelligence from its own local authority return interviews since 2009. Indeed one local authority has not shared any intelligence at all... [furthermore the Police Force has]... a high number of children placed in its area by other local authorities. To my knowledge there has been very little (if any) intelligence passed to the local Police from return interviews conducted by these out of Force local authorities'*.⁹⁸
194. Such concerns were shared by national representatives. In his formal submission National Police Lead for missing people Chief Constable Veale explained that it is: *'critically important that all relevant information gleaned from return home interviews is shared with the police to assist with future risk assessments and support the overall intelligence picture'*.⁹⁹
195. The NCA reiterated this: *'Information obtained from these interviews should be fed back to police to help inform future risk assessments'*.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Chief Constable Mike Veale, National Policing Lead for Missing People. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

⁹⁸ Mr P. Shakesheff. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 7.

⁹⁹ National Policing Lead for Missing People, Chief Constable Mike Veale.. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: National Police Chief's Council written response'. Page 7.

¹⁰⁰ National Crime Agency. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response'. Page 7.

196. At the policing roundtable participants were keen to tell the inquiry about the value of the information that could be shared from return home interviews and their frustrations that information was not always effectively shared.
197. Both roundtables touched upon the possibility of return interviews being jointly commissioned by the police and social care. At the roundtable with policing partners it was discussed that joint commissioning may enable easier information sharing.
198. The roundtable with the social care partners raised issue of why there is a need for both safe and well checks and return interviews. An example from Wales was shared by Bob Yetzes:
199. *'Every child that goes absent or missing from our homes in Wales gets interviewed. I'm not quite sure why, legislatively, we need the local authority to repeat it or the police to do a safe and well check. That's an independent person, who is quite capable of reporting to a local authority and the police everything they've found out. They do it in a very timely manner – the police ring them and then they're at the home promptly. It's a fantastic system. The authority pay for it and accept the cost of it. It works really well. It would relieve some of the pressures you're talking about in terms of available time; if they are all classified as missing we could all do this and the police wouldn't have to do their check as well. Why can't it be one return interview?'*
200. An Ofsted report on missing children in 2013 also raised the issue of effectiveness of safe and well checks.¹⁰¹ This does appear like an area that needs to be looked at and consideration given to making the system of both safe and well checks and return interviews more efficient.

Recommendation: *The Home Office and DfE should undertake a piece of work to establish the feasibility of combining safe and well checks and return interviews into one return interview with a young person returning from a missing episode. This should be required for each missing child and not be dependent on parental consent.*

201. There would however be practical obstacles to overcome in order to jointly commission return interviews effectively. The College of Policing and the Department for Education Guidance would need to be aligned to give proper instruction on roles and responsibilities to ensure that provision does not get passed from pillar to post between local authorities and the police.
202. Furthermore, central government could effectively aid local authorities and the police by considering how a national data sharing agreement could help partners to more effectively work together.

¹⁰¹ Ofsted. 2016. Missing Children.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/419144/Missing_children.pdf

Conclusions

Jo Youle from the charity Missing People said *'in all policy decisions there are usually unintended consequences. The absent category has created a group of children who have gone missing and never received any response. We don't know anything about these children and we are at risk of ignoring them whilst they cope with difficult problems. We could well be letting them down'*.¹⁰²

The key themes of inconsistencies in responses and data gathering, confusion around meanings and definitions for both police staff but particularly for other agencies; and the lack of multi-agency joint working to safeguard absent children have been running through all the evidence this inquiry reviewed. Another theme was the lack of oversight and scrutiny, both in relation to individual risks assessments and categorisation in terms of local and national oversight of which responses absent children receive.

Even though there is an expectation that LSCBs will scrutinise absent data at the local level, examples shared with this inquiry suggest that it does not happen in all cases and the focus predominantly remains on children who are at high risk. On the national level both Ofsted and HMIC helpfully highlighted specific examples of the poor responses that absent children receive. Ofsted in their submission to this inquiry noted though that given the broad scope of their inspections, their primary focus is *'on those children most at risk and so our tracking activity would usually focus on those children who are missing as opposed to those categorised by the police as absent'*.¹⁰³

The respondents to this inquiry also posed questions about what outcomes the absent category achieves for young people and what message this category may be sending to a child and a family. In terms of outcomes, in most areas the absent category prevents any response being made and therefore denies the police and social care to improve outcomes, for example by preventing future episodes of going missing. Being categorised as absent results in very little or no active safeguarding response and sends a message to young people and their families that whatever happened in their lives to make them go missing is normal and not of concern to services.

The Children's Society shared a quote from a young person they have been supporting in one of the projects. A young person in care said: *'One social worker used to visit after each running away episode. It is good when someone cares'*.¹⁰⁴ The absent category as it is implemented now may be sending a message to absent young people that no one cares.

NCA in their submission conceded that *'in the absence of comprehensive evaluation it is very difficult to establish whether the introduction of the absent category has seen any improvement in terms of safeguarding. Currently it cannot be demonstrated'*.¹⁰⁵

The APPG is concerned that having a separate 'absence bucket' divides children unnecessarily. Around the table there was broad agreement that it could be unhelpful. The National Policing Lead, CC Mike Veale said, *'all reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from "no apparent risk", where some people may be classified as absent,*

¹⁰² Jo Youle, Chief Executive, Missing People. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

¹⁰³ Ofsted. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: written response'. Page 3.

¹⁰⁴ The Children's Society. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: The Children's Society's written response'.

¹⁰⁵ National Crime Agency. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: NCA written response'. Page 3.

*through to high risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. Currently local authorities and the police have separate categories and separate ways to record and share information about different types of missing children, I do not believe this is helpful and actually could lead to confusion.*¹⁰⁶

There was an overall agreement that a gradation of responses to missing children that is underpinned by good quality multiagency risk assessment is a way forward.

*'The idea of actually having some form of risk assessment that then triggers what you do and how you do it, seems to me to be a sensible thing to do. You've got to get consistency, you've got to put proper training in place, you've got to have resources to be able to do so. Not least, you don't want to scare the living daylight out of senior managers when you've got all these high risk cases and nobody to actually allocate the service to.'*¹⁰⁷

*'The assessment of risk and the decision making undertaken as a consequence of that assessment are at the very core of this debate. It is incumbent on all agencies to work together to address the 'push' and 'pull' factors which can cause absent and missing episodes. Too often missing is seen as problem in itself whereas it should be viewed as a symptom of underlying challenges in that person's life. If we seek to deal with those challenges then we are more likely to improve overall safeguarding, reduce the number and frequency of missing episodes and improve the life chances of the person concerned.'*¹⁰⁸

There was also a broad agreement that the response to missing children should be made consistent across all areas and that the current level of inconsistencies are unacceptable. Respondents to this inquiry advised on more prescriptive and robust guidance for police forces on how to respond to different levels of risk that they have to follow and will be inspected against. Changes to statutory guidance for children's social care, against which they would be inspected, were also recommended.

Everyone agreed that the best way to safeguard children was for agencies to work together and one way of achieving this was through joint commissioning of services such as safe and well checks and return interviews for each child that encourage joint oversight and information sharing.

It was also agreed that there needs to be proper research to underpin response to children who go missing who face a range of risks from low to high. That research should not only focus on police action but also look at appropriate responses when a child returns, with recognition that each child going missing needs some response but for some it may be relatively limited while for others it may need to be more intensive.

¹⁰⁶ Chief Constable Mike Veale, NPCC lead for missing people. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with policing partners. 10 March 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Jim Lievers. Director of Children's Services, Oxfordshire County Council. 2016. All-Party Parliamentary Group for runaway and missing children and adults inquiry into safeguarding absent children roundtable with children's social care and partners. 13 April 2016.

¹⁰⁸ National Policing Lead for Missing People, Chief Constable Mike Veale.. 2016. 'APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults: Call for evidence – Inquiry into safeguarding absent children: National Police Chief's Council written response'. Page 5.

Recommendations

With all these factors in mind the Inquiry concludes with the following recommendations:

National Recommendations

1. The separate 'absent' category should be abandoned by the police and missing children should instead receive a proportionate response based on the risks they face. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) should work with the College of Policing (CoP) to design a response that assesses the level of risk to all missing children as either 'low', 'medium' or 'high'. No child should be allowed to be categorised as low risk without prior joint assessment of the risks they face being undertaken by both the police and children's services.
2. The CoP Authorised Professional Practice on missing children should be revised to remove the separate absent category and establish a continuum of responses based on a comprehensive risk assessment. HMIC should use the guidance to inform inspections of police forces' responses to missing children.
3. The CoP, in their updated professional practice should provide detailed information on the response required for each level of risk, including low risk. The guidance should particularly address the length of time the low risk categorisation can be used for, regularity of review periods, escalation to higher levels of risk and dealing with situations where others disagree with the chosen categorisation.
4. The National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing should commission research focussed on evaluating the outcomes for children categorised as low risk or no apparent risk to underpin future Authorised Professional Practice.
5. The Department for Education (DfE) should write to all Directors of Children's services in a letter that states that all children who are reported as missing to the police, regardless of how they are categorised, should receive a return interview.
6. The DfE should update the statutory guidance on missing children to specify, in detail, what response should be provided where a child is 'absent without authorisation' and should work jointly with NPCC and CoP to ensure that the 'absent without authorisation' and 'missing' categories are complementary. The guidance should detail the circumstances in which a child in care can be considered to be absent without authorisation, including the amount of time such absences can last and how they should be reported, clarifying that it should be used when the whereabouts of a child are known.
7. The DfE should update the statutory guidance on missing children to include information on risks and responses to children who go missing as a result of grooming for criminal exploitation with specific reference to the responses that should be made when they go missing across 'county lines'.
8. A requirement must be placed on fostering agencies, similar to that which is currently in place on children's homes, to ensure that fostering agencies notify their local authority when children are placed with foster carers outside the local authority which is responsible for them.
9. The Police and the Home Office should introduce a National Database for missing children that allows information to be shared across police lines. This database should be designed

not only to provide accurate data about missing children at a national level but also to be a useful and proactive tool for coordinating and intelligently informing missing children investigations. It should include information about previously identified risks, where young people go missing from and to, and whom they go missing with.

10. A national information sharing protocol for missing children and accompanying best practice guidance should be designed by the DfE and the Home Office to allow the police and local authorities to share information about missing children for the purposes of risk assessment and intelligence gathering for ongoing police investigations and safeguarding work. This protocol should address the sharing of information from Return Interviews.
11. HMIC, Ofsted, HMIP, CQC in their joint inspections should include criteria focusing on data sharing about children who go missing.
12. The Home Office and DfE should undertake a piece of work to establish the feasibility of combining safe and well checks and return interviews into one return interview with a young person returning from a missing episode. This should be required for each missing child and not be dependant on parental consent.
13. The ADCS and College of Policing should undertake a feasibility study into joint commissioning of return interviews for every child reported as missing.
14. The DfE should work with ADCS, LGA and the College of Policing to develop changes to the notification process whereby the information that should inform risk assessment if a looked after child goes missing from out of area placement is shared with the police in the area in which a child is placed.
15. Children who go missing from home should have a 'nominated person' appointed to ensure that they are properly safeguarded.
16. The Home Office, in their upcoming strategy and action plan on missing persons, should provide a timeline for the revision of the absent category, the introduction of the national database for missing children and for the implementation of recommendations made in this inquiry.

Local Recommendations

1. Local Safeguarding Children Boards must have oversight of all missing children cases and must scrutinise the whole population of missing children including those categorised as absent or low risk. Their work to address the risks to missing children should be reported on in every annual report and should include looked after children placed outside of their local authority's area.
2. Local authorities should request data from schools in their area on children who are missing from education, children absent without authorisation as well as children who regularly register for a day but do not attend lessons, and cross reference this data with children who are reported as missing to the police to identify children who may require intervention.
3. Local authorities should review the way they place children out of area to ensure that notification requirements are followed in each case when a child is placed out of area. They should provide the resources and support young people need to keep in touch with friends and family, enable their voices heard through Children in Care Councils, and ensure that they have sufficient face to face time with support workers and always receive return home

interviews when they go missing in order to reduce and prevent children placed out of area from going missing.

4. ADCS and LGA should publish action plan which facilitates cooperation between areas to ensure return interview provision for all children in out of area placements.

List of Contributors

The inquiry heard the views of the following individuals during the two roundtables:

- Joe Apps, Bureau Manager, UK Missing Persons Bureau, National Crime Agency
- Jane Booth, Independent Chair, Rochdale and Lancashire Safeguarding Children Boards
- Karen Bradley MP, Minister for preventing abuse, exploitation and crime
- Sandra Bruce, Head of Advice & Screening, Safeguarding Children Unit, Rochdale Borough Council
- Roger Bull, Staff Officer to the NPCC Lead for missing people
- Christine Callaghan, Head of Service, Child Protection & CSE, Bolton Council
- John Carroll, Assistant Portfolio Director for the Protecting Vulnerable People Programme at Her Majesty's Inspectorate of the Constabulary
- Steven Cox, Staff Officer to the NPCC Lead for missing people
- Susannah Drury, Director of Policy, Research & Development, Missing People
- Rebecca Egan, Safeguarding Unit, Home Office
- David Hancock, MASE Analyst, London Borough of Camden
- Dr Zoe Hilton, Head of Safeguarding, National Crime Agency
- Detective Chief Superintendent Vanessa Jardine, Head of Public Protection, Greater Manchester Police
- Jim Leivers, Director for Children's Services, Oxfordshire County Council
- Andy McCullough, Chair, English Coalition for Runaway Children
- Lisa Pascoe, Deputy Director of Social Care Policy, Ofsted
- Councillor Roy Perry, Chair of the Children and Young People Board, Local Government Association
- Iryna Pona, Policy Advisor, The Children's Society
- Phil Shakesheff, West Mercia Police
- David Tucker, Head of the Crime and Criminal Justice Faculty at the College of Policing
- Chief Constable Mike Veale, National Policing Lead for missing people
- Kathryn Warrillow, Assistant Director, Children in Care, Department for Education
- Bob Yetzes, Chief Executive Officer, Bryn Melyn Care
- Jo Youle, Chief Executive, Missing People

Written evidence was submitted to the inquiry by the following organisations and individuals:

Association of Directors of Children's Services, Barnardo's, Greater Manchester Police, Gwent Missing Children's Team, Hampshire County Council and Isle of Wight Council, Independent Children's Homes Association, Kent County Council, Local Government Association, Missing People, National Crime Agency, National Police Chief's Council, Nottinghamshire Police, Ofsted, The Children's Society, a qualified social worker and two former police officers.