

Children 1st and Barnardo's Scotland response to the Scottish Government consultation on working together for people who go missing in Scotland

December 2015

Children 1st and Barnardo's Scotland are submitting a joint response to this consultation due to our similar positioning on this issue, bringing together our collective knowledge, experience and expertise.

Children 1st provides abuse and trauma recovery and family support services in eighteen local authority areas across Scotland, as well as providing four national services. In 2014 Children 1st worked with over 500 children and young people in trauma recovery services. Working with children and families who have experience of the issues often identified as the underlying reasons behind people going missing. Many of the children and young people that we work with have multiple complex vulnerabilities and adversities and experience mental health problems and trauma due to sexual abuse and exploitation, neglect, the impact of living with violence or substance use in the home or bereavement.

Barnardo's Scotland has over 122 community-based services across Scotland and three specialist child sexual exploitation (CSE) services, located in Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh. In 2014/15 Barnardo's Scotland supported a total of 264 children and young people in these services, as well as a number of families and carers. In Renfrewshire Barnardo's Scotland run the Safer Choices Missing Service as part of a tripartite agreement with Police Scotland and Renfrewshire Council. Police refer young people to the service and specialist Barnardo's staff conduct a return home interview, incorporating an assessment of the young person's needs and risks, as well as advice to professionals and direct one-to-one work where required. The service has been running since April 2013, and has received a total of 598 referrals, involving a total of 111 young people.

Our organisations are concerned, as stated within the consultation document, that 64% of missing incidents involve children and young people, and 70% of sexually exploited young people will run away. We therefore welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and are pleased that the Scottish Government is considering how to address these issues through the draft Strategy's stated objectives and commitments. Our response is focused on the areas of our expertise, and in particular is based on our significant experience of trying to address issues relating to children going missing, including the underlying causes, and our understanding of the risks that young people are exposed to when they go missing. We take the opportunity to highlight the key role that high-quality recovery services can play in supporting delivery of the main objectives of the Strategy and the links between child protection and the draft Strategy.

Summary of our key points:

1. We welcome the draft Strategy and its approach to collaborative working and the links between going missing and child sexual exploitation and human trafficking.
2. We could welcome clarity over the terms 'absent' and 'young people'.
3. There should be further links between the Strategy and the child protection system, including detail around the provision of emergency accommodation for children.
4. There should be more explicit reference in the Strategy to children who are not looked after but are vulnerable to abuse and trauma, including those in kinship care

arrangements.

5. We would welcome reference to the role of the Named Person in identifying vulnerable children at risk of going missing.
6. Clarification should be provided about the links between people who go missing and the information sharing provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.
7. The role of Social Work in general throughout the Strategy, should be further clarified.
8. We would welcome revisions to the section of the Strategy relating to return interviews.
9. The value of specialist child sexual exploitation and abuse and trauma recovery services, and the need to ensure continued investment in them, should be highlighted.
10. Reference should be made to safeguards relating to the misuse of missing person reports.

General comments

We fully recognise that people going missing is a complex issue without a single solution and are supportive of the Scottish Government's aim to reduce the harm related to people going missing and efforts to provide a framework through a Strategy for organisations to work together to reduce that harm. We also welcome the recognition and attention that has been given to the links between those who go missing and child sexual exploitation and child trafficking.

The Strategy highlights many of issues that can contribute to missing incidents. However, considering that many of these issues are symptomatic of poverty, and that the majority of children and young people who go missing will come from areas of multiple deprivation, there could be a stronger recognition in the Strategy that reducing inequalities will contribute to its preventative approach.

We are concerned that the Strategy (p.15) seems to equate 'absent' with 'low risk'. Young people who go missing from school, skipping periods, and then returning may be thought of as absent. Our own service experience and examples from Rotherham have demonstrated that these young people may be sexually exploited whilst 'absent'. It would therefore be helpful if the Strategy could further develop the term 'absent', without its equation with low risk.

In terms of definitions, we would also welcome clarification about the term 'young people' what ages the Strategy is referring to when it uses this term.

Links with the child protection system

Given the high number of missing incidents that involve children and young people, many of which are precipitated by instances of abuse or harm, we would welcome greater clarity about how the draft Strategy is intended to link with the Child Protection System. This could be in the form of a stand-alone practice note or supplementary guidance..

We would also be interested to hear how the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's programme of action with local authorities and child protection partners, which will be in place by February next year, will take into account the vulnerabilities of the children covered by this Strategy. It is vital that our child protection processes are as robust as possible in order to focus resources and effort on reducing potential harm and the number of children who feel that their only option is to run away.

In line with this, Objective 3 of the Strategy states that 'At present there is no dedicated emergency accommodation available for young people in Scotland' (p. 17). We know, and the Strategy recognises, that young people who do not have a place to stay are more likely to be subject to exploitation or harm. We would therefore welcome detail from the Scottish

Government as to what measures can be put in place to safeguard those children who are in danger of harm as a result of this lack of emergency accommodation.

Early identification and prevention

Both research and our service experience suggest that young people who go missing from home are not always reported to the police. The Protocols developed by Police Scotland focus on looked after children who go missing from residential or foster care. We would welcome further discussion about identification of those children who go missing from home or school, and who are not looked after or who are living in arrangements such as kinship care arrangements. Increasingly, our services are becoming concerned about this group of young people, who tend not to come to the attention of statutory services but who are subject to, or at risk of, exploitation. Children 1st know from our experience providing the National Kinship Care Service that children and young people living in kinship care, who are in many cases not looked after children, can be particularly vulnerable and we are aware of instances in which this has resulted in them running away.

It is also important to highlight the potential role of the Named Person in identifying vulnerable children who may be at risk of going missing. Commitment 1, on prevention planning for vulnerable individuals, mentions the importance of a Child's Plan being put in place to prevent or respond to missing incidents, but we would welcome a statement here on the key role that a Named Person can play in identifying vulnerability and thereby reducing the risk of a young person running away. If a child is identified at an early stage and provided with the appropriate supports then it reduces the risk of them going missing and being exposed to further harm, for example. To this end we think it would be appropriate that the Named Person and Lead Professional are given standard training on their duties with regards to missing incidents, clarifying their role in contrast to that of Social Work and other agencies. This could be included as part of any training package being developed for the Named Person and Lead Professional.

The Strategy states that one important intervention is 'early mediation and support being provided to a young person's family when they are at crisis point' (p. 9). We would welcome an accompanying statement on the importance of sufficiently resourced early intervention and prevention services in offering support to families early on and preventing them reaching that point of crisis. We know first-hand the impact that effective early support can have on the families that we work with. It is also important that the Strategy acknowledges the key role that third sector support services can play in reaching out to those who may be unwilling to engage with statutory services.

Finally, we would welcome clear reference in the Strategy to the importance of relationship-based and non-judgemental practice. We know from Rotherham, and other examples, that children who have been abused have often been dismissed as "promiscuous" or "challenging" with little or no exploration of underlying behavioural causes. In order to ensure that children do not go missing it is important for there to be a rights-based approach to consider what is in their best interests and how their voices can be heard. Professionals must be non-judgemental and have the ability to recognise abuse when it is reported; taking into account the possibility that children may not recognise it as abuse. When children feel they are being judged or not listened to this will increase the likelihood that they will run away.

Information sharing between organisations

Our organisations welcome the emphasis in the Strategy on working alongside existing systems and the links to legislation and guidance, including the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

The Strategy emphasises the importance of recording or sharing information about a child or young person who may be at risk of going missing, and states that 'Local Authorities will want to ensure that the guidance they provide to Named Persons and Lead Professionals includes information on that role' (p. 14). Considering that guidance for the Named Person and Child's Plan has already been finalised and published, we would welcome further details concerning the steer that the Scottish Government will give Local Authorities to ensure that communication of this role is clear and consistent. Will practice materials be made available to accompany the recent publication of the guidance?

Commitment 3 of the Strategy, promoting the exchange of information about missing people among agencies, would benefit from a more direct link to the information-sharing provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and accompanying guidance. This would help to ensure that any details shared concerning children and young people are relevant and proportionate to the circumstances, and that all agencies have regard to the same guiding principles when sharing information. The role of Social Work under this commitment, and in general throughout the Strategy, should be further clarified.

Additionally, we are pleased to see an emphasis on developing a shared language and common understanding between agencies responding to a missing incident and with regard to exchanging information in the Strategy. The statements on working in partnership throughout the Strategy are welcome, as is the inclusion of a wide range of agencies; we know from experience that Housing are not always included but they have a key role to play and may hold crucial information, particularly around young people suffering from sexual exploitation. Alongside this, developing joint training sessions between the relevant services and partners is a good way to build strong working relationships and lines of communication and could be included under Commitment 3 and 4 on information sharing and developing risk assessments.

Return Interviews

Whilst supportive of each of the commitments within the Strategy, we are concerned about the implementation of Commitment 5, detailing provision of support interviews. The Strategy acknowledges that provision may vary 'substantially depending on local circumstances' (p. 18). We are aware that practice in Scotland may look different in one part of the country from another; however, this should not mean that service provision is patchy or that access to a return interview and subsequent support is a postcode lottery.

The Strategy indicates a role for the Named Person and Lead Professional in the return interview process. Whilst we welcome their involvement, it is important that the Strategy be as clear as possible how this will work alongside the duties that the Named Person and Lead Professional already have, taking into account their capacity, so as to build confidence and consistency in responding to missing incidents. It would be helpful if the Strategy outlined expectations of the Named Person and Lead Professional more clearly in this respect, and whether training would be offered on their required involvement or duties with regards to return interviews.

It is also important to recognise that the return interview is a process, not a one-off event. The Strategy should provide more detail on what the next steps will be for children aged 16 and 17 after their return interview; these children cannot go through the child protection system or children's hearing system, so we would welcome examples of the kind of safeguards that will be put in place to avoid them slipping through the gaps.

We support the Strategy's statement that where children are being interviewed, 'the Scottish Government Guidance on Joint Investigative Interviewing of Child Witnesses should be referred to', and welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to produce good practice guidance for providing return interviews (p. 18). We would like to see consideration in this guidance of the vulnerability of any child or young person involved and any potential impact on their wellbeing. A child or young person may interpret the process as a formal interview,

which could cause them to be nervous, worried or distressed in addition to any other vulnerability which may be related to them going missing. As a result they may be unwilling or refuse to take part. The return interview should therefore be explained carefully and clearly to them, and if they do not wish to take part this should be respected and some other form of communication should be considered. It should be conducted by someone who is fully trained in child protection and children's rights and, where appropriate, has a relationship with the child. We look forward to the good practice guidance and hope that the above issues are reflected on when developing this.

Provision of specialist recovery and support services

Although the importance of partnership is highlighted in the Strategy we would welcome recognition of the value that the third sector can bring in delivering both preventative and recovery services. We welcome the emphasis in the Strategy on prevention, but wish to highlight that the main challenge of delivering on these ambitious aims will be the limited resource available for services to respond in the way that the Strategy demands. Many of our own early intervention and prevention services are experiencing threats to funding which will jeopardise our ability to identify some of the most vulnerable children as early as possible.

We welcome the Strategy's recognition and attention of the links between going missing and child sexual exploitation, and human trafficking, however, we are concerned about the limited provision of specialist services in Scotland. Specialist child sexual exploitation services and abuse and trauma recovery services can play a vital role in both preventing children from going missing—by helping them to manage complex emotional feelings and reactions relating to abuse or trauma—and in assisting with their recovery when they return. The aims of the Strategy are to be applauded, but they will only be fully realised if the appropriate services are available to tackle the underlying causes of a young person's missing incidents, and are given sufficient capacity and resource. The Strategy would therefore benefit from a statement regarding the Government's commitment to ensuring that high-quality, timely and fully resourced child sexual exploitation and abuse and trauma recovery services are available throughout Scotland for all children in need.

We welcome the Strategy's statement that support is important both before and after a missing incident; it is therefore crucial that people who go missing have access to services offering appropriate and tailored support at any stage that they need it.

Misuse of Missing Person Reports

It should be noted that in some cases a young person may be reported missing by their abuser or someone who wishes to harm them. For instance a victim of domestic abuse, or a child or young person who has run away due to living with violence in the home, might be reported missing by the perpetrator so that the police have to go and find them whilst they are in refuge. It is important that those responding to a missing incident are aware to these possibilities and are able to take the appropriate action to protect the person involved from further abuse or exploitation.

It would therefore be helpful to include reference to this in the Strategy, in particular in relation to the importance of agencies working together to recognise the warning signs, and sharing information about the background and circumstances surrounding a missing incident. These considerations should be built into any assessment of a vulnerable person's support or care needs (p. 10).

Children 1st and Barnardo's Scotland look forward to working together with the Scottish Government as the Strategy progresses and would be happy to discuss their response

further. In the first instance please contact Jonathan Hancock, Policy Assistant, at jonathan.hancock@children1st.org.uk.