

MAYOR OF LONDON

Caroline Russell AM

Chair of the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee

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Dear Caroline,

Thank you to the Police and Crime Committee for sharing your report, 'Missing children in London'.

Tackling the problem of children going missing is a hugely important issue and one that requires strong partnership working from London and national partners. It is clear there is always more that can be done to improve the level and consistency of service that Londoners should expect.

There are several services and initiatives within the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) that aim to tackle the issue of missing children.

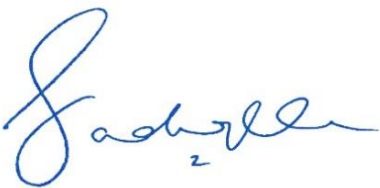
One example is Rescue and Response (R&R) – a pan-London service supporting vulnerable young Londoners who are exploited by county lines drug dealing. Dip samples showed a 74% reduction in missing episodes of children and young people who were supported by the service.

MOPAC also convened and coproduced the [Reducing criminalisation of looked-after children and care leavers protocol](#) for London with partners. This important document outlines the links between children being reported missing and criminalisation, and provides best practice and advice for organisations to improve the outcomes for these children.

I remain fully committed to making London as safe as can be for every child, including working in partnership with the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) on a Children's Strategy for London, which was an important recommendation from the Casey Review.

Please find my more detailed response to each of the Committee's recommendations annexed to this letter.

Yours sincerely,



Sadiq Khan

Mayor of London

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Mayor of London's response to the recommendations of the London Assembly's Police and Crime Committee report on Missing children in London.

Recommendation 1

MOPAC should work with the Met and London boroughs to agree a standardised process for reporting data from each missing-child report, and from Police Prevention Interviews and Return Home Interviews conducted in London, with the aim of publishing a 'missing children in London' dataset by the end of 2023, and annually thereafter. The dataset will improve understanding of the causes of children going missing and help services to better allocate resources towards prevention.

The Mayor welcomes the Committee's recommendation. MOPAC and the MPS are working to devise and implement a standardised reporting process as described. Once created, it is expected that the reporting system will create a wealth of data that can be used across various agencies to shape responses, including problem-solving and prevention strategies.

In addition, MOPAC, in collaboration with the MPS and the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), already jointly developed plans in 2022 for a London "Missing People" profile, which will include an in-depth look at children and young people. MOPAC's Evidence and Insight Unit will conduct a deep dive into the problem of missing children and how the MPS monitors risk, including the outcome of operational activity and any associated factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, deprivation, and intersectionality of need. This work will supplement and build upon two research projects already underway into both Child Sexual Abuse and females at risk of offending, exploitation and being missing. These are expected to have final reports by late 2023.

Finally, MOPAC is in the process of commissioning HMICFRS to undertake a thematic inspection of the MPS's handling of Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation and how these both relate to the issue of missing children in London.

Recommendation 2

By December 2023, MOPAC should conduct research to understand the overrepresentation of Black children in reported missing-children figures. The review should inform targeted interventions to reduce the number of Black children going missing.

As part of the problem profile that MOPAC's Evidence and Insight Unit and the MPS are developing, there will be an in-depth assessment of the factors, including ethnic disproportionality, related to the risk, operational activity, and outcomes of missing children investigations.

The MPS has established contact with the organisation 'Missing Black People' to help inform its work through important links to impacted communities.

The Mayor is also aware that the MPS is involved with national academic work under the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) to better understand the dynamics of the disproportionality of black people who are reported missing, including children. It is intended that results from this research will inform the MPS's response to future incidents, the approach to the accurate risk-assessment of missing children, resource allocation as well as future prevention and intervention. MOPAC intends to release these results in sections as completed. It aims to publish a full report by spring 2024.

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Recommendation 3

The Mayor should explore the opportunity to declare City Hall a safe haven for all children who feel at risk, threatened or in danger.

MOPAC and Greater London Authority (GLA) officers will explore further the practicality of this recommendation, taking into account existing initiatives across London and Newham, to ensure that any declaration would provide a meaningful option for those children requiring support.

Recommendation 4

As part of its review into Safer Schools Officers, MOPAC should assess whether all Safer Schools Officers are fully trained to recognise risk factors for missing children; and are able to deliver an effective safeguarding response to at-risk children in partnership with children's services.

This recommendation is welcomed. As you know, an MPS review into the operation of Safer Schools Officers (SSO) and an assessment of their disproportional impacts is already underway. MOPAC has considered the initial review work that has been undertaken by the MPS, and further work will be undertaken to ensure it fully responds to the issues raised in the Mayor's Action Plan.

The proposed assessment of SSO capability could ensure and, where necessary, enhance, SSO's ability to safeguard vulnerable children and young people in partnership with Children's Services.

MOPAC will consider, in collaboration with the MPS Youth Policy team, using the newly convened SSO Partnership Panel and MOPAC's network of voluntary organisations, as a means of defining both what the current capabilities of SSOs are, as well as what that capability and response should look like in supporting children at risk of going missing. MOPAC will do this in consultation with the VRU, which has adopted a child first approach in its work and has established relationships with schools, communities and young people.

Recommendation 5

The Mayor, government and relevant partners should work to minimise the use of hotels to accommodate unaccompanied children seeking asylum, in a way that protects them from exploitation.

There are no hotels set up by the Home Office to accommodate unaccompanied children (so-called 'UASC hotels') in London. Nonetheless, London has a role to play because children targeted for exploitation in these hotels may be brought to London, and because local government in the capital can support national systems that reduce hotel use to accommodate unaccompanied children seeking asylum.

The GLA tackles issues of exploitation and safeguarding through its convening of the London Strategic Migration Partnership (LSMP) Board, which takes place quarterly and is chaired by Deputy Mayor for Communities and Social Justice, Debbie Weekes-Bernard. The LSMP Board brings together key stakeholders from central and local government, civil society and other regional services to develop and maintain a strategic overview of key issues of migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum in London, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The LSMP Board recently discussed the response to children reported missing from hotels in consultation with MOPAC and the MPS. LSMP officers are also in regular contact with key professionals involved in coordinating the placement of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in London, particularly officers at Westminster Council who are responsible for delivering the [National Transfer Scheme \(NTS\)](#). The NTS has been effective in transferring unaccompanied children away from hotels while acting in their best interests.

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We continue to see children placed in adult asylum accommodation who are subsequently age assessed by a local authority as children. LSMP officers also continue to follow up on wider questions of safeguarding in hotels where this is raised as part of strategic discussions with stakeholders. There is recognition that children and young people remain vulnerable if they are placed in hotel accommodation as part of a family unit, or when their age is disputed.

Recommendation 6

By December 2023, MOPAC should conduct a review of the experiences of parents, carers and staff in reporting children missing in London. The results of this review should be used to shape a joint MOPAC-Met strategy to improve the process for reporting missing children, including how it will upskill 999 and 101 call handlers to provide appropriate and accurate advice.

The Mayor notes the recommendation and is aware that the Missing People charity conducted a report into this particular issue in 2022 ([the experiences of reporting a child or adult missing to the police](#)). MOPAC will conduct a problem profile into Missing People, including the user voice and experiences of parents, carers and staff in reporting children missing in London by summer 2024.

Recommendation 8

By December 2023, MOPAC should develop comprehensive guidance on how BCUs can work with voluntary sector services to enhance responses to missing children, including more active use of the text-safe service.

The Mayor has received assurances from the MPS that it will work with voluntary sector agencies to enhance the response to missing children. The MPS is strengthening an already established and supportive relationship with Missing People, as well as developing links with Missing Black People and The Children's Society. For the last three years, the MPS has partnered with the Children's Society in delivering training packages across children's care homes in London to spot the signs of exploitation and to provide educational literature and toolkits to disrupt child exploitation, which can impact children who go missing the most. This work is set to continue as The Children's Society is part of the wider County Lines programme in the MPS and closely liaises with its Missing Person Coordinators.

The MPS has always supported the use of TextSafe messages as an early investigative option. As it builds towards the proposed delivery of the Centralised Vulnerability Hub (CVH), expectation to use TextSafe and Suicide TextSafe (aimed at adults and in conjunction with the Samaritans and Missing People) is already secured in training and process guidance for CVH officers.

The Mayor has received assurances that the MPS is committed to developing all relevant links with third sector agencies across the missing response, especially where value is added to the response to missing children and their families. MOPAC will, as part of its oversight function, ensure that these links between the MPS and third sector agencies meet the needs of missing children.

Recommendation 11

By December 2023, MOPAC and the Met should review the implementation of the Philomena Protocol to assess whether it is having its desired impact and whether any improvements can be made.

The Mayor notes the acknowledgement of the positive collaboration between the MPS and MOPAC. The MPS has refreshed its version of the Philomena Protocol and is building towards a further push to ensure this supportive strategy continues to underpin joint working, prevention,

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information sharing and good responses by police and social care providers when a looked-after child is reported missing.

The Philomena Protocol is a long-term strategy that requires sustainable delivery to achieve results and provoke enhanced practice across the care sector.

As part of its oversight function, MOPAC will continue to monitor the performance of the MPS, including the outcome measures on missing people, and support the MPS to provide the best service it can for Londoners.

Recommendation 13

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) should maintain a national directory of phone numbers and emails for missing-children's teams in each police service across England and Wales. MOPAC should write to the NPCC to request this.

The Mayor notes the evidence considered in the report. The Mayor is advised that the MPS recently led a national piece of work to improve the process of case transfers and cross-border tasking requests for missing incidents, which would mitigate some of the concerns raised.

However, the Mayor understands that not every force has a dedicated Missing Person unit or a defined team responsible for investigating missing children, and therefore, Force Control Rooms which are the only 24/7 contacts for every police force, may be the most appropriate option. MOPAC will write to the NPCC in the first instance to examine whether a central list such as this would be feasible.

Recommendation 16

In 2023, MOPAC should work with the Met, London boroughs and organisations involved in the delivery of Return Home Interviews in London to establish a standardised approach to this delivery, to ensure every returning child is guaranteed a consistent experience that is based on best practice.

Return Home interviews are conducted by local authorities under whose care each child is at the time of the missing occurrence. MOPAC officers also work together with partners at the London Safeguarding meeting to improve the responses to those whose children go missing to better safeguard them and reduce missing episodes. They will continue to work in partnership with the MPS and other organisations to achieve a better and more standardised approach to the delivery of this service.

Recommendation 17

To fulfil commitments in the Mayor's Police and Crime Plan, MOPAC should fund projects designed to provide longer-term support for children who have returned from a missing incident. We look forward to receiving your response to our findings and recommendations, as well as any other comments you have on the report. We would be very grateful to receive your response by

The Mayor welcomes the Committee's recommendation. MOPAC will use the findings and outcomes of the work developing a "problem profile" for missing people to better understand and inform future decisions on projects tailored to the specific needs and longer-term support for children who have returned from missing incidents. This will be done in collaboration with the

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Commissioning and Partnership teams within MOPAC, as well as ensuring signposting to already existing resources where appropriate, such as LGE, Empower and similar support.

In addition, the VRU has partnered with Missing People, funding the support service 'Is This OK?', a free and anonymous digital space for children and young people at risk of exploitation. This service will offer free and confidential support to young people aged 13-18 across the capital.