

London Assembly Police and Crime Committee – 29 September 2022

Transcript of Agenda Item 6 – Missing Children

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): We now move to the main item of business, the discussion on missing children in London. I would like to welcome our guests, Commander Kevin Southworth, Head of Profession, Safeguarding, at the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS); Will Balakrishnan, Director of Commissioning and Partnerships at the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC); Susannah Drury, Director of Policy and Development, Missing People; Sarah Parker, Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children; Marc Stevens, Senior Service Manager at Catch22; and we will later be joined by Beverley Hendricks, Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey. Welcome to you. Also joining us remotely is Sherry Peck, the Chief Executive of Safer London.

I am going to start the questions off and then I will direct who they go to. The first question is how has the number of incidents and individual children missing in London changed over the past five years?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Thank you, Chairman, and good morning to everyone. I should preface this initially by saying many of us recognise, and certainly we in the MPS recognise, there are some challenges around the data in this space in terms of how we collect it and how we analyse that in order to get behind the diagnostics of why young people go missing in the way that they do. However, having said that, that is just a caveat. We do have data, which has previously been shared with the Committee and with other forums. What it roughly shows us in the last five years is that we have tended to regress to the mean, therefore there is anywhere between 25,000 and 27,000 missing person incidents on average in any one year. That did drop during the pandemic year by about 2,000 to 3,000 missing young people, but then it has regressed to that statistical mean again this year.

I have two different figures in many ways, one which comes from our internal Merlin system, which is one of our main MPS datasets, which other colleagues will not always necessarily have access to, which tells us that 26,031 young people went missing during the calendar year of 2021 to 2022. Then we also have some data from June, which shows a figure just slightly lower than that, which comes to about 25,000. There is a difference there of about 400 to 500 young people depending on when the data is counted from and exactly which database you use.

I should say that just this week myself and my colleagues within the MPS had a really productive workshop with MOPAC's Evidence and Insight Unit, who have access to a wider range of datasets than we will in the MPS, and that really productive workshop, among other things, has talked about an upcoming problem profile for missing children, which will be able to look at all the data in the round and get a really accurate analysis, not just of the numbers, but of things like the diagnostics, everything from return-home interviews, outcomes, where intervention has made a difference, where it has not. Therefore, there should be quite an exciting and productive piece of work underway jointly between ourselves and MOPAC in the not too distant future to look at these figures in greater detail.

I do not know if you want a more granular breakdown of each year, which I can do if you like over those five years, Chairman, or whether that headline is sufficient. What would the panel prefer?

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): It is sufficient, because we have quite a few details, as you can imagine, anyway. That is a comprehensive answer on that. Is there anything more specifically that any of you want to add to that?

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): I would like to say, for Safer London, I can speak primarily about those who have multiple missing episodes and those who are missing for longer, they are the children and young people that we work with. If our colleagues from Missing People were to speak on this, they would also say that the figures are somewhere between, out of every ten children that go missing, about seven will not be reported to the police.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes, we are coming on to that.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): I would just like to add that in our experience children are going missing more frequently and we are seeing that more often.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): OK. Let us expand on that. If I come to you, but if I ask you the next one then you can incorporate in your answer. The Children's Society has reported that two in three children that go missing are not reported to the police, as was just mentioned there. Do you think that is an accurate assessment and what impact does that have?

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): Thanks, Chairman. I was just going to clarify slightly the numbers. Kevin was referring to missing instances and what we know is that children who go missing go missing more than once normally. It is around about 8,400 children, individuals, went missing last year, to then make up that 25,000-plus instances. In terms of the trend, while the number of instances are remaining relatively static or going slightly down over the last five years, in fact the number of children going missing is going down as well. Therefore, less children are going missing more often if that makes sense.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes. When you look at the two figures, it makes a difference.

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): I hope that is hopeful clarification.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): That is helpful, especially for people watching who do not have the benefit of a good briefing as well. Susannah, if I move to you.

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): Thank you. Yes, those figures are accurate from the Children's Society. We certainly see that on our helpline, lots of the young people that we speak to have not been reported to the police. One of the main reasons for that is the most common reason for children to go missing is problems in home, whether that is a family home or care, therefore that might be conflict, abuse, neglect. There might be good reasons why someone is not reporting them missing. Also, we know one in five children is kicked out of home when they find themselves to be missing. That is another good reason why they are not going to be reported by whoever did that.

Also, we know that some parents and carers will not report a child missing if they have not had a good response when they previously did. Therefore, if a child is going repeatedly missing, as Will says, if they feel the police response was not helpful, for example, then if that happens again, they may just decide not to. Also, we know that there is some under-reporting as well as over-reporting from care home settings.

Sometimes a child might be reported late for missing curfew, for example, when there are not any particular concerns. As well, if a child has a regular pattern of behaviour and seems to be coming home safe, then they may not be reported even though - as we are all aware - that can be a big warning sign for exploitation.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): OK. Sarah, do you have anything?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): Just to say a little about the kind of individuals. The information here is both from Catch22, from our services that we deliver in London, but also I have spoken to the members of the English Coalition for Runaway Children (ECRC), co-chaired with Missing People, who deliver missing services in London. There is some interesting information behind those missing incidents and missing young people. There is a clear increase in children missing from home as opposed to missing from care, as a proportion, compared with what has been the case in the past. We have seen a significant increase in missing incidents due to emotional wellbeing and mental health, children going missing due to a desire to self-harm or to suicidal ideation, and that is something that is a real concern to us. It is happening nationally, but it certainly is happening in London.

As a proportion of missing children, in the services that we have spoken to, I do not have the benefit of the access to the very latest missing data unless it is in the public domain. We have seen an increase in girls as a proportion of children going missing and specifically Black children and young people are disproportionately represented in missing figures, compared with the demographics of the population in general. The average age of children going missing in our services is just slowly decreasing. It seems that children are sometimes - whether it be through exploitation or some of the other experiences that they have - those are affecting them at a younger age. They are just a couple of bits of information that were given to us from services working on the ground, some of them with Sherry and Safer London.

There are a lot of rumours circulating among populations of young people under the radar about what has happened to certain children and young people who have gone missing, including rumours about abduction, murder, one at least of which I was told is demonstrably untrue because it relates to the profile of a missing young person that was relatively high profile. These are creating a climate of fear among children and young people about why it might be that certain young people are going missing and what the repercussions might be for them of raising that with the police or with authorities.

The increased use of social media and encrypted messaging, increased use of private hire vehicles in exploitation, and the increased use of cryptocurrency make the exploitation that may well be involved with missing children so much less visible and so much harder to track. Therefore, that is a real challenge for us as services.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): OK, thank you. Sherry, did you want to add to that at all?

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): Not really. The only thing around the characteristics of young people that are going missing, I would say we are seeing a disproportionate number of children with learning disabilities and those that are neurodiverse are also going missing quite regularly. That just makes them more open to grooming and I do definitely agree that parents sometimes are reluctant to report children missing when they have had negative responses historically. Again, we see primarily young people of colour and girls going missing.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes. I was astonished by those figures. I will come to that in a minute. If I can first just ask the Commander, has there been a change in the level of demand placed on the MPS to respond to incidents of missing children over the last five years?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service):

Thank you, Chairman and colleagues. The incidences, as Will rightly clarified a few moments ago, have regressed to a mean, so the demand is about as it was three to five years ago. Some of the successes in this space - according to our latest data from our Merlin system and the tracking facilities we have - shows that the vast majority of young people do return within 48 hours. Susannah and I were just discussing this before, because data from a couple of years ago shows that as being around 60% within 48 hours, our latest data shows it was over 90%, which in and of itself sounds like a success. We must be careful not to over-celebrate that apparent success because in reality we need better data as to how much of that was down to police intervention or partner intervention and how much of it was just that they have returned of their own volition. It is far from a success story in its own right and we must always be careful with statistics.

There are some really key points, just to coalesce a few of the previous answers into something that might help the panel. We have already touched on a whole range of issues that are part of the diagnostic drivers behind missing people. Sherry and I were speaking just yesterday - and colleagues I am meeting for the first time here today have echoed it - whether it is online child sex abuse and grooming in that sense, perhaps facilitated by things like crypto exchange, whether it is something like a County Lines recruitment into a mule facility for an organised criminal gang, whether it is - heaven forbid - suicidal ideation or self-harm, which is a very different phenomenon, but nevertheless equally harmful and something that we need to work closely with partners to track, or whether it is simply young people testing boundaries, whether they are boundaries set at home, boundaries within a care facility, there is a whole range of drivers behind missing people. They are each different and require a very different response.

Therefore, from a policing perspective, we are working really hard to look at how we take a far-more enterprise approach to child safeguarding and look at these things in the round. The danger is sometimes that we can tend to compartmentalise off and look at that is a County Lines matter and that is a self-harm matter and that is a child who repeatedly goes missing because they are going through a rebellious phase. The risks of that are that you misidentify or that we miss risks in young people. Whether they return within 48 hours or not, those risks could still be very evident to us. Therefore, it is a case by case basis. I just wanted to summarise some of the things that are going through my mind as we are discussing here today and what might assist the discussions. Each one of those is distinct but in the round they all pose a threat to children and young people. How we best get ahead of that threat can only be managed best through a multiagency approach, joint working to understand data and facilities behind that, partnership and diversion activities around those areas such as County Lines, which is the work that Rescue and Response do and other partners around the table. Then of course in times where we do see criminality, enforcement activity from the police if required.

There is an awful lot in there and summing up back to your question about demand, it depends on which one of those is manifesting. A child who returns very quickly simply because they are testing the boundaries of the controls is one thing, it requires very minimal involvement from the police. Therefore, that instance will not require much from us thankfully. An instance obviously of something like child sexual exploitation potentially by an organised criminal network, a whole different ballgame. I know this panel in previous sittings has heard about that through the auspices of things like Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and so on and so forth. There is a wildly different spectrum of police response depending on what we are dealing with. Then a similarly different challenge in terms of how we get our arms around those diagnostics in order to ensure that the right, proportionate, and most partner-led response is applied.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes. There seems to be gaps in this. If I said to you now, as a snapshot, how many children are missing? I mean the ones that have been missing for a long while that are clearly not the 24/48-hour ones. How many would you say, very roughly, London has?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): We have roughly 70 children reported missing every single day, Chairman, therefore right now here today --

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): OK, taking it as a round, what is the core, what is your absolute core of kids that have gone that there is just no trace of?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): I am afraid I do not have that figure for you. I would have to get it. I cannot imagine it is a very high figure because the vast majority do return, as I say, within 48 hours, and that is over 90%, in fact it is in the high 90 percentages. I would have to get you that figure separately, Chairman, I am afraid.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): That would be really helpful. Do you have those figures? Do you have children missing over 24 or 48 hours, etc, one week, two weeks, a month? Do you have access to all of those figures?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): I can certainly get it, Chairman. I do not have it here to hand today I am afraid.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): It is there, therefore somebody can. Do all the partners have access to this so that everybody knows what they are talking about? You can either look at these 26,000 overall figures or you can look at the 8,000 figures or it could be that there's 50 that are hard core missing, no trace of.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Where we have a missing child over an extended period of time, that will often end up being treated as potentially even a homicide. Thankfully I have nothing in that space at the moment, I am relieved to say. Of course, as the panel will know, we have not had a missing child thankfully turn up deceased in quite some time in the MPS, which is a reassurance in some ways. Again, no cause for celebration, just a positive in the sense that at least we have not had a deceased child. However, yes, if we have an extended missing person situation involving a child who we believe was high risk, there is a very real chance we would refer that to our colleagues in the homicide command to look at as to whether that potentially is something that might be a potential fatality.

In terms of the hard core number of those who are missing over seven days or beyond that, I would have to get that figure for you separately I am afraid. It will be a low figure though. It will be a low figure I imagine.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): That is what I am getting at. At what point is there a flag saying, "This child has been missing for ..." At what period would you say, "Now this is really worrying," what timeline?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): It depends on the case I am afraid, Chairman. It depends on those underlying drivers that I talked about a moment ago. Where we have enhanced concerns that could be a very short timescale indeed. We may go to critical incident almost straight away in a particular instance if we think there are risks of child sexual exploitation or gang violence or something similar. In an instance where we think a child may have run away from a harmful situation and is just determined to stay away from that harmful situation, simply does not want

to be found, then that might be a slower time search for that young person to try to make sure we bring them back into safe care. Therefore, it does depend on the aggravating factors and those enhanced concerns I am afraid. Sorry to be imprecise.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): I am just trying to get an idea of the hard core amount. Sherry's hand was up a minute ago. Is it about the figures because we are coming on --

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): Yes, about the figures, yes, absolutely. At Safer London at any one time we are working with somewhere between 300 and 500 children and young people. We work up to the age of 25. About 70% of the people we work with are children. We have a need-to-know alert system, therefore if people are repeatedly missing or missing for more than 48 hours that comes to me on a regular basis. Out of those 300 to 500 children, at the moment we are working with around 370 children. At any one time, five of them are either long-term missing or missing on multiple occasions. That is just to give you a feeling with what is happening with the young people that we are working with at Safer London.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): That is really helpful, thank you. Sarah?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I just wanted to make the point that the length of time can sometimes be a red herring. Even if a young person is not missing for a long period of time, it does not mean they are not suffering significant harm. We certainly have known cases where young people have gone missing repeatedly but possibly for 'only' a couple of days at a time, but during that time they have witnessed some really horrific things and experienced some terrible things.

There was a colleague in London who spoke to us about - this is not current, this was a couple of years ago - a child who was going missing from school, so was catching the bus to school with their school uniform, not going into school, this was regarded as truancy, was not even recorded as missing despite the concerns of parents, and then would return home at the end of the school day. During that time that child was being sexually exploited for the whole of the school hours but apparently it was not a concerning missing. Therefore, sometimes we need to separate out the time because it is risk and harm that we really need to focus on here.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): I accept that unreservedly but sometimes we need to have some sort of comprehension of the figures that we are looking at. You mentioned earlier, Sarah, and I think the Commander did as well, that more girls and Black children respectively go missing in London. I have looked at the figures. There are more Black children that go missing than if I compare it with white, whereas the percentages of those in different people in London make up 13% Black, 59.8% white. That is staggeringly disproportionate. Are there any reasons that we know about? Has anything been gone into as to why those families have this particular problem with their children?

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): It is really good question and one that we are trying to find out. At Missing People we are doing some research with Listen Up, another organisation, to find out exactly the answer to the question, why are Black young people so disproportionately represented, and to understand that better. However, speaking to other organisations led by Black people, some of the questions they are raising, which could be part of the answer, are the fact that Black children are more likely to be excluded from school, therefore they are then at higher risk of exploitation, at higher risk of mental health issues, therefore all of these factors as well as racism that they may face and the impact of that on their emotional wellbeing may well be important factors. We are doing some research to find out exactly what the reasons are and to try to find out more about the impact on those young people.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Also, how to start to address it to see if we can help, which is the most important thing. Did you want to come back on this, Sarah?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): Just to say Missing People and Listen Up are doing some excellent work in this field and it is something that we perhaps belatedly, all of us, have become more aware of and it certainly behoves all of us to look more at what is going on in that space. We would just like to raise the issue of adultification of adult children, on the back particularly of Child Q perhaps, but also of the experience of some other Black children in London. That children who are Black are not always seen as in need of protection in the way that white children are, and so sometimes they are not receiving the support that they need to start with.

There are some community sensitivities as well. We have also had people who have spoken to us about lacking confidence in reporting their child to the police because they are not convinced that they will get the response that they need and they also fear that they themselves or their families, their children, could get into trouble. Whether or not those things are justified, and I am perfectly prepared to accept that we cannot just cast aspersions, there needs to be evidence, but the confidence is an issue. The fact that people feel this may be the case is important and does need addressing.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Perception is always very important. I will just come to Assembly Member Moema first, she has asked to speak.

Sem Moema AM: Thank you, Chairman. Thank you for that response. I just wanted to ask, first of all the MPS, and then other guests. You raised the point about Black children being disproportionately excluded and therefore being at risk. Whether the MPS feels that they are supported by other organisations in London to prevent children going missing from other statutory services or other statutory providers, we are interested in your views on that.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes, we will keep that minimal because we are coming on to other sections that will come in under. Did you want to answer that, Commander?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Thank you for the question. We do have a really positive supportive and collaborative relationship from most of our partners in this space. Everyone struggles with the same issues really, which is the scale of the challenge that faces us, and I say that with compassion for all my colleagues on the statutory provision side and in other areas who are straining under the weight of incidences and individuals who go missing repeatedly.

People, and I am sure this panel, are probably aware of the Operation Philomena protocol, which has been implemented in the MPS for some time now, which is where our officers and our missing persons co-ordinators work really closely with children's care homes in particular. We know that care homes in all forms, whether they are regulated, unregulated, and so on, can often result in higher incidences of missing children and repeat missing persons. Working with those care homes to understand what they can do to help prevent repeat instances of young people going missing has been productive in terms of, in some instances, with joint responsibility agreements, reducing instances of missing from that home by between 30% and 50%.

Again, with the statistics showing that we have regressed to a mean of about 25,000 to 26,000, it is not solving the problem, but it is a good example for the Assembly Member's question of times when we have worked

really productively in partnership with certain homes to have a really sensible and mature approach to how and when children are reported missing and therefore managing the risk that they may be in.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): OK. We are coming to some of that later, therefore I think I will stop there. I just had a quick indication from Assembly Member Best.

Emma Best AM: Thank you, Chairman. It was just, Sarah, to follow up on your point just then, you spoke about the adultification of Black children and how it means that some of them are not getting the support that they need. Could you be more specific about the organisations, community groups, or bodies, that you believe are not providing the support they should be?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I do not think any of us are. That is an issue that all of us need to confront honestly, and we need to be aware of it. I am reluctant to name specific organisations, partly because I am not based in London and although Catch22 have services in London with whom I have extensively consulted, it would not be very helpful to say that. However, I did attend a really good session in 2021 by Africans Unite Against Child Abuse, which was looking at the issue of missing children and it was an issue that came up repeatedly from members of the Black community who I think probably would be the better people to ask about that. I am sorry to chicken out with that answer, but genuinely it is something that is an issue for all of us. It is an emerging issue that should be a real challenge to any of us working to protect children.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Thank you. We are running very late on this particular section. I have seen Sherry Peck has indicated, if it could just be kept on the data really.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): OK, I was going to pick up on the adultification issue and say that I think it is an across-the-board failure to recognise children of colour and Black children, the adultification is a massive issue. The other thing that I would say is that everybody should be understanding the context that we are asking our children to grow up in, it is absolutely brutal. Until the unfairness that is inherent in the system is changed - and changed quite dramatically - the issues are always going to remain for children. Therefore, the work of Professor Carlene Firmin [Social Researcher, Durham University] should be understood by everybody.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): OK, thank you. Assembly Member Ahmad, briefly.

Marina Ahmad AM: Thank you, Chairman. I am deeply concerned again about the issue of specifically Black African and Caribbean children being overrepresented in these figures. Sarah, you talked about girls having a particular issue and, as you said, on the back of Child Q and the disproportionate intimate strip searches of black children. This is yet another issue that has come up where Black children, particularly Black girls, are disproportionately affected. Could you very briefly - I know you did not want to answer earlier - but could you very briefly outline what you think needs to happen here?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): One thing I would really advocate is that we listen to children. I am delighted that you have invited us here and we have all spoken about the importance of multiagency working and it is something that we need to do together. However, children are the ones who can tell you, those Black children can tell you what their experiences are, and I just do not think their voice is out there enough. I am sure there are some brilliant young people who would be able to come and speak to you and you would benefit enormously by just really listening to their experiences. I know I would. I would love to be able to come along

too. Those young people have regular experiences of just perhaps almost invisible exclusions, microaggressions, just daily discriminatory acts, which cumulatively have a real impact for them over time. As I say, I hope that some recent events, which have been tragic, have also served for us as a wakeup call and, on the back of the very negative experiences of some children, that we are all much more attuned to that now. It is about time.

Marina Ahmad AM: Thank you. Chairman, would it be possible for us to organise some kind of session like that?

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): I was going to go on to that because I think we will get to the end of the meeting and realise there is a whole lot more. Let us see how we go. I am going to move on now to protecting vulnerable children, which is going to be led by Assembly Member Garratt.

Neil Garratt AM: Good morning. We touched on this a bit already, but just focusing in particular on that cohort of children who go missing who have some serious risk factors, such as links with County Lines, known links with child sexual exploitation, and so on. Thinking particularly about that cohort of children who go missing. What are the key challenges in preventing those kind of children from going missing as opposed to the more general population, which I think, Commander, you mentioned earlier? If I can start with you, Commander, but particularly thinking about those more vulnerable children who we are more concerned about, what are the challenges in preventing those from going missing?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): The challenges in areas such as County Lines have been recognised for some time and, as this panel will know from previous Assemblies, I am sure there has been some genuine successes in tackling the organised criminal gangs who are generally responsible for the modern slavery, the recruitment of these young people into County Lines rackets where they are being forced to smuggle drugs across borders or indeed across London or elsewhere.

The diversionary tactics in that stepped some time ago from any sort of move to criminalise those children far more into a diversionary pathway where we look to divert them away from that County Lines work. The work of Rescue and Response, which is a commissioned service by MOPAC, is really fundamental to that and Will and I were just talking beforehand about the need to make sure we drive up our police referrals into that capability so that we can try to divert young people away from a life as a County Lines victim. Long since have we stopped prosecuting people in that space, unless of course there was clear evidence of wilful criminality. We recognise these children as vulnerable rather than criminals. Therefore, there has been a step change there some time ago and that has yielded some good dividends in terms of bringing young people into a safer lifestyle. There have been roughly about 20 young children a year recovered from County Lines phenomenon and brought back to a safe lifestyle without them being criminalised. That has been repeated over the last few years and those numbers are rising.

More broadly, in areas such as child sexual exploitation, there continues to be the ever-present risk of adults who would seek to exploit children for sexual gratification. We have seen evidence of this in other areas. We are currently working on the recommendations from the Telford Child Sexual Exploitation Inquiry report and of course we have previous watershed reports in this space including IICSA and others. The challenges there, as we know, is that people who seek to groom in that sense will tend to do so often online and in very surreptitious and insidious ways. The trick for us there is to make sure that our online investigative posture through our online child sexual abuse and exploitation teams is as vigorous as it can be in order to target the offenders and bring them to justice.

I am pleased to say that, in this last week's His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report that was commented on by HMICFRS as being a reducing risk for our organisation because our detections and our enforcement in that space has been increasing steadily for some time, thanks to the great work of our colleagues in Central Specialist Crime. Therefore, there is a big piece in there for us, police, as there would be about enforcement against the gangs responsible for criminality and sexual exploitation. There is then of course the partnership piece around once we identify those children and young people at risk as to how we divert them. That is where we are grateful again to the colleagues to my left and to many other statutory and non-statutory agencies who assist us in those diversionary pathways.

If I may just go back to a point that Assembly Member Ahmad mentioned a moment ago, about young people and disproportionality in terms of those figures, which is quite germane here. Is that I would almost query in a way how concerned we should be about that difference in the statistics, slightly controversial as that might sound, because when young people and children are going missing we want to know about that, going missing in itself is not a crime, we need to know as police and partners if a young child is missing so that we can help recover them. The last thing I want is those figures to drop and children of any demographic to be at risk. Therefore, I would much rather they went up in many ways so that I know, so that we have the opportunity to intercede and particularly so if they have a criminal gang of any hue who is trying to exploit them so that I can tackle them and bring them to justice with my colleagues.

Neil Garratt AM: Thanks. I think it probably is a question that a lot of people want to comment on, therefore if we go all the way along, Will, specifically about those children with a risk factor.

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): Thanks. You are talking about the most vulnerable children here and unfortunately we do not have a social care colleague with us, but the work that we are doing in the safeguarding space is really important here as well. What we want to do is prevent young people who are exhibiting early vulnerabilities from being exploited. An interesting point on disproportionality as well is many of these children going missing, a very high proportion are looked-after children. There is a strange disproportion anomaly in children's social care that social care colleagues, if they were here, would talk about more, which is Black and females are overrepresented in the social care population versus what happens in early help, which is the pre. Therefore, basically you are more likely to be put into the care system and less likely to receive an early help intervention. That does go some way to explaining the disproportionality in the figures.

It also goes some way to explaining some of the other disproportionality that Kevin was referring to too because those vulnerable members of society are not receiving the discretionary services that are available. We are trying really hard at City Hall to do loads about that. A really important place is the work that we are doing with safeguarding leaders across London. There is a Safeguarding Executive that I sit on, but I would particularly like to talk about the Adolescent Safeguarding Forum, which MOPAC and the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) are really close to. That is looking at something called contextual safeguarding. For teenagers this idea of contextual safeguarding, everything that is going on in your lives, and our London Rescue Response partners here will tell you way more about this, but it is absolutely vital. What we need is whole community protective responses to the most vulnerable young people. We have to stop them progressing and those vulnerabilities increasing. That is the sort of stuff the VRU does. That in itself will prevent young people from becoming the victims of criminal exploitation, gangs or other forms of abuse.

Neil Garratt AM: Thank you. Susannah, specifically thinking about those children with a vulnerability, what are the challenges in stopping them from going missing?

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): The biggest challenge in preventing those young people going missing is that we know that they have been groomed incredibly deeply and over a long time. The draw, the pull of the exploiter is so strong because of the threat that they know that they and their family face if they do not do what they are being told they must do. Preventing them going missing in the first place might be really hard but the most important thing is to see a first missing episode as perhaps the first sign of exploitation. It is perhaps the most common sign of exploitation. The response to that to try to intervene before that exploitation gets entrenched; therefore return-home interviews, which I know we will speak about later, are a really important part of that picture. Also, making sure that something happens after them.

One of the services we run, not in London, but I am sure there are other services similar that perhaps Catch22 run, of not just providing a return-home interview, but providing ongoing intensive support to a young person to help them avoid getting totally entrenched and help them get themselves out of the situation that they are in. I would also say the role of parents and carers is incredibly important here. We work with parents of missing children every day and sometimes they know their child best, they know when they are concerned, and sometimes they do not feel listened to when they are reporting those concerns to the police because they might not know the right words to use of course around exploitation, but they are really concerned. Seeing them as partners in safeguarding and involving them effectively in the solutions is another important way of preventing this becoming a repeat and very risky experience for the child and their family.

Neil Garratt AM: The grooming point is a good one. I read an autobiography of a girl who had been exploited and it was only very many years later that she came to understand that this man - she was I think 13 or 14, he was in his 20s - that he was not her boyfriend and she was "going missing", running away to spend time with him, and her parents found it impossible to stop her leaving. She was literally climbing out of her bedroom window and then social services either found it difficult or in some cases were just unwilling to stop that relationship. It would be ten or 15 years ago that was happening, and not in London, it was up in Yorkshire. Do we think we are better now at stopping that kind of relationship? It is an obvious red flag when you read about it, when she writes her autobiography in her 20s, but I can see that it is difficult to stop it happening at the time.

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): As professionals, we are better at recognising it for sure. It is still a big issue. We know that from the figures, the numbers of young people being sexually and criminally exploited. It is really difficult because of the added challenges of the threats and the risks that they face if they do not comply. The other thing that I want to say is that at Missing People we have two services that can really help young people, we have our runaway helpline service and also a safe call service, which is particularly for victims of County Lines exploitation and their families. Both as really early intervention opportunities and we can help young people think through what is going on for them around relationships, around exploitation, but also help get them safe if that is what they need in that moment as well.

Neil Garratt AM: Sarah, just again on that question about preventing those particularly more vulnerable children going missing.

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I will try not to speak for half an hour. Just to point you to, just to get some background, and you were talking about the book that you read. *Sky News* picked up a really good story on Monday night and then there was *Radio 4* Tuesday night, and I really commend those to you just because it is a particular story of one girl. Interestingly, it also talks about the use of the National Referral Mechanism,

therefore that might be something that you would like to consider there. They have done a much better job than I could do.

In terms of individuals, the huge vulnerability that is intractable as far as I am concerned is where young people have experienced very, very distressing early childhood trauma. There may be developmental trauma, relational trauma, a whole range of experiences. That can leave such a hole in the life of the child. That hole, regardless of how good carers can be, how wonderful social care might be in supporting them, that hole stays. If we are not filling that with good things, with good activities, with good people, then somebody else will. It is such a challenge. We see children who are exploited, who are then supported to understand and to leave that exploitation, but for whom that vulnerability stays. Then several years later that might then happen to them again and it might then be a pattern that is set up for unhealthy relationships into adult life. It is a huge challenge, and I cannot overstate the amount of resource that needs to go into that.

The other thing I would say is that we focus on the child here. The child, what is going on with the child. I would just like to talk about some structural wider issues as well. Some of the issues that we are looking at now will be real drivers for exploitation. We need to be very aware of, for example, the cost of living crisis, the impact that will have on people living in poverty, driving more families into poverty. The responsibilities some children feel to make money to support their families when they can see what is happening, is a real danger point.

Also, I am very grateful that you mentioned contextual safeguarding, because that is the thing about looking at the risk that is in the environment in which the child is growing up, rather than always focusing on the child, and that is what we need to do. When a child is released from custody, when a child is rescued in the Rescue and Response services, then they come back to the same place, to the same risk, to the same level of threat. One of the most intractable and difficult situations is the whole thing about debt bondage. If a child is in debt bondage, what do we do, there is no legal and ethical way to deal with that. However, then that leaves that child incredibly exposed and in real danger, sometimes mortal danger. I just put that out there. I have absolutely no solution, but it is very important to highlight that.

Then I did talk earlier about the rumours that circulate, the level of threat and fear that is all happening underneath the radar. We know anecdotally the huge numbers of children who carry knives. That is because they are fearful. Ironically, it makes them less safe. Therefore, somehow, we need to really invest in this generation who have been doubly impacted because they have also had the impact of COVID. I know, I recognise I am talking in a week when multibillions have been wiped off the British economy, I recognise how difficult it is, but the one cut I think cannot be made is for our children and young people in London.

Neil Garratt AM: Thank you. I saw that, Sherry, you had your hand up as well to come in on that question.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): Yes please. It is really Safer London's bread and butter. As I said earlier, we are working at any one time with 300 to 500 children who have some of the most complex lives in London. We have a presence in every London borough. Our work has recently independently been evaluated and it says that we have a statistical significance in reducing levels of victimisation. More than 50% of the children when they leave us feel that they are no longer victims to the set of circumstances they were already in. We have a statistical significance on moving children away from criminality. It is not as high as I want it to be, and we are always striving for more.

Your question initially was: what do we have to do to work with children to move them to that point? There are three things that underpin our work. First of all, you do not get beyond the interview stage at Safer

London if you think that the answer might be criminalising children. We safeguard children rather than criminalise them. The whole thing around contextual safeguarding underpins what we do. Safer London is currently being evaluated by a university about being one of the first non-statutory organisations to embed contextual safeguarding into our approaches.

The last thing is that we really think the victim-perpetrator divide is really unhelpful. There are not a group of children that are victims and a group of children that are perpetrators. If you look across the board, many of these children that would be perceived by your average *Daily Mail* reader as the perpetrators, when you unpick just slightly - reinforcing what other people on the panel have said - are very often victims and carry huge amounts of developmental trauma and live in very brutal contexts.

What do we do? All the Safer London staff are credible professionals. You might hear other organisations talk about employing people with lived experience and so on. At Safer London, we do not believe that is enough. They have to be credible professionals who can engage with children for anything between six months and up to two years, which I know makes our Commissioners' eyes water, but the evidence shows that sometimes it can take that long to work with young people.

The first thing we do is we secure their physical safety and that is about them being able to navigate safely through the place where they live. Sometimes it also means that we need to move children and families and we are quite successful at doing that, but it is a huge disruption for the whole family.

After that, we pick up on securing emotional safety for young people. Some of them have severe mental health problems but, for almost every child that lives amongst violence, we know that that will impact on their emotional wellbeing. We do huge amounts of work around emotional safety, intelligence and self-care.

Any of us would be foolish to think that peer networks are only negative or not important. We know that the value of peers to young people is critical and so what we do is we work with them to build healthy peer networks. We make sure they understand their own needs in relationships and that they can secure their own needs and that they can recognise negative and positive friendships and learn how to navigate out of that.

The last thing we do is that we really try not to allow children to leave us until they have some sort of future focus and that they are quite clear on what is going forward. That might be that they have strong financial planning skills and that they know what they want to do for a living. They may have found the passion that will drive them that is not becoming the next Marcus Rashford or Stormzy - you know, it is a realistic passion - and they have some clear drivers to future focus. That seems to be having a positive outcome for children who are living complex lives in London.

We do not do any of that alone and we do rely on partners. Partners are under enormous stress, whether that is the police, social care, or other voluntary sector organisations. It is absolutely critical that we recognise that that stress is in existence. We also do it embedded in communities and so there is a real place for small voluntary organisations in a place. There is an amazing organisation in London, St Matthew's Project, which runs football clubs in parts of south London. It does incredible work and that is really valuable. We always step children down into strong local connections like that.

You were looking for solutions and we have bits and pieces of that. We certainly do not have the whole answer, but we certainly have some of the solutions. I am happy to share more information about that if you need it.

Neil Garratt AM: Thank you. Thanks, everyone. It is a very complex and difficult question and I appreciate that. That was some quite useful discussion.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Thank you. I want to take this opportunity to welcome year 13 students from the London Academy of Excellence in Tottenham. We are talking today about missing children and/or young adults. Often, they will be of your age and you will hear very many of the people speaking today saying just how important it is that friends of people who go missing are there for them and if they can point them to services that can help them. Missing children is something that -- we all wish that there were not any at all. If you have any friends who are likely to go missing, you could be that one connection that will stop them moving away from home or getting themselves into any trouble. Please listen because a lot of this could affect you or some of your friends. Thank you very much for coming. We do appreciate it.

Assembly Member Ahmad, did you still want to come in on the back of that question?

Marina Ahmad AM: I did, Chairman. Thank you very much. We know that children seeking asylum are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In August [2022] we heard from the Home Office itself that these children were going missing at the rate of one a week from Home Office accommodation. The Nationality and Borders Act, which was passed in April [2022], has been criticised for being discriminatory against this group of children based on their nationality and immigration status.

What work is being done to address the specific needs of these children? I am going to ask Commander Southworth about that, please.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): I do not have a statistic for that and so, apologies, I would have to come back to you with a stat. What I would say is that this issue of people with potentially vulnerable immigration status has come up in different types of crime and criminality and, indeed, will feature no doubt in this as well in missing persons, which, as we have identified before, is not a crime in itself. It is a vulnerability.

The key thing for us is that in all such things we take a child first approach. If we came across a child or a young person who was missing and we believed certainly at risk and it turned out at the same time they were potentially of insecure immigration status, recovering them first and foremost would be step one. Ultimately, any considerations thereafter with the United Kingdom Border Agency or with the Immigration Service would be a separate consideration altogether. We determinedly disaggregate the two. We have a similar situation when it comes to young people who have been reported missing. We treat them as a missing person first and then second, after that, if they are wanted for a crime, we will deal with that in a secondary faculty. That is something which we have made clear as policy to all of our officers and staff. In terms of more detail behind that, I would have to come back to you if you wanted statistics, I am afraid.

Marina Ahmad AM: It was not statistics. It was actually about strategy.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Certainly.

Marina Ahmad AM: Sarah, did you have anything to say about that?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): It is not something that I personally have dealt with very much and so I am not

going to say a lot, but just to point you to an excellent Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT) report that has just been produced called *Outside the Frame*, which raises the concerns around the Nationality and Borders Act and also talks about children who are being accommodated in hotels.

I fully appreciate that there is no one from social care here, but they would tell you the enormous pressure that there is on accommodation, particularly in London because of the prices, but it is completely inappropriate that any unaccompanied child should be placed in hotel accommodation. Clearly, that does make them much more vulnerable. Then, when children who have been trafficked into the UK go missing, those are the children whom we sometimes never find again. There was poor grammar in that sentence, but those might be the ones who go missing and will never resurface.

Marina Ahmad AM: Thank you.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Assembly Member Russell?

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you, Chairman. Picking back up, Commander Southworth, what is the main challenge for the MPS with children who are missing from care? Is there sufficient co-ordination and information sharing between the MPS and carers to tackle those particular challenges?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): It is a real mainstay of our approach to safeguarding young children from the risk of going missing. At the risk of repeating some of what I said before - I hope you will indulge me - the work under Operation Philomena to work jointly with care homes in order to ensure that we have the best possible operating practices is central to everything that we do in this space.

There are just under 400 care homes across the city with which we have agreements; there are 135 regulated care homes and we calculated about 535 unregulated care homes within that. With 377 of those, we have a joint responsibility agreement, 312 of which are in the unregulated space. That shows really good engagement from those, as I say, over 370 care homes in terms of working with us to ensure that they do not just report one minute past curfew time a child or young person who perhaps goes missing regularly, but take a circumspect approach to what they might be able to identify and whether they are missing and at risk or not.

Simultaneously, where we see repeat missing persons from that care setting, then we have the opportunity to engage our missing persons co-ordinator with them to try to take a problem-solving approach and have a strategy meeting with other statutory partners and non-governmental organisations to see if we can divert that young person away from that frequent missing person behaviour, working jointly with the care home facility. There are some good examples in there of best practice, working multiagency and particularly with the care homes themselves.

The wider landscape of care settings is something that poses us all a challenge. The very increased ratios that we see of children going missing from care relative to children going missing from home will test us all for some time to come. That is not solely down to -- as colleagues of mine in this space advise me, some of the unrelated care homes give fantastic support. It is not a binary issue that Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulated are all the best and unregulated are not. However, there is clearly a compulsion on us to try to make sure we have as much regulation in place as possible.

Secure placements and out-of-London placements are another challenge as well. Moving people from one local authority area to another, particularly young people, and displacing them is another challenge, all of

which can add up to those diagnostic drivers behind which we see young people going missing from care settings because they have been displaced out of their area, detached from their friends and so on. There are lots of different facets to that, but central to it is us working jointly with those care homes and with our Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) partners to try to make sure we do not unnecessarily displace children or, when we do, we put them in a setting that is safer than the one we have removed them from.

Caroline Russell AM: Yes. Did you say there were 312 unregulated care homes that you had been engaging with through the [Operation] Philomena protocol?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Indeed, yes.

Caroline Russell AM: Would you say that the Philomena protocol is helping in terms of helping practice? I am sure there are lots of unregulated care homes with very good practice and great people working there, but presumably there is more concern around the unregulated care homes than there is around regulated care homes.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): I am not an expert in that space in terms of what Ofsted colleagues will do regulate and vet those care home facilities. You would have to - forgive me - ask other partners or Ofsted itself.

However, probably all of us from a common-sense perspective would certainly welcome greater regulation so that we have that safeguard in place because regulation is a necessary safeguard for us. It is a rather clumsy yes to that but, at the same time, I certainly would not want to suggest that all of the unregulated care homes are not doing a good job because, as I say, we have over 300 of them engaging with us under Operation Philomena. We really welcome that. I am sure that colleagues in this space will attest that the challenges there are particularly difficult for providing all of that care home capability and capacity for young people. There is probably only so much my local authority colleagues, LSCP and others can do to provide those places, given the amount of funding and resource constraints they may face.

I am trying to be sympathetic to their cause there whilst at the same time acknowledging your point, which is that, clearly, we would rather they were all regulated, we would rather they were all under Philomena, and we would rather we had free-flowing access to secure placements for those who really need them. Unfortunately, as a society, we are not in that space at the moment. I welcome this panel's support and others in terms of how we could perhaps force that issue.

Caroline Russell AM: Susannah, you wanted to come in?

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): Yes. I just wanted to recognise that that is some really good practice happening there, especially because it sounds like it is an ongoing relationship. Police officers are continually liaising with those care homes about whether the right support is in place for each young person. That is great.

I guess I have just a note of caution for care homes that are perhaps under-reporting children as missing when they are at risk because, as you rightly mention, there is some over-reporting, but we know there can also be under-reporting with the carers not recognising the risks and not reporting young people as missing.

Also, just picking up on a point around out-of-area placements, of course we all know accommodation in London is so expensive that a lot of London young people are in care in other areas. That creates real issues when they go missing around responsibility for return-home interviews, which may mean that those young people are less likely to get a return-home interview. Also, there are real challenges for the local authorities and police in both areas with information sharing and making sure the right supports are in place for that young person. We know that those young people are also more likely to go missing because they want to see friends and family back home as well. That is a particular challenge for London in this space around care for the proportion who are out-of-area and the challenges that that creates for the services that support them.

Caroline Russell AM: I wonder if I could bring Beverley in here. You are from the London Borough of Haringey. I just wonder if there is anything that you would like to see improving in the way the local authorities work with the MPS and with other partners in terms of supporting particularly children placed out of the borough who are at risk of going missing.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): Thanks very much. I do want to endorse the commendation that was just echoed by Susannah around the principles of the [Operation] Philomena protocol. Where we have seen it working, it works really well. It does not just address the trigger assessments of the children who may be at risk in particular homes but also reinforces the confidence of the keyworkers and the way that they work with some of the most vulnerable children, whether it is in an unregulated or a regulated setting. On the unregulated point, I know that Ofsted has a plan and no doubt a separate note can be shared on it.

Our biggest challenge as practice leaders is really about children who, for good reasons, may have to be placed out of the local authority and the disconnection between the forces in sharing information, the different governance arrangements, the different pathways and the different processes that are followed. One of our concerns is that with all the best intent - because, when we work with our officers, they do a sterling job - there is a delay in getting that engagement for children who are placed out of their resident authorities. That, of course, intensifies the risk because your local Multiagency Child Exploitation [Groups] (MACE) do not have access to the data in the area that they are placed in. We may have profile risk assessments but that is limited, and we do not have access to the resources to intervene and prevent episodes happening again and also to ensure that the local authority's care package is robust in the locality they are placed in. We are very dependent on the care provider as a single agency to discharge that corporate responsibility for us.

Caroline Russell AM: When you say "the care provider", you mean the --

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): The homes.

Caroline Russell AM: The homes, yes. Thank you. That is presumably when you find yourself using unregulated homes. Do you have less reassurance on that?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): The Ofsted direction of travel to move to regulating all provision for children and young people is the right one for the sector and my colleagues across London would support that. It is the unintended consequences that may occur when you are dealing with a hugely complex and complicated landscape that feels very much out of the line of sight for some of the practice leaders and the staff. An opportunity to share intelligence across the forces - not just the MPS; the MPS has a critical role for us, and it does lead on many of those discussions - is the missing piece. We do not know what we do not know.

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you. Sarah, I can see you nodding. Does that mean you wanted to add something briefly?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I absolutely reiterate all of the things that we have heard. It is absolutely our experience, too, that the difficulty across borders is that things are stored on different databases. That is also the case in the UK with the police. Police databases do not speak to each other.

One specific issue I would just like to mention in relation to missing and the whole complicated care landscape is that if a child goes missing across a local authority or a police force border, there are then issues about whose responsibility that child is and who picks that up. We have had members of ECRC who have reported to us that the local police force in the area from which the child went missing will not accept the missing report because they say, "They are now missing in another area", whereas the other area's police force will not accept the report because they say, "The child is not one of our children but is from somewhere else". That means that nobody is effectively accepting that report and looking for that child. Then, when that child does return, they do not get any of the support and intervention that a child should get on returning from missing, either.

Caroline Russell AM: Does either MOPAC or the MPS want to respond to the point about when children go missing across borders and there is a disjuncture in terms of who takes responsibility?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Hopefully, we will complement each other. We were actually just comparing notes. Forgive me, panel. I have the breakdown here of the layout that I understand, as best I can, of the regulated and unregulated care homes across different local authority areas within London. We were just noting that a very significant volume of the care homes, both regulated and unregulated, are in areas of course where the real estate is cheaper.

We see that as a driving phenomenon because what that means is, if you are in one of the very central inner London boroughs and you are a child who requires placing in a care home, there is a high likelihood you are going to get placed out into one of the outer regions. If you are young person who is being moved maybe because you have been involved in a gang or something similar, the risk there is that you get put into an area where there may be tension with another group of young gang members. Therefore, that is more likely to make you want to go missing from that care setting.

That is a simple example, I know, but a very real one when we talk about how we move children and young people across the city. The statistics I have here show that if you take our South Area Command, which has one of our biggest missing persons challenges, it has a very high number of care homes compared to, say, Alpha Whiskey, which is our central London area including Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea. You would expect that, I know, but the outcome of that and the corollary of that is that we are going to see more movement of children and young people out of their home local authorities depending on the actual real estate price as much as anything. Then the challenge within that is, as I say, how that displaces them from their peers and how that potentially puts them in contact with other risks.

When we started to talk about unregulated care homes, I was quick, as you know, before to make sure we signposted that many of them have really good working practices with us. The known unknown in this is that where children are being under-reported or not reported to us, then that of course poses us with very real and insuperable risks because I do not know what the risk is. That goes back to my point before to

Assembly Member Ahmad about the fact that we need to be careful about trying to reduce these figures in any area. If children are missing, they are missing, and we want to know about it.

Caroline Russell AM: Yes. Thank you. My final question goes back to the trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care. I just wonder if anyone else wants to comment on what more the local authorities, the police and other partners can do to ensure those trafficked and unaccompanied children who go missing from care seek help.

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): Sarah mentioned earlier some ECPAT research. We have done three pieces of research with ECPAT UK on this topic around trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care. As you will all be aware, the numbers are staggering. One in three trafficked children went missing from care in 2020 - that is a national, not London, statistic, I should say - an increase of 25% and one in eight unaccompanied children.

We know there are some real issues here, of course. Often the traffickers, the people who have brought them to the UK, will be telling them not to trust any professionals here and so that is a real challenge from the start for professionals who are trying to support them. Also, there is a real role here for independent child trafficking guardians, which I know are in place and are delivered by Barnardo's across London, to help build up that trust with a young person as soon as they arrive because we know often they go missing really quickly.

The other thing that is so important is to make sure that those young people as soon as they arrive get information in their own language, perhaps voiced by someone that they would recognise as being someone from their own country and their own culture, to explain to them what is going to happen to them and why, what support is available and what will happen if they access that support. There is such an understandable fear of all agencies and what will happen.

One of our biggest frustrations is that this is such a big group of children going missing, but they rarely contact us at Missing People and the Runaway Helpline. We know that that is probably because they are afraid of what will happen if they do. That is an issue that we are trying to address at Missing People.

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you. I am aware Sherry has not come in online for a while. Is there anything you would like to add on this point?

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): For me, one of the bigger issues for certainly trafficked and unaccompanied children is at that position of transitioning into adulthood and the fear they have about what that may mean for their status. Sadly, we have worked in the past year with two or three young people as they have turned 18 who have become very involved in criminal gangs. In fact, we came across our first case of a young man having his organs harvested to pay off debts and so on. We should absolutely be focused on children and young people, but that transitioning into young adulthood is when things can go desperately wrong at this point. I am not an expert in that, but we are seeing more and more young people being coerced into serious organised crime when they have no other adults or systems to support them because of their immigration status.

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you. That is absolutely shocking. There was just one thing that I wanted to pick up on what Susannah had said, but it has completely disappeared from my brain and so I am going to hand straight back to the Chairman.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): I will take it back straight away for time reasons. Beverley Hendricks, you arrived in the middle of that. I am so sorry that you have had a terrible journey trying to get here. Getting to this place, as every single Assembly Member bar one will tell you, is a nightmare. Thank you to all the others who managed it and I am so sorry you had a problem.

We are now going over and can we be mindful of the time, guests, please? It is such an important subject. We tend to talk on about it, which I am grateful for, but we must keep to time. Assembly Member Bokhari?

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you, Chairman. I just wanted to pick up on some of the areas that Assembly Member Russell was just talking about in terms of the way local authorities are working with police, partners and so on, and also on the looked-after children outside of London.

Firstly, as an experienced teacher, I feel like the conversation with the panel has missed a really important aspect that I have not picked up on anybody mentioning yet, and that is the work that you are doing with schools. I would like to know exactly what you are doing. As a teacher myself, I always felt as if we were completely left in the dark. There were vital bits of information that we had as teachers that were just not being communicated to the right people. We found it very frustrating when working with local authorities and social services. What has improved since my time in teaching, only a few years ago?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I will just make one comment, which is not going to answer your question and so I apologise, but I am an ex-teacher and so I absolutely know where you are coming from.

I would just like to make the point that actually the work with schools is often the prevention and early intervention work as well as, you know, the specific concerns that you want to raise. I would just really put a plea here that commissioners consider that. When budgets are straitened and it is difficult to cover all the things, we know we cannot cut crisis intervention, and so it is upstream that we cut those services. You ask Catch22 what we might be doing in schools. Actually, in our services in London, very little because that is not what our commissioners are asking for. It is a very important point.

Hina Bokhari AM: Beverley, do you want to come in here?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): I do because --

Hina Bokhari AM: I was slightly critical of local authorities there and I would like to hear from you.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): Constructive criticism is always welcome. From our experience - and I have canvassed the views of the north central London assistant directors and of course the wider practice leads from London councils, we feel that we understand the critical importance of the school community being very much a part of the systems we have in place around any vulnerability, but never more so since the post-Covid measures that we have now.

If I illustrate with the examples provided to me from the boroughs that I consulted before coming here, we know that some of our headteachers have designated some champions involved in our MACE. The MACE is the strategic board that reports to our safeguarding partnerships across adults and children, and they have a voice. They are not just coming to the table. They are forming the agenda and sharing information within the framework and the revisions to *Working Together [to Safeguard Children] 2018* that permits them to do so.

Some of the challenges are that the schools want more information than we can legitimately provide and some of the tensions are caused then. The commission may want to consider how we would be given more liberty to share information that keeps children safe with the work of the safer neighbourhood police in the schools. Although we have systems in place, even the safer neighbourhood police have to think about what they can and cannot say because they have to balance all people's rights.

The work that we do with the schools has drilled down to doing some dedicated exploitation and missing training and education as part of the core curriculum offered to teachers and governors and we have workshops with parents. We have just launched a campaign in our own local authority really bringing alive to parents some of the risks that they were oblivious to. If Johnny says, "I am going next door to stay with Bev", they take it on trust and that piece of work that parents would normally undertake seems to have slipped a little. We work with the parents, the governors and the teachers.

Then each of our schools has a representation on our safeguarding partnership so they can inform commissioning and strategic direction, but they are involved in the layers underneath as well. Our experience is that there is not a disconnect with the schools. What is complicated is that the school economy and the school structures are vast: academies, free schools, faith schools. Finding somebody who is truly representative to champion and lead 70 schools in many local authorities is a challenge.

Hina Bokhari AM: Where do we get that consistency? We need consistency across the board with this. This is vital. What could we be recommending to make sure that that happens?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): It is a challenge. My directors of children's services (DCS) - I am here representing one - would take the challenge. It is going to be a role for the London DCSs to think about how the education sector can come together to look at the governance arrangements first of all, what we want them to represent and then whether they are really connected at the hard end. In a very challenging and busy job, to work with the safer neighbourhood police to share that softer intelligence often is what helps. We need a system.

Someone suggested some years ago e-syns that would sit on top of the police national database and help pull out information around children to be disseminated, but that takes resource. It takes project development. It takes two or three years to get that off the ground and funding. The commission might want to look at what systems would be available for information across the agencies that might ensure that our teachers do not come and talk about just their individual child or what is in their ward areas but can really contribute to the strategic development.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you. To pick up on the point about the looked-after children who are outside of their own boroughs, what I was really concerned about - and perhaps MOPAC and the MPS could help me with this - you have raised all the concerns and the worries and the problems, but have you been able to use your intelligence to pick up patterns that have helped you with your evidence to protect those really vulnerable children who are in outer boroughs, out of their areas, and yet are still going missing?

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): I will just kick off by talking about a particular section of those, those who are engaged with county lines. The strategic assessment on our county lines rescue service that we publish every year has seen the number of referrals from constabularies outside of London - not the MPS but other county police - go up and up. Some 40% of referrals are now coming from outside. Young people who are involved in county lines operations but are London children are now being rescued by Rescue and Response and brought back to

London and safeguarded. The situation is remarkably improving. Kevin, there are probably wider points that maybe you want to draw on.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service):

Certainly. There is a lot more we can do from the MPS perspective, working with our colleagues in Operation Orochi and elsewhere to make sure we build on that, referrals from within the MPS as well. Will is rightly talking about an increase in referrals from outside constabularies. We can probably do more in that space in the MPS. We would welcome the challenge of working on that together to increase those internal referrals.

At the same time, there are broader issues around placements. As colleagues rightly alluded to, we have the MACE forums and, at the same time, some boroughs - certainly the one I policed last myself - have gangs, multiagency panels where we do try to track what is happening to at-risk gang members as they move across different force boundaries or indeed within the force. Where we think we might be potentially at risk of moving them towards conflict, we have that multiagency forum to address that very point with local authority and diversionary pathway colleagues so that we can try to make sure that we do avoid those pitfalls. I do not mean to sound like we are just polishing the problem and doing nothing about it. There is synergy around this.

As with all such things, the demands, as I alluded to before, and the limitations of where placements are will always be an inevitable driver because there are only so many placements to go around and children may need to be moved. That is something that I need to work more closely with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) about in terms of making sure that we have the best possible co-ordination between us of where young people are moved when they are moved out of their own local authority areas. That will be a work in progress for some time to come as the makeup of London continues to ebb and flow, as it always does.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you. Does the 2014 statutory guidance on children who go missing from home or care go far enough to represent the risks and links between missing children and gangs and sexual exploitation?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): According to Josh MacAlister, no [Chair, Independent Review of Children's Social Care]. The national childcare review [Independent Review of Children's Social Care] made some helpful findings in that area and suggested that there was more work to be done and, for the first time, recognised that this was not a locality issue. It was a national problem. It was a national issue for us to address. In our experience as practice leads, we will have our resident children found by Rescue and Response in Scotland, but the laws, rules and police force operations are completely different to the way that we work with the MPS. The suggestions from the national childcare review are ones that we must take seriously.

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): I agree with that.

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): I am aware that the Department for Education is revising that guidance and we are partly waiting for that review before doing it, but it certainly is aware that the guidance is not up to date in terms of the understanding we now have around different forms of exploitation as well. I believe that will be reviewed.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you. We are moving on to the Mayor's priorities now. He has made some very bold statements when it comes to missing children. His aspiration is for zero children going missing. That is very

bold considering everything you have just said about the complexities with missing children, the fact that a child can go missing - from my experience, I know, as a teacher - just to annoy their parents to the extreme end, which is incredibly frightening.

What do you think of that statement in terms of his aspiration? Do you think there is any explicit action that MOPAC is doing to make that possible? Maybe there should be a different way of defining what a missing child is to really meet that target.

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): My understanding is that the Mayor has actually committed to mission zero. I understood that was a motion filed by Assembly Member Bailey that everyone agreed to. What the Mayor has said is that there are too many missing children, and one missing child is too many. That probably is a good statement.

You then ask a really good question, which is what we are doing about it, whether it is zero or whether it is just a lot less. We have already talked about some of the commissioned services that we have in London. Admittedly, most of the ones that MOPAC commissions that we have heard about are for children who are already victims. We are mostly trying to prevent revictimisation and Sherry characterised that really well.

Fortunately, although - as our fellow panel member was saying - there has been a disinvestment in prevention services across the country, City Hall is really bucking the trend there. The VRU, which is an ever-growing programme, is one of the biggest preventative programmes of its kind. It is in schools with the whole-school approach, which is fantastic. Next time you have VRU colleagues here, it would be really great to hear of some of the incredible progress they are making with schools, which is fantastic.

We are also doing a lot with statutory partners. It is fantastic to have Beverley here. We work really closely with the London ADCS. Also, I sit on - and MOPAC funds and the Mayor funds - the Safeguarding Executive, which has just gone under new chairmanship. Fantastically, it is the chief executive of Bromley now, who is an ex-DCS himself. We contribute to, among other things, lots of the procedures work they have been doing. There is a real drive in London, which is fantastic, for children's services to start working together a bit more. There is something called the London [Innovation and] Improvement Alliance, which my former colleague Ben Byrne works on, which is a fantastic thing. There is loads.

Hina Bokhari AM: There is loads, but are we going to get to zero?

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): We will never get to zero, no, unless --

Hina Bokhari AM: Shall we be explicit on that and actually be really honest about it? It is really unfair. It is really unfair on people who are going missing every day, who have been impacted by it, the victims, the families, to say you are going to get to zero and not do it. Let us be honest.

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): The Mayor has not pledged to zero and the Police and Crime Plan does not say zero, either. I am not sure. Apologies. I do not know where that is coming from.

Caroline Russell AM: As an Assembly, we agreed that it was important that we work to have zero missing children and that is what this is about. We have heard from people all morning who are doing everything they can to reduce the number of children who go missing and so --

Hina Bokhari AM: Yes, I completely agree with that.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): We are all agreed, Assembly Member Russell.

Caroline Russell AM: Yes.

Hina Bokhari AM: Yes, I absolutely agree with that. However, we need to have a definition on missing children and what that means. That is what we need to be clear on.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): First of all, I endorse the fact that we should all be aspiring that no child goes missing. At Safer London, we would absolutely endorse that, although I realise we have a very long road to travel.

Secondly, one of the things that I wanted to talk about when we were talking about schools and the challenges for schools and then out-of-borough placements is that actually safeguarding online now is such a huge issue. It is a huge issue for schools that many incidents happen outside of school, but schools are having to take on that responsibility because it is coming back into schools and whether or not schools have got the additional resources to do that. When children are placed out of county or out of borough, really, they are all still very much connected online. We really must not forget the fact that, for children, online safety and the risks that are posed to them are really critical. We have not mentioned that today and so it is worth just storing it there. I will be quiet there because it was about the other questions rather than this one.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you so much for that. I am just going to move on now to another question for Will. You are my favourite person today. In what ways is the Mayor's Police and Crime Plan specifically helping to improve London's response to missing children? How are the Mayor and MOPAC working with the VRU and partner organisations to prevent children going missing? You may have mentioned something already, but is there anything more you want to add?

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): Just for time, yes, hopefully I have given a good flavour of everything we do in MOPAC. It is really important for the Mayor. We have a whole section in the Police and Crime Plan, making it clear that protecting people from exploitation and harm is a huge part of it.

The Deputy Mayor [for Policing and Crime] also specifically on some of the MPS things chairs a specific oversight group around child protection improvement, which has already led to and seen some improvement. That group is connected to the Safeguarding Executive, which I mentioned earlier, which is fantastic. There is really close partnership working with the VRU. They are very much in the prevention space and the schools approach. We have talked about that.

Something we have not talked about is the work we did last year on launching the reducing criminalisation of looked-after children protocol, brilliant joint working. It includes Operation Philomena. It works with every local authority. What is really important about that is that sometimes reporting of these missing instances when children are not missing and have just been reported by their placement can criminalise the child because the police are involved now. It breaks down the trust with the carer. Social care colleagues will tell you way more about this, but it is something that comes up a lot in return-home interviews. That reducing criminalisation of looked-after children protocol is one of the things that the Deputy Mayor [for Policing and Crime] personally is most proud of, actually, that we have done at MOPAC.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you so much, Will, for all of your answers. I am going to just ask a general question, a last question from me. What additional specific steps can the Mayor and the MPS take to protect and prevent children and young people going missing in London? Is there anything that you think has not been mentioned by Will?

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): At Missing People, we work in partnership with every police force around the country. One of the ways that we do that is we offer some free-to-access services that the police can use to help them find and safeguard missing children. We offer good links into our family support team so that we can provide support to a family and make sure that they are able to work effectively with the police to find their missing child. We offer a text safe service so that, when a child is missing, a police officer will request it but we from Missing People will send them a text message saying, "We are here. We are independent. We can offer you confidential support", because often children are not ready to be back in touch with the family and not ready to reach out to the police but will reach out to a third-sector agency. Also, we can offer publicity appeals, both public appeals that you might have seen around the place in terms of billboards, social media and print media, and also, if that public appeal might make a child more vulnerable - and we know in many cases it does - we will offer instead a behind-the-scenes appeal through professionals who are the eyes and ears of their community, perhaps train station managers, community health services and so on.

The MPS are good users of those services, but it could be better. Currently around 10% of children who are missing in London get a text safe message. We would love that to be a higher percentage because that is a really easy way of offering that safeguarding response to the child at the moment when they are in crisis.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you. That is an excellent idea. Anyone else?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I have just a couple of points. One is not specifically for the MPS and MOPAC, but it does relate back to schools and is relatively resource-free. Clearly, it is something where we need to consider consent and information sharing, but I know that there are local authorities around the country where, when a child is reported missing, the school is automatically informed so that the school is aware and can then begin to explore in a safe space where the child already feels safe and comfortable some of the things that might be going on and offer support. Sometimes a child will go missing and nobody apart from the immediate family might know that that has happened. That is something that is worth considering.

There are two things that I might just like to mention really briefly. One is around - and I understand what a hugely complicated thing this is - just ensuring that the training for MPS officers is really comprehensive so that they understand. We have already had a little bit of a conversation about missing and what the definition of 'missing' is because a lot of the stuff in statutory guidance is open to interpretation. What does 'independent of the care of the child' actually mean? We know that different people interpret it in different ways. When does 72 hours start? It is about being really clear about what is in statutory guidance and really understanding when a child is missing. The national police lead would very much advocate that we never take a tick-box approach to assessing missing risk. We look always at the child and their specific circumstances and vulnerabilities. That includes being trauma-informed and really deeply understanding trauma, not having a 40-minute training session once every five years but really understanding what that looks like and, back to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, looking at culturally competent support. That is not just linguistic support because there are some cultures in which words like 'rape' and 'exploitation' do not exist. There are conceptual gaps there that need to be filled in and that is really important.

Finally, I will just mention again mental health. We know how many children are going missing due to their mental health. If we can begin to really sort out early access to mental health support, then that could also help to decrease the numbers.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): It would be remiss, and my colleagues would have much to say to me when I return to the office if I did not mention that listening to children, building on the points that have been made, is critical for all agencies. It is every professional's responsibility to be skilled up in listening, hearing and acting on some of the very sensitive things that our children tell us. There has to be better collaboration, partnership working and joint training endeavours, joint learning and education endeavours.

One practical example for us as practice leads would be sharing the analysis of the return-home interviews. If we really want to get to zero missing, we have to listen to the reasons why children go missing. The return-home interviews are a missed opportunity if we do not have some analytical ability to dissect what that says across London.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): Absolutely. Can I just add one final point, really? It is about utilising information from those children who are missing from education. For many years now, we have talked about trying to link that into the wider missing data. Some work around that and working with schools closely for those children who are regularly going missing could be really useful.

Hina Bokhari AM: Thank you. Chairman, Susannah has one more point but it is up to you, if you are --

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes, if it is brief. Thank you, Susannah.

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): I hope it is brief. It is just on the point of the zero missing children aspiration, which I would support because we all know, if we can prevent - as Will has been saying - children getting to a crisis point through better early intervention and better support, they are less likely to go missing.

I have just a couple of notes of caution. Sometimes going missing is the right response from a child because they are in danger in the situation they are in and going missing can actually make them safer. I am just wanting there to be space for those children to still have a response. There is always a danger with a target that it creates unintended consequences. If that is set as a target to the MPS, could that mean officers feel less likely to record a child as missing because they have this target to reduce the numbers? That could mean people slipping through the safeguarding net. I am not saying it is not a good idea, but there are just a couple of notes of caution. If that is something that the Mayor wants to take on, liaise with the MPS on how that could happen effectively because, as Kevin said, it is really important for the MPS to know when there is a child missing and at risk and be able to respond.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Commander, we are coming back to your section, if you want to quickly answer that. Panel, we all understand it is an aspiration. It should not be a realistic target. It is never going to be a realistic target.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Certainly, Chairman, and I will try not to delay the panel. I know you need to move quickly. I was just mindful that that last question was framed around what the police can do differently in this space. I wanted to perhaps

add a bit of reassurance, if I may, around some of the training that we have been doing. I will whistlestop it to save time.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes, because the next section is on the MPS's response to missing children.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Shall I hold fire, then?

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Thank you.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Thank you. If we do not cover that, I am very happy for it to come in at the end of this section, thank you. We will move on to the MPS's response to missing children. That is being taken by my colleague, Assembly Member Devenish.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you, Chairman. My first question is: in your experience, how do the people you work with, both professionals and families, view the MPS's response to missing children? What are the main challenges identified and where is there room for improvement, please?

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): What we need to recognise is that the MPS's challenge around responding to missing children is perhaps harder than any other force because of the scale and because of the number of partners that they have to liaise with. I am thinking in terms of local authorities. You know all of this information, but I just wanted to recognise that it is a really tough response.

One of the things that families tell us, which links to one of the questions around the HMICFRS child protection inspection, is that sometimes they feel that not much is done to find the missing person in those first 48 hours. Some of that is perhaps partly a communication issue from the MPS because cases will go into the missing persons unit after 48 hours, but when that is communicated to families it sounds as if nothing is happening before that, which we know is not the case. I would be really interested to know what has happened at the MPS since that inspection, which found that quite often there were very limited actions taking place unless someone was recorded as high risk in those first 48 hours. I know that inspection finding is a few years old, but it is something that comes up for families.

They also find that there can be frustrations in not being kept up to date with information. They are, obviously, wracked with worry and concern about a missing loved one and sometimes it can be really challenging to find out what is happening from the police. Again, recognising that police colleagues are really busy, sometimes that family member might have new information that they cannot pass on or just need an update and reassurance even if there is no update to give, but just to know that there is still a focus on finding that missing child.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): I endorse all of that. It would be remiss of me to sit here and not note that, for many people within London, the fact that parts of the MPS have issues around misogyny and racism will impact on a community's engagement with the police at all sorts of times. That said, even though professional networks are under immense strain, information sharing when children go missing usually works quite well. That of course is only within that professional network, but strategy meetings are called quite regularly. Police engagement sometimes is patchy within those meetings, but I have experienced lots of really

positive police action, really going above and beyond when children are regularly missing, but also reluctance to get involved. On some occasions when children perhaps are those children who regularly go missing, there can sometimes be a reluctance to get involved.

There are some basic problems, too, and nothing that anyone else would not have mentioned. The simple act of contacting the police officer that you are trying to work with due to shift patterns and sometimes lack of mobile phone numbers can be an issue. There is a reduced number of officers, and they are desperately overstretched and picking up things that perhaps 20 years ago police officers would not be expected to be working around. When Kevin and I met the other day, we were talking about some of the programmes out in the United States (US), where the police are being supported by services that work particularly around mental health and would go out and work with people who have mental health issues rather than the police going out. We spoke today about working across borders and the complex police structures. If somebody is a perpetrator of violence and also a victim of exploitation, which part of the police team in that Basic Command Unit (BCU) would we be wanting to work with?

Finally, there is the turnover of young, inexperienced officers. We have that same problem. Everybody is having that same problem of recruitment. It is a bit of a mixed bag for us, really, but there is a willingness to listen from senior officers, without a doubt.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you. Sarah?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I absolutely echo what my colleagues have just said. Speaking as Co-Chair of the ECRC, we did ask members whether they had seen an improvement and people did say that they had seen some improvement. They also said that they felt that there was room for more. However, everybody recognised that achieving consistency of practice across such a large and complex organisation is really difficult. I have a quote here from a missing worker from one London borough who said:

"I am finding that each area of the MPS works extremely differently. Some are very proactive. They consider exploitation risks. They liaise well with children's services. However, some areas do not really communicate with children's services at all and take little action to locate the missing child."

That just demonstrates that we talk about the MPS as though it is one thing. It is not. It is actually an enormous collection of teams that work sometimes in quite different and diverse ways.

In terms of some of the issues, parents talk about the difficulty of actually getting through and just the amount of time you might hang on a telephone line in order to get through to report a child missing and then some of the difficulties of reporting a child missing. We think that has improved. That is something that we have raised before and have worked with police colleagues on, and we think that has improved.

Clearly, we have already talked about the Howard League report about the criminalisation of children in care. We certainly do not want children in care to have any more contact with the police than any other child would have, but there have been cases where we believe a child has clearly met the definition of missing, but the police still would not accept the report. That comes from us in Catch22 and our services but other colleagues across London as well. A service manager of one borough told us, "We are still experiencing police not accepting frequently missing children as missing any longer." They might have accepted the first few but then, after a while, they are no longer accepting them as missing. They are regarding it as behaviour. They are regarding it then as an annoyance. "This is often when the police have not really looked at indicators of

exploitation.” Again, my colleague from this London borough was talking about the fact that she felt that the police who were dealing with that perhaps did not really understand the nature of exploitation and grooming. Whilst it may look like delinquent behaviour, this is a child who is being exploited. Then one London borough raised with us the issue of missing versus wanted:

“We understand that if a young person is considered wanted by the police, even for low-level issues such as a historic breach of a tag or something, then they will be considered as wanted foremost and closed, then, to the missing units because that would be a duplication of resources. The worry we have and what we wanted to raise or query is what impact this might have for the young person and the resources used to locate somebody who is clearly vulnerable, particularly if police have more pressing or priority wanted cases where other people might be deemed a risk to the public.”

It is that thing where we are not entirely sure how to respond to a child when they are being criminally exploited. It is the victim-perpetrator thing again. If we are actually regarding them more as a perpetrator and they are wanted, then they may be vulnerable but they are not receiving the missing response. If they are not reported missing, they do not get then any of the support from the services such as the ones that MOPAC commissions. That is an issue that has been raised by one particular borough.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you. Beverley?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): From a practice leader’s perspective, we must work harder to ensure that we are moving away from any approach that adultifies children. We see that often in the response to unaccompanied asylum seekers. There is a will at the strategic level to change that and we are really delighted to see it, but it is the person who answers the phone to that social worker who is calling to convene a strategy meeting where we need to target some resources and some of our time.

Also, I endorse what has been said, but the other area for me would be around how we treat and understand how very vulnerable children with special educational needs and social, emotional and mental health needs are to exploitation and to being coerced into going missing. They are on the spectrum of missing from, “I am going to go and see my family that you, social care, say I cannot”, to actual criminal exploitation. Our data tells us that children from the special education needs and disabilities part of the world are the most vulnerable but yet, in terms of the work that we do across the sector, including the police, education, social care and health, we cannot leave them out of the agenda. They need to be brought into this discussion. They are least equipped to help us understand some of the impact of them going missing because of their disabilities or special needs.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you. Back to you, Commander. In what circumstances, does the MPS refuse a report of a missing child and how often does this happen, please?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): This concept of refusing a report of a missing child I need to look into more closely, perhaps with partners offline, Assembly Member Devenish, in that I am not aware of that being a practice of ours. If we have a child reported to us as missing, we will report them as missing. We comply with the authorised professional practice of the National Police Chief’s Council. For instance, the term ‘an absence’, which used to be a term used a couple of years ago with missing, has now been abandoned. We do not treat a child who is simply absent from care as being anything other than a missing child.

There is always a balance in such things on a case-by-case basis. One of the benefits of today, of course, is to work and listen with partners who have a really good insight into these areas. Each individual case will be on its merits. When we have a repeatedly missing young person coming from, say, a care home setting where we know that it is testing the boundaries of that setting, turning up a couple of minutes after the hour in each instance, we need to be really careful with that and that we do not over-police in this space, especially as we recognise that so many of these young people are coming from communities that may feel quite disengaged from the MPS, maybe diverse communities or quite often, as we said before, the young Black community. We do not want their experience of the police to be, every time they turn up two minutes late from their curfew, they are being hunted by the police.

We really need to be cautious. Striking this balance between not adultifying and not over-policing the community, whilst at the same time making sure the community is safe is one of the wicked problems that our frontline inspectors and the resource-and-demand teams who manage those missing persons in the first instance really have to balance carefully. I am sure that many of the young people who do find themselves in difficult situations, some of whom, as Susannah rightly said, may be almost better off missing if they are in a dangerous setting. In the first instance, we need to take a really careful approach from a policing perspective that we come at that from a compassionate and supportive point of view, working with our partners, rather than us screaming around there with blue lights as if we are hunting them down and then arresting them.

May I take this opportunity, Assembly Member, to address some of the other points that were raised? I was making some notes because there are some really key points in there, if I may, Chairman, if you will indulge me.

Tony Devenish AM: Sure.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): I really positively endorse everything everyone has said, and I am super keen to work with colleagues, some of whom I am meeting for the first time today, some of whom I have worked with extensively already.

I met with the practice leaders, Beverley, just the other day en masse. We discussed the issue of wanted missing. I hope you will be pleased to hear that subsequently, since that, I had a public protection delivery board just last week with every single public protection lead for the city, all the detective superintendents, where we discussed exactly that point. We radiated the message loud and clear, as I said earlier, in relation to children and young people with insecure immigration status. The child first approach will always involve us putting the missing situation first if we believe that child is at risk. It is making sure that we have that strategy meeting and making sure we engage with partners to bring them back to a place of safety. Whether they then have insecure immigration status or whether they are wanted for a crime is always going to be secondary.

Within that, never say never. Never say always. If we have a child -- Sherry and I were talking the other day about a case she was sighted on where a young lady was simultaneously victim and suspect, simultaneously someone undoubtedly guilty of very serious crimes including stabbings and so on, whilst at the same time a victim of serious sexual violence herself. These are the challenges that we face in modern society. Within that instance, it might be a case that the crime is so serious that we may well have to expedite the wanted missing part of that because there is a victim to that who requires justice also. You can see just how vexed some of these issues are.

However, our fundamental position, as relayed to all of my peers and public protection leads just the other day following my meeting with the practice leaders, is that we will always put the child first approach in place and a

strategy meeting should be taking place. Even if that is after the event of an arrest, then we will try to make sure that we do exactly that.

Just moving across some of the other points, on the point about initial inquiries, we have the resource-and-demand teams that lead on this for us and that is all missing persons, low, medium and high. I should just reassure everyone, especially my partners on the panel and the wider community listening, that when we have a high-risk missing person, it is treated not quite as a critical incident perhaps but as a very serious incident in every measure. As an on-call Commander for London, as I was just recently for four days, I am notified personally of all the high-risk missing persons, young and old, who have been dealt with around the city and what activities we are taking to actually find them. Consider that as a chief officer oversight through the MPS chief inspector in our call room, working with the local BCU and the resource-and-demand team to make sure the risk assessment is right and make sure that necessary inquiries are underway.

I hope and believe that the strong work of my colleagues, many of whom are very busy, as rightly alluded to by Susannah, is one of the reasons why, thankfully, we have not had a fatality of a young missing person in quite some time and why we do see so many recovered in less than 48 hours. I am not by any means throwing up the bunting and suggesting everything is rosy because there is so much more we need to do and partners here have mentioned some of those points today, but the training that we are rolling out now across all aspects of missing persons, I hope, again, will give this panel some reassurance and likewise the [London] Assembly. We have devised the nation's first missing persons investigation course, a two-day course, which has been rolled out to all of our missing persons units. We are extending that to those resource-and-demand teams to assist with that first-line response to those immediate missing persons, even if they are low-risk.

We have our Operation Aegis capability, which rolls around all the BCUs of the city, trying to train the emergency response team officers, who will often be that first port of call for referrals of young missing persons into the service, to make sure that they understand that the voice of the child, which is a really key phraseology, which all of my partners on the panel will be aware of, is paramount in our thoughts. We have to be able to hear and understand the voice of the child in addition to understanding the prevailing contextual safeguarding issues and the other factors that I alluded to earlier that may potentially be in play. Why is that child, who seems to be of no means, coming home with a really fancy pair of trainers that may cost £150? Where are they getting that money? Is it a sign of grooming for sexual exploitation or grooming for criminal exploitation? Is it a sign that they are involved in street robbery? We need to consider all these facets.

We had the highest ever turnover of officers that we have ever known in all of my 25 years of service. It is my 25th anniversary today, actually. I have to say that I am massively impressed by the work that they do for us and the commitment that they show. The challenge for me as Commander for public protection is ensuring that training reaches right through to the Police Constables (PC) at the front line and police staff members in the MPS contact centre (MetCC) and reaches right through in a more invested way in those missing persons teams responsible for those high-risk missing persons inquiries.

As you will probably know - and certainly Beverley will know - we recently did some training with local authorities around return-home interviews, some joint training, and so, again, how we work with our partners to understand the value of debriefing these young people when they return so that even after the event we can identify what has driven them diagnostically to go missing and then try to prevent that in the future going forward. All of that is before we get to the point of the missing persons co-ordinators, one for each BCU, who link in, as I alluded to earlier, with the multiagency partners that we have in this space to try to look at that hardcore cohort that you alluded to, Chairman, who go missing all too frequently to see if we can bring down the overall instances and try to prevent them from coming to harm.

I should emphasise perhaps just some of the points we went through earlier as well in terms of the scale and complexity. I am really grateful for Susannah emphasising that on our behalf. We talked about grooming for sexual exploitation and Assembly Member Garratt asked before about how good we are at identifying adults who may be preying on children in that space. National Crime Agency (NCA) colleagues estimate in a recent report that over 750,000 adults in this country have some sort of sexual interest in children. That is the scale of the challenge that we face, as daunting as that is. Much of that will be online and will be noncontact, but that is a real concern for me both as a professional and as a parent and for all of us, I am sure. How we get ahead of that in terms of our online investigations to identify that surreptitious grooming in cyberspace and the online space that we may not see and may not be evident to us or to our partners is a real challenge for us as well. How we invest in digital investigation in the online space and online violence against women and girls is another new front, really, in our bid to try to tackle all forms of vulnerability, exploitation and missing in particular.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you, Commander. Without repeating yourself, in what ways has the MPS improved its response to children reported missing over the past five years, please?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): I fear I may be guilty of repeating myself there and so I shall try to bullet-point the things I have said rather than repeat them.

[Operation] Philomena was a huge protocol to be implemented. As colleagues have said, it has been largely successful. It is pleasing to hear that it has been reflected by my peers here and likewise in society. There is the training that I have just alluded to, the multitiered training that we have invested in, the investment in missing persons units in each BCU.

There have been one or two pilots that we are really interested in. I visited Bethnal Green Police Station the other day where they were talking me through a merger that they have effected of their exploitation team and their missing persons team so that they can better tease out those risks of things like county lines grooming. There are some interesting pilots in place. There are some interesting technological developments that we are looking at such as Good Smartphone Activated Medics (GoodSAM), which is this ability, a bit like TechSafe, to do almost a video interview with young people using new technology. They may be missing and are not quite ready to come back to us yet but are at least willing to show us where they are because of course there are risks in text message contact only. There are lots being done, and lots will continue to be done in that space.

Going back to that point I made right at the beginning of the session today, I hope you will forgive me, there is the work that we will be doing next with evidence and insight at MOPAC - and we stand shoulder to shoulder on this, MOPAC, police and partners alike - on how we better understand the scale, the diagnostics, the drivers, improve our datasets and then take those big steps forward that we need. That is the only way we will really get traction against this. Then it would be lovely to reach that noble aspiration of zero missing children, but we must be careful we do not over-police our way to that.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you. Moving on to MOPAC and Will, is the Mayor satisfied with the progress made by the MPS and what else would the Mayor like to see done?

Will Balakrishnan (Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime): I cannot speak entirely for the Mayor, but what I can say is that we always want the MPS to carry on improving. The Deputy Mayor [for Policing and Crime] chairs the specific oversight that I mentioned earlier for

child protection, and we are not disbanding that. Despite the 2021 report saying that the MPS had made a significant improvement, we are not disbanding that. Similarly, the police effectiveness, efficiency, and legitimacy (PEEL) report recently published almost makes a number of recommendations.

Again, we stand shoulder to shoulder in trying to improve these things, but it will never be good enough, Assembly Member Devenish. That is the true answer. Kevin's personal ambitions in this area, I know, are incredibly high, too. It will never be enough.

Tony Devenish AM: OK. If you have anything else, you can write to us. I am always interested in what the Mayor and MOPAC are doing. Back to the Commander, what action is the MPS taking to ensure investigative response matches the identified level of risk and history of the child?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): It will come down to the grading and that is something that is regulated, in some ways outside our control. For instance, if we want to do advanced telecommunications enquiries around a high-risk missing person, we need to be able to justify to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's [Office] that we are doing something, which is genuinely to tackle a life at risk. We are bound by legislation to make sure that we do not overuse disproportionately some powers in seeking to track and trace, if I can use that phrase, young people who might be missing. That is using quite advanced techniques that we might only use for quite serious criminality and only using those sparingly in situations where we genuinely believe a life is at risk. That is evidence there, I hope, of how we are both willingly but also by statute compelled to be proportionate in our approach to missing people in keeping with the risk and I hope that is helpful. Is that where you are going with that?

Tony Devenish AM: Absolutely, thank you. What checks and controls has the MPS put in place to ensure that it treats all reports of missing children fairly?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): We have a dedicated inspection team, which sits under the same leadership - myself as oversight - as Operation Aegis so our training capability in this space walks hand in glove with our inspection capability. Every sort of eight or nine months, we do a dedicated inspection of missing persons to look at both the categorisation and then the commensurate action that follows every missing person. Clearly, with the volumes that we have - 70 a day - it will not do them all during that period, but it is a dip sample across BCUs. Then we will bring what is almost 100 cases back to the London Child Protection Improvement Oversight Panel (LCPIOP) - so the Deputy Mayor [for Policing and Crime] and the Assistant Commissioner for Frontline Policing - to hear those findings. Interestingly, the next dip report on 'mis per' is finalised now as we speak. It is presenting to me at the next Public Protection Delivery Board, and it will be presenting at the next iteration of the LCPIOP. I know Will's [Balakrishnan] teams and I are working together to perhaps reformat that slightly so we have a level of governance and inspection internally, which then reports externally to MOPAC as well and comes round on a regular cadence to give us, hopefully, that reassurance.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you. Is the MPS now using trigger plans to effectively inform investigations?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Trigger plans with care homes and so on?

Tony Devenish AM: Yes.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service):

Yes, absolutely, as part of the Philomena Protocol, sir.

Tony Devenish AM: OK, thank you, and then moving back to the rest of the panel to give the Commander a rest. Do you agree with HMICFRS that the MPS may be missing “early opportunities to quickly find the child and make sure they are safe”?

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): Yes, as I mentioned, this is something that families raise with us; that they sometimes feel they do not know what is happening, particularly in those first 48 hours. I know [Commander] Kevin [Southworth] has mentioned the new resource-and-demand teams, I think they are called, which are meant to be looking at that. It will be interesting to see the impact of those in terms of how investigations perhaps feel less ‘tickboxy’ in those first 48 hours, as HMICFRS found out and it will be interesting to see if there is a way of looking at that. We will certainly be keeping an eye on that for families as well.

One point that I wanted to raise is that obviously data and statistics can tell you lots of different stories. There is NCA data, which has data from every force, fewer missing children found by the police in London than the national average. I do not know the reasons behind that, but it is certainly something to keep an eye on. Why is that? Why are more either being found by other professionals, parents and carers or coming back by themselves? That may be a good thing because we have all talked about the criminalisation of children, not wanting too much police contact, but that is definitely something to understand further.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): The first thing is I wanted to qualify that in the five years that I have been Chief Executive at Safer London we have never had the MPS refuse a missing report. I do not know about other people’s experience, but we have always been able to lodge them. I think that on occasions, endorsing everything that Susannah [Drury] has just said, some of the early opportunities are missed. Sometimes, that can be for a variety of reasons, including families’ reluctance to report immediately because of that perhaps perception of what the police involvement may lead to. Sometimes, it is about the lack of police response and other times the response is really positive. It is a bit of a mixed bag but, again, I would like to remind you that we work with children and young people at that real complex end so I cannot speak about the child that has gone missing for the very first time, after not coming home from school. They may get a very different response. We are working with children that are usually well known to the police or other statutory services.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you and Sarah and Beverley, only if you have anything to add?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): There is a huge opportunity for us to really work closer with the MPS around this intergenerational community engagement piece. There are particular communities and if our children from the Tottenham Academy had a voice, they would say, “What happens in this house stays in this house”, the mantra across many families. There is a real desperate need from the practice leaders’ perspective for us to continue the work that we are doing to engage those communities. They are not hard to reach, and they are not hard to identify. There are just some stubborn intergenerational beliefs and thinking that cascade down to their children so they will not share information and we have to do something about that.

The second thing for me is really to do with picking up the points around who finds children. If we triangulate some of the data that we have of the incidences of local authorities going to the family courts to get recovery orders, we are seeing an increasing reliance on that, particularly for looked after children. Again, this is an opportunity for us to throw that into the data and intelligence discussions to see why that is happening.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you and, Commander, the final word to you on this section. How is the MPS addressing this?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): I alluded earlier to an enterprise approach to child safeguarding and Will [Balakrishnan] and I have already begun our conversations about this. For me, one of the challenges is to make sure that we look at our Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) processes and that we look at the recommendations coming out of the tragic deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes about the potential creation of Multi Agency Child Protection Units. We need to consider other LSCP executive partners and with other charities we need to look at how we look at the child in the round for all of its risks. We need to look at Operation Encompass in schools in terms of flagging up children who have witnessed domestic abuse at home. We need to look at every faculty of this, right the way across to, as my colleagues from Catch22 alluded to before, children who are potentially at risk of self-harm. As we saw with the tragic case of Molly Russell this week in the media, dragged down that road by algorithms online, the risks go on and on in every space. The only pinch point for that for me is our Child Abuse Investigation Team referrals desk in a bolstered MASH - by definition multi agency - with access to the right levels of provision from all of our partners so that we can get ahead of the risks and prioritise the precious resources against those that need them most.

Unmesh Desai AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you. Again, my question is to you, Commander. How do you work with British Transport Police (BTP) in response to missing children?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): To be fair, Assembly Member Desai, I will have to come back to you in terms of our relationship with BTP, other than to say that obviously they are a very close partner of ours geographically and we have the opportunity to reach into their officers and staff to help us try to locate people who might be missing on the transport network. I spoke with the Chief Constable [of BTP], Lucy D'Orsi, just the other day actually and we talked about using their Oyster Card facilities more regularly than we currently do. In terms of the detailed granularity of what our teams do to link in at a practitioner level, I would have to write to you separately, I am afraid.

Unmesh Desai AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you, yes.

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): I was going to say that, as I say, I have been collecting feedback from people, and somebody said how well trigger plans are being used in their area, they thought that had really improved practice, and I just wanted to make a point about language. What language we use is really important when we are talking about missing children. One of the difficulties might be the police language nationally and this is not just an MPS issue. We talk about "mis pers", that is very common language and that would be somebody who is 12 or somebody who is 72. They are a "mis per". I wonder if it is unhelpful to use that language and I wonder if, when we are talking about a child, it helps to use different language so that we really identify the risks around that child. Then also we are continuing to talk about "the child" again and what we can do for "the child" to keep themselves safe. I wanted to make the point - the MPS, I know, is really active - to also look at places and spaces within the community. It is important that the risks outside of the home are addressed in addition to trying to focus on what can happen for that individual.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes, thank you and that has come out loud and clear. The problem with changing language is that other people do not keep up with it. There are so many different terminologies for different things that we can so easily say the wrong thing these days, especially as politicians. It is very difficult sometimes to keep up.

Right, we have one section left, which is returning home and preventing future incidents, and that is going to be started by my colleague, Dr Sahota.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Thank you, Chairman. This is a section about returning home and preventing future incidents and my first question is to the MPS. How effective are police prevention interviews in preventing future missing children incidents and what evidence is there to support what you are about to say to me?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): It is a very good question, Assembly Member, in that I do not think we have empirical evidence to say how successful it has been. As you rightly say, that is something that our Missing Person Co-ordinators lead on, and it complements the return-home interview afterwards. Part of the work I think we will be doing with Evidence and Insight going forward and internally looking at our mechanisms is to gather exactly that data and how we can prove it is actually working. Apologies, I do not have that to hand.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: If you have anything at all, please do share it with the Committee. If you have not and if you are able, could you catch up with what your findings are to the Assembly?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Pleased to. Yes, of course.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Thank you, and the next question is also to you. In what ways has the MPS improved the way it works with partner organisations to help prevent repeat incidents of children going missing?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): Again, without repeating myself too much, the heart of that lies in things like the Philomena Protocol where we work with the care homes to ensure that, where children are reported to us, it is because they are genuinely at risk, genuinely missing and not just testing those boundaries. Increasing that awareness of partners and working on the joint responsibility agreements to make sure they understand what we are asking of them is a really key tenet within that, whilst simultaneously educating our own officers about all the risks that might underlie a missing person's episode. I am mindful of the time of the panel and I have said some of that before so I do not want to repeat it too much, but that would be the mainstay of that.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Yes, and one of your partner organisations, I know, must be Social Services, but do you also link up with the National Health Service (NHS), for example, for general practitioner (GP) practices?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): We do an awful lot of work with the NHS on a whole range of issues, and I am really grateful for their support in everything from Sexual Assault Referral Centres to stalking. It is not something where I necessarily think of them first and foremost as a partner in this space. However, they certainly are a valid partner. I think more so it is a case of --

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: It may be where you can get some information? GPs may have information about family dynamics, those sort of things, which may be useful to you?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service):

Indeed and, in fairness, if that is an unexplored avenue for us, I would have to look into that separately. Certainly, in terms of partner agencies, it is our non-governmental organisations who support us, charities like colleagues here and support agencies who we do try to actively engage with. In fact, Susannah [Drury] was just talking to me before we sat in session today about the slightly lower than expected uptake of the TechSafe so it is exactly that sort of dynamic we need to build on.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: OK, great, thank you. The next question is to all of you; the rest of the panel may want to make a contribution. Are you confident that high quality return-home interviews are being offered to every child after missing incidents in London and in your opinion is there room for improvement anywhere?

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): Yes, I can comment on that if you like. I am actually quite old and was involved in the campaign for the introduction of return-home interviews. For many years, I worked as a Director for Safeguarding at The Children's Society, which delivers many of them across the country, including here in London or they certainly did when I was there. We are at risk of seeing that the undertaking of a return-home interview in itself is going to somehow create safety. I think it might have been Beverley [Hendricks] earlier who talked about utilising what comes out of those return-home interviews and at the moment they are certainly not happening in a timely fashion. The idea was always that they were going to happen very quickly and that they should lead to a support plan off the other side. Very often, that is not the case for a variety of reasons; essentially the return-home interview in itself is not adequate to somehow prevent children from going missing again. It should be part of a much bigger picture and I am not sure that the resources are in the system that are allowing that to happen in every incident.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Thank you.

Susannah Drury (Director of Policy and Development, Missing People): I support everything that Sherry says. They are only as useful as what happens afterwards, whether that is follow-on support specifically for a returned child or referrals into other services that the child is then able to access. I want to make the case for return-home interviews because they are one of the few universal services that do not have a threshold. Every child who has been missing should be offered one on every incident that they have been missing and they are such an important opportunity to find out what is going on for that child. Having worked with return-home interview workers, they can be a really incredible way of finding out that there is something seriously wrong in that child's life. We know that money is getting tighter and tighter and tighter, but I would really make the case that it is so important that they continue for any funding that is available from MOPAC and from local authorities to make sure that happens because they are really critical.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): It is the local authorities' responsibility and the guidance tells us that the local authority should offer a return-home interview within the timescales you have heard talked about. Where we feel we have successes is largely clustered around children who are looked after below the age of 15; after the age of 15, that becomes more challenging to engage them in the conversation. As practice leads, we are piloting an app that allows children to do their own return-home interviews and we will see what comes out of that, but that came from the analysis of the return-home interviews so I do support your point wholeheartedly. I do not think this is something where the sector is ready to see us introduce something else. We must allow the engagement with trusted professionals, who have the confidence of our children to go through this process,

but it should not stop there. We should do the intervention and it should inform plans going forward, but also the analysis across the piece should be fed out to the MPS. That is what we would like to see.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Therefore, the local authority do the return-home interviews. Then do you share it with the MPS and other partner organisations?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): We will share it with our local BCU and, particularly if there is a repeat missing episode, we will pull the findings into that strategy meeting and discussion.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: OK, thank you. Does the MPS do return-home interviews also?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): No, they are the responsibility of the local authorities.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: One of the questions here, which is in my briefing, is: has the MPS completed the delivery of the return-home interview training? The answer to the question must be that you do not see it as your responsibility?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): No, it is -- do you want to?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): It is clear that the return-home interview function sits with Children's Social Care under the Directors of Children's Services.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: OK.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): How the Director stipulates how we do that across the partnership is part of the complexity. In my neighbouring authority, [the London Borough of] Islington, they have a different system to what I have in [the London Borough of] Haringey. Therefore, each BCU will be stretched across the political drivers from each local authority and that is part of the issues that we are trying to resolve.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Right. Is there any specific training?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): There is.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Is there any specific training for return-home interviews and is there some sort of attempt to have uniformity rather so that we get it all right, that we use best practice?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): It is a really interesting point about training. Just to be clear about language - and I do not want to keep going on about language - I think this is where some of the confusion lies. The police conduct what is sometimes called a prevention interview, what used to be called a safe and well check. I think locally it tends to be called a found debrief in some of your services immediately when a child is found, and it

might be at the point where they actually are recovering the child. Confusingly, that is sometimes referred to, both inside and outside of the police, as a return-home interview. Technically, that is not though.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: OK.

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): That is one thing and then a return-home interview is the responsibility of the local authority. Now, they might have a dedicated team. If the child is open to social care, it may be completed by a social worker or it may be a commissioned service and that is where Catch22 is sometimes commissioned to do that. In statutory guidance, it does state that every child, who has been reported missing, should have access to an independent return-home interview. London is so complex and there are so many boroughs that I cannot really say what the practice is overwhelmingly here. In practice, in some areas of the country sometimes it is only certain cohorts who are actually offered that. It might be children in care, or it might be children who are first time missing or it might be children on their third missing incident. There is not uniformity of practice and I would absolutely endorse what Susannah [Drury] says. It is the one threshold-free intervention when there is no other concern around that child at all, the family is not open to social care, they are really succeeding at school and yet there is clearly something going wrong in that child's life. That can be an absolutely key moment. In connection with exploitation, by no means all children who go missing are being exploited, but almost every exploited child will go missing at some stage and so it is absolutely key that they receive a good quality RHI.

In answer to your question about training, different organisations have different training programmes. I know that there are a couple of national bodies, who are looking at developing training, but there is not a nationally-recognised package or even a London-wide package of training, partly because of the huge range of people who deliver them.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: It seems that not only is there confusion about the training, but there is also confusion about the terminology.

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): Absolutely, yes.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: What does "return-home interview" really mean?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): Well, I think most people understand what "return-home interview" means. It is sometimes the language around the immediate police intervention that I think can be difficult.

Just one more point about language. You asked about the quality of interviews and I would like to point out how important it is to avoid victim-blaming language. Sorry, I have such a sensitive antenna for this. I even note that in the briefing that we were given we were asked to identify "the link between going missing and criminal exploitation", but "the challenges in protecting and safeguarding children from sexual exploitation". Why are we using the language of "protecting and safeguarding" when it is sexual exploitation and yet we are talking about making links with gangs when it is criminal exploitation? All these children need safeguarding and protecting and sometimes just subconsciously we use the language that blames victims. A child does not get to choose the ways in which they are exploited - that is literally diametrically antithetical to exploitation - but if a child has been criminally exploited, there is still an assumption that they might be making lifestyle choices, which is not valid.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: The other thing, Sarah, is of course you all say that it is very, very important that we should have these RHIs. Therefore, I am assuming that they are giving you valuable information about why it has happened and how to prevent it. Is that the case?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): Oh, tremendously rich information. Sometimes, the first one will not, the second one will not, the third one will not, and I would really advocate for the continuity of a worker working with a child. Sometimes then on the sixth return-home interview, they make a massive disclosure about exploitation that may have been going on for some time. They might talk about people/places and they might give really important police intelligence, but crucially that is the opportunity then at which the child can be safeguarded. It might look like some return-home interviews are not doing very much, but what they are doing is building relationship, building trust. Then our one concern is sometimes what then does happen to the information? If a child is not open to Children's Social Care, who is going to act on that? Who has access to that? I would like to echo what Sherry [Peck] said; that the initial idea was that that information would then be gathered and acted upon and it is crucial that that second piece happens.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Just finally, do the children get a named social worker to look after them or is it just the emergency social worker who ends up handling the case?

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): They don't necessarily have a social worker at all. If you have a return-home interview, that provision will be made, but if there is nothing that flags up concerns for a child assessment then they may not ever have a social worker pick that up.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: OK.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): That is why we support Susannah's [Drury] view around the return-home interviews. Most local authorities and particularly the ones across London do have systems at every level of the threshold decision-making place, universal services right up into the acuity of tier 4. Using my own borough as an example, with the guidance from people like Research in Practice we have trained up in a model that we have devised return-home interviews for family support workers and some of the primary school family support/teaching staff. That is a local decision that we took. Where we share the BCU, the challenge for the MPS is we have an arrangement that we gather information from them to inform those interviews, but my counterparts may not because they have a different system in place.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Great.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): That is really the challenge.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Yes.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): The consistency for me is not just about workforce, continuity of the same staff and the way we have joint training. It is around the pathways, processes and the governance arrangements that sit under this very vulnerable area that is left to very local bespoke planning and I think that does impact the MPS.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Has anyone done a survey or assessment of what the services are across London? Is that information available?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): Earlier, you heard the Commander talk about the London Innovation and Improvement Alliance. They are about to produce a report in November [2022], addressing this very issue but using it through the lens of looking at the Multiagency Child Exploitation arrangements and how the MACE operates. From that piece of work, I think we are going to get some very helpful suggestions.

Dr Onkar Sahota AM: Great. Thank you.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): I have two Assembly Members, Assembly Member Bokhari to start with.

Hina Bokhari AM: It is what Sherry [Peck] just said about the fact that she was concerned that things were not being done in a timely way. I would like to pick up on that point that you made because there is concern that the police prevention interviews are not always done face-to-face and are on the phone. Is that a problem? Then the other concern that I have picked up on in our notes and the brief is that the return-home interviews are not always passed down back to the police. I would like some clarification from Sherry and from yourself, [Commander] Kevin [Southworth], as well on those particular issues.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): That is the point I wanted to make; that although the local authority has the responsibility, on occasions they commission services. I can say my personal experience is that when services have been outsourced that just adds an additional layer to the timeline of when somebody knows a child has gone missing and then you have to tell somebody in the third sector. Of course, these interviews can only take place once you have made contact with the child and they consent to engage with you and that is very often some of the issue. Then add to that the complexities that Beverley [Hendricks] just described to Members of the panel very eloquently so I would reinforce that.

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): The point that Sherry just made is a really good one about that being child-led; we need the compliance to actually do that. If a child prefers to be spoken to on the phone, that may be something that we have to do. Obviously, that would not be in the immediate recovery of that child because we need to physically see them and make sure they are safe. Certainly, in terms of any preventative meeting, we will be directed by partly the child themselves as to how they want to be communicated with, if at all.

On the other point that you made about the return-home interview information making its way back into the police system, there should in every instance be a MASH referral for every missing child in the city. That, as I alluded to before, is the point at which we should have a single point of entry for this, a single point of consideration where multi agency partners put back in the readout that they got from the return-home interview, from the enquiries themselves, from repeat instances and that child is weighed up in the round. If a strategy meeting needs to take place, then it can and that is where the problem solving, the grit of it, should be done and I am hoping that is the case in every instance. Obviously, we have 29 MASHs across the city across 12 BCUs and 32 local authorities so there will be a disparate landscape there in some ways in terms of how different agencies work, but largely that is the plan. It goes into the MASH, a referral into there where all of that should be weighed up and if there is relevant information from a return-home interview, for instance, that should be weighed up in the round there by a multi-agency strategy meeting.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Thank you. Assembly Member Best?

Emma Best AM: As someone who has been lucky enough to go on a missing persons interview training and lived in that sort of world, I found - as, Beverley, probably you know - that with such an important tool it often becomes, as it does with statutory duties, also something that is so weighed down by "At what point you must do something" and "What form you must fill out". Linking that in as well with the very circular nature of the interview process and the recurring missing children - and, Sarah [Parker], you were spot on with it - it is that sixth interview. It is very easy perhaps in this room where we are talking about one singular issue to say, "Keep on going", "Keep on with it". How in practice, Beverley, do you make sure that that happens and that instead of it being very process-driven - filling out the form - make sure that it is useful every time, making sure that it stays clear that that breakthrough could happen on the sixth time? Also, its circular nature may be the non-engagement as well. That is also something where it comes to the point where whoever may be working with this family or this child expects that they will not get a reply. When you have a multitude of other cases on your lap and you know this child is not going to engage, how do you also break that? Whilst it is very easy to say in this meeting to keep on doing it and get to that sixth interview, how in reality do you think it is best that local authorities can do that?

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): Lots of local authorities have moved away from the service delivery model around return-home interviews where we were expecting the social worker to do it as part of their day job. They have invested and have put the financial investment into having teams of people who are available to act, to do the return-home interviews and to maintain their relationship with the young people that we think are most at risk of going missing. That is through a wide range, that independent, trusted professional, working through people like teachers and the schools. I am happy to send a separate note on how it works, not just from Haringey but other local authorities. Having social workers based in some of those schools is incredible, a place where children feel comfortable and safe in going to talk because the skill of the social worker is present, but it does not carry the same weight of feeling that they have betrayed family, friends and other people. The independence is the important thing for the local authority and that is why there is a tendency to outsource it to try to achieve that, but you have heard some of the complexities of that. What we do is have then regular reporting so that we have the data that tells us about the impact and as part of the quality assurance measures across the local authorities, we want to hear from children, sharing their experience of the process and what can change. In our panels, many local authorities have children who sit in what is called the Aspire Panels or the Children's Councils or the Parliaments. This is a topic that is embedded within the agendas of the things they report back as representatives, children's experience of the process.

Emma Best AM: That point about the social workers within schools comes back to what Assembly Member Bokhari said earlier about integrating schools and often family support workers is such a good option as well because social workers still bring that stigma. A level beyond that/below that in schools often does really help with those two points.

The second question I had was around preventing future incidents and often we are thinking about this real-time with the children who are in their teenage years. This is happening now, but that point actually happens way before in primary school years and it comes back to that point that Sarah [Parker] made about these children often not having had that love of a supporting adult and seeking that somewhere else in their teenage years. That trust with the police is a real opportunity to have primary school visits and build that up for a positive nature. With the VRU I have argued consistently they need to engage at primary school level as well. All these things are happening before. How can we engage better with the primary school children? Let us be honest, teachers and everyone who comes into contact with them knows that this is going to be the

problem ten years down the line. Instead of waiting until it is the problem, how can we intervene at the point that we should be to prevent future incidents?

Commander Kevin Southworth (Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service): As a parent of two children in the city in inner London boroughs - one is at primary school, one is at secondary school - I always take an interest in what they are taught in personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) [education]. I say this now as a parent rather than as a professional police officer so forgive me, but it strikes me there are some real opportunities there to educate young people about some of the perils of being online. I was particularly impressed with what my teenage daughter was told the other day about the hazards of some issues; education around things like the age of consent and what that means in sexual relationships. There are so many different facets that could usefully be built into that aspect of a child's syllabus, I think both at primary and secondary school, that could equip them to understand this really complex world that they are growing into. I say that, again, not with my policeman's hat on but with my dad's hat on. Yes, there is good stuff being done there. It perhaps could be emboldened to help these young children and young people understand the perils that might be out there and avoid them in the first place and that is across all strata of society. I do not know if my peers would agree, but that is just one observation.

Sherry Peck (Chief Executive, Safer London): We did some work last year in some of the junior schools in some of the London boroughs, utilising an intervention that has been rolled out across Scotland. This was like a bystander intervention that supports young people to, in effect, recognise things and recognise when they and their peers may need support and that is something that is worth investigating. It has had a massive impact in Scotland. We do quite a lot of our work in schools and find schools very supportive and I would absolutely endorse that teachers know what is coming upstream. Very often, we are working with a child that is, say, 14 and sadly now we are also working with children of the age of six, seven, eight because they are also involved. There is something about the social workers in school - investment that is absolutely needed - and there is something about supporting teachers, who are always very, very trusted. However, some of the biggest resources that we see at Safer London that we could utilise a million times over if we had the money is family support. For children, the biggest protective factor especially from contextual risks - not perhaps safeguarding risk in the family but the contextual risks - is families if they can be supported. Alongside the school and alongside social workers in school, for me that would be an ideal model.

Beverley Hendricks (Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey): I could not agree more, Chairman. There is a lot of work that happens within the local authority and across the partnership that really focuses on the engagement with the children who are in school. Often, the children we have most concerns about are those who are not engaged in their education, present or remotely, and there is something about prevention being better than cure. If we are going to really tackle prevention, that must start pre-birth with parents and our parenting programmes across the local authorities really need to not be shy about putting these types of risk prevention conversations in the parenting programmes. Children need that. If parents get it and if the parenting is strengthened and does not collapse when they come to adolescence, then we stand a better chance of reaching a target of zero missing and other zero targets around the risk landscape.

The only other comment I would make is for areas where we believe that some of the experiences that our children tell us have a common denominator. That is that the majority of them come from very impoverished and poor backgrounds and there is a wider societal piece, a political piece, around addressing the impact of child poverty.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): OK.

Sarah Parker (Research and Development Officer, Catch22, and Co-Chair of the English Coalition for Runaway Children): Absolutely, I would endorse all of that and, yes, parents and communities are our hugest, untapped resource. Just to say also the importance of activity and making sure that there is lots of opportunity for children and young people and obviously we have talked about diversion, but trying to engage children very early in meaningful activities.

Susan Hall AM (Chairman): Yes, we could talk all day because I agree with that and I know the panel does, but we have to limit this.

This is such an important subject and I do not think it is spoken about enough. It does my heart good to see that we have such good multi agency working. As an ex-leader of a council, you really get things resolved or certainly assisted when all the different moving parts come together so that is really good. Is it all right if we write to you all? There are quite a few questions still left, certainly in my mind, that I would like answers for that we can put into some sort of report going forward. Certainly, Sarah [Parker], you were quoting quite a bit there that we would find quite helpful because it gives a broader base of people's views. If we may do that, thank you very much.

I would like to formally then thank our guests for attending the meeting, especially [Commander] Kevin [Southworth] whose anniversary it is today, 25 years in the MPS. Congratulations to you and thank you for participating in the discussion.