

# MDA No.: 1485

## Title: Missing Children in London

### 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 At the Police and Crime Committee meetings on 29 September 2022 and 22 February 2023 the Committee resolved that:

*Authority be delegated to the Chairman, in consultation with party Group Lead Members, to agree any output arising from the discussion.*

- 1.2 Following consultation with party Group Lead Members, the Chairman agreed the Committee's report on missing children in London, as attached at **Appendix 1**.

### 2. Decision

- 3.1 **That the Chairman agrees the Committee's report on missing children in London, as attached at Appendix 1.**

#### Assembly Member

I confirm that I do not have any disclosable pecuniary interests in the proposed decision and take the decision in compliance with the Code of Conduct for elected Members of the Authority.

The above request has my approval.

**Signature:**



**Printed Name:**

**Susan Hall AM, Chairman of the Police and Crime Committee**

**Date:**

**25 April 2023**

### **3. Decision by an Assembly Member under Delegated Authority**

#### **Background and proposed next steps:**

- 3.1 The terms of reference for this investigation were agreed by the Chairman, in consultation with relevant party Lead Group Members and Deputy Chairs, under the standing authority granted to Chairs of Committees and Sub-Committees. Officers confirm that the letter and its recommendations fall within these terms of reference.
- 3.2 The exercise of delegated authority approving the report will be formally noted at the Police and Crime Committee's next appropriate meeting.

#### **Confirmation that appropriate delegated authority exists for this decision:**

Signature (Committee Services): L. Harvey

Printed Name: Lauren Harvey, Senior Committee Officer

Date: 15/03/2023

Telephone Number: 07729 625571

#### **Financial Implications: NOT REQUIRED**

Note: Finance comments and signature are required only where there are financial implications arising or the potential for financial implications.

Signature (Finance):


Printed Name:

Date:

Telephone Number:

#### **Legal Implications:**

The Chairman of the Police and Crime Committee has the power to make the decision set out in this report.

Signature (Legal): 

Printed Name: Emma Strain, Monitoring Officer

Date: 15/03/2023

Telephone Number: 020 7983 6550

### **Supporting Detail / List of Consultees:**

- Unmesh Desai AM
- Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM
- Caroline Russell AM

## **4. Public Access to Information**

- 4.1 Information in this form (Part 1) is subject to the FoIA, or the EIR and will be made available on the GLA Website, usually within one working day of approval.
- 4.2 If immediate publication risks compromising the implementation of the decision (for example, to complete a procurement process), it can be deferred until a specific date. Deferral periods should be kept to the shortest length strictly necessary.
- 4.3 **Note:** this form (Part 1) will either be published within one working day after it has been approved or on the defer date.

### **Part 1 - Deferral:**

Is the publication of Part 1 of this approval to be deferred? NO

If yes, until what date:

### **Part 2 – Sensitive Information:**

Only the facts or advice that would be exempt from disclosure under FoIA or EIR should be included in the separate Part 2 form, together with the legal rationale for non-publication.

Is there a part 2 form? NO

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## **Lead Officer / Author**

Signature: J Roker

Printed Name: Janette Roker

Job Title: Senior Policy Adviser

Date: 15/03/2023

Telephone Number: 07511 213748

**Countersigned by Executive Director:**

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Helen Ewen', written in a cursive style.

Printed Name: Helen Ewen, Executive Director of Assembly Secretariat

Date: 28/3/23

Telephone Number: 07729 108986

# Missing children in London

Police and Crime Committee

**LONDONASSEMBLY**

## Police and Crime Committee



Susan Hall AM  
(Chairman)  
Conservatives



Unmesh Desai AM  
(Deputy Chair)  
Labour



Marina Ahmad AM  
Labour



Tony Devenish AM  
Conservatives



Neil Garratt AM  
Conservatives



Sem Moema AM  
Labour



Caroline Pidgeon MBE  
AM  
Liberal Democrats



Keith Prince AM  
Conservatives



Caroline Russell AM  
Greens



Dr Onkar Sahota AM  
Labour

The London Assembly Police and Crime Committee is responsible for examining the work of the Mayor and his Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), to make sure that he is delivering on his promises to Londoners. It also investigates other issues relating to policing and crime in the capital, and routinely publishes the findings and recommendations from its investigations.

## Contact us

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## Foreword



**Susan Hall AM**

**Chairman of the Police and Crime Committee**

Thousands of children go missing in London each year, and many go missing more than once. However, the true scale of the problem is unknown as many incidents of missing children – perhaps even the majority – are not reported to the police.

The London Assembly Police and Crime Committee launched an investigation to better understand the reasons why children go missing, and how services can better prevent children from going missing and find and protect those that do.

Throughout this investigation, the Committee heard troubling details on the level of hardship facing many children in London. It is those children with experience of poverty, conflict in the home, trauma and the care system that are also the most at risk of going missing.

When a child does go missing, they are exposed to the most appalling harms, including criminal and sexual exploitation. While over 90 per cent of missing child incidents are resolved within two days in London, the Committee heard evidence of how children can experience harm in missing incidents that last only a few hours.

Every incident of a missing child requires a full safeguarding response, but the Committee is concerned that this is not currently being delivered. We heard how families and carers face frustrating delays when reporting missing children and sometimes receive inaccurate information from police call handlers. We also heard how assessments and responses to missing children are inconsistent across the Met's Basic Command Units and that police respond in a disjointed way when a child goes missing across police service boundaries.

We were also concerned to hear that when a child returns home after a missing incident, opportunities to understand what happened and to prevent future missing incidents are often missed.

Throughout the investigation, we have noted issues with the quality and availability of data. The lack of London-wide data that can tell us why children go missing is particularly concerning, including what drives the overrepresentation of Black children in missing child

figures. If we do not fully understand the drivers, services cannot target effective interventions to prevent children from going missing.

The Committee is grateful to all those that contributed evidence to the investigation both through attending Committee meetings and sending written submissions. I am especially thankful for the five young people from the GLA Peer Outreach Team who shared their expertise and personal stories.

This report makes several recommendations, directed largely at the Mayor, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and the Metropolitan Police Service. These are constructive recommendations for how we can better protect children in London at risk of going missing and I hope they are taken forward positively. Throughout this report, I have been reminded how the issue of missing children is all our responsibility. I hope this report offers a timely reminder to us all about the need to protect children from harm.

When it comes to missing children, we should all have the aspiration of 'vision zero'. The more we work towards this goal, the fewer children will go missing.

## Executive summary

In 2022-23, 9,370 children went missing in London.<sup>1</sup> Many of these children went missing more than once, resulting in 29,455 separate missing incidents being recorded by the Metropolitan Police Service (the Met).<sup>2</sup> The figure is probably much higher, as many incidents of missing children are not reported to the police.

In September 2022, the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee launched an investigation into missing children in London. The aims of the investigation were to better understand the reasons children go missing, and how the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and the Met are working to prevent and respond to incidents of children going missing.

To inform this investigation, the Committee held a public meeting with guests from the Met, MOPAC, the London Borough of Haringey and three voluntary organisations. The Committee also held a private meeting with five Peer Outreach Workers between the ages of 17 and 25.<sup>3</sup> Peer Outreach Workers comprise a group of young Londoners, commissioned by the Mayor to help shape policy, strategy and services. The Committee also received 18 written responses to its call for evidence.<sup>4</sup> The Committee is grateful to all those who gave their time and expertise to this investigation.

The findings of the Committee's investigation are set out in detail in this report, and include the following as a summary:

- The collection of data on the underlying reasons children go missing is poor. There is also little understanding of what drives the overrepresentation of Black children in missing-child figures.
- The reasons children go missing are varied and complex, and efforts to prevent children from going missing must therefore be far-reaching. A safe home environment is the biggest protective factor to stop a child going missing, but safeguarding is everyone's business and requires a city-wide response.
- The Committee is concerned that the provision of the Met's Safer Schools Officers is inconsistent; and that they do not always work effectively enough with partners to safeguard children at risk.
- Families face frustrating delays and inaccurate information when reporting missing incidents to the Met. Low trust and confidence in the police may make parents and

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<sup>1</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See the data here.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See the data here.](#)

<sup>3</sup> Meeting information and transcript for the public meeting [can be found here](#). No transcript of the private meeting has been published to protect the privacy of young people. Four of the five participants were under 21.

<sup>4</sup> All written responses are published [here](#).

carers reluctant to report children missing, and encourage them to search for their children themselves.

- The Met's response to missing children is inconsistent across its Basic Command Units (BCUs), including communication with parents; attendance at multi-agency meetings; and how it determines when a child does and does not require an urgent police response. The Committee is concerned that not every child is receiving an effective and proportionate police response when they go missing.
- Children who are missing and have been exploited into criminal activity should be seen first and foremost as victims, and everything should be done to avoid the criminalisation of a child. Evidence received by the Committee suggests this is not always happening in practice.
- Children in care are at heightened risk of going missing, and many will go missing frequently. Improvements have been made to how the Met and social care providers respond to missing incidents involving care-experienced children. However, further improvements are needed to ensure all missing incidents are being logged, recorded and responded to effectively.
- Children often go missing across BCUs or police service boundaries, especially children in care who are placed outside their home borough. Responses to these children can become fractious between different missing-persons' teams, hindering effective responses to highly vulnerable children.
- Not all children who return home after a missing episode receive an effective response from services. Information gathered from the return-home process is not effectively used to inform long-term safeguarding plans.

The Committee makes 17 recommendations, which are set out below.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

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

### Recommendation 2

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

### **Recommendation 3**

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

### **Recommendation 4**

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

### **Recommendation 5**

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

### **Recommendation 6**

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

### **Recommendation 7**

The Met should attend all multi-agency strategy meetings for children who are missing or at risk of going missing, or who have a history of missing incidents.

### **Recommendation 8**

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

### **Recommendation 9**

By December 2023, the Met should review how it assesses risk in missing child cases and how different thresholds trigger different police responses. This review should be conducted with London boroughs, care providers and relevant voluntary organisations, with the aim of producing a jointly agreed risk assessment that is made available to all relevant services.

### **Recommendation 10**

The Met should write to all London boroughs, children's care services and relevant voluntary organisations to clarify its policies that inform safeguarding and operational responses to children who are both missing and wanted.

### **Recommendation 11**

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

### **Recommendation 12**

For children in care who are placed within London, but outside their home area, the Met should establish clear processes between the home BCU and the destination BCU, or neighbouring police service, to facilitate effective information exchange and joint attendance at strategy meetings; and to ensure that, in the event of any future missing incident, there is an effective joint response.

### **Recommendation 13**

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

### **Recommendation 14**

By December 2023, the Met should conduct a review of Police Prevention Interviews delivered in 2022-23, to include:

- the number of children who received an interview
- whether they were conducted face-to-face or over the phone
- whether they were conducted with the young person, or the parent or guardian
- whether a child willingly engaged
- whether a child made a significant disclosure
- the outcome of the interview.

The Met should share its findings with the Police and Crime Committee.

### **Recommendation 15**

By December 2023, the Met should establish standardised principles for effective delivery of Police Prevention Interviews. This should include:

- specialist, trained officers in plain clothes to conduct each interview
- a child who goes missing on multiple occasions to receive an interview with the same officer, wherever possible
- interviews conducted alongside a child's social worker/support worker where appropriate
- improved sharing of information with borough safeguarding teams and social care partners.

### **Recommendation 16**

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

### **Recommendation 17**

To fulfil commitments in the Mayor's Police and Crime Plan, MOPAC should fund projects designed to provide longer-term support for children who have returned from a missing incident.

## Chapter one: missing children in London

### The scale of missing children in London

During this investigation, whilst reviewing responses given as part of Mayor's Questions in June 2022 and January 2023<sup>5</sup>, the Committee raised concerns with the Met on the quality of the data it had provided. This was due to the sum of figures for 'individuals' not matching the totals given, and differences between the datasets as well as data published on the National Crime Agency (NCA) website.<sup>6</sup> The Met confirmed that the data previously provided in response to Mayor's Questions were incorrect and provided updated data to the Committee on 5 April 2023.<sup>7</sup> This report has relied on this refreshed data. The Committee has asked the Met when responses to Mayor's Questions and data provided to the NCA will be corrected for accuracy. Additionally, the Committee notes concern that while the total number of individual children going missing per year is clear, recording of ethnicity in incidents of children going missing multiple times has led to unclear data for individuals by demographic group.

In 2022-23, 9,370 children went missing in London.<sup>8</sup> Many of these children went missing more than once, resulting in 29,455 separate missing incidents being recorded by the Met. In written evidence provided to the Committee, Missing People said the true number of missing children is probably much higher, as up to two in three missing incidents are not reported to the police.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> London Assembly, [Question – missing children, 25 January 2023](#); London Assembly, [Question – missing children](#), 22 June 2023.

<sup>6</sup> NCA, [Statistical Tables for UK Missing Persons Unit Data Report 2020-21](#), August 2022

<sup>7</sup> This data is taken from Merlin, the Met's database for recording the details of children and young people aged 17 and under. The Met has informed the Committee that: "The MERLIN system allows officers to enter multiple ethnicities against the same person. Doing so would result in the same individual being counted separately within different ethnicity categories. However, that person would still only be counted as one individual in the total overall. It is also possible for an individual to go missing more than once and have a different ethnicity entered on each occasion. Hence, totals for each ethnicity group being more than the overall total." Because of these discrepancies, this report largely focuses on incidents data.

<sup>8</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See the data here.](#)

<sup>9</sup> Missing People, [written evidence](#), February 2023



Source: data provided to the Committee by the Met.

Commander Kevin Southworth, Met Police, told the Committee that over 90 per cent of missing child cases in London are now resolved within 48 hours.<sup>10</sup> In written evidence sent to the Committee in January 2023, the Met said it currently had 104 child missing cases recorded on its Merlin system that were open beyond seven days and subject to investigation.<sup>11</sup> It said 65 of these cases had remained open for between seven days and three months.<sup>12</sup>

While longer missing incidents are highly concerning, Sarah Parker, Catch22, said children can face significant harm even in incidents that are resolved very quickly.<sup>13</sup> For example, she told the Committee that children who are missing for only a very short period may still “have witnessed some really horrific things and experienced some terrible things”. In written evidence, The Children’s Society said:

*“Exploiters continue to change the way in which they groom and exploit young people and understand that young people missing for an extended amount of time may result in an investigation. As such, they are more wary of the length of time young people are missing and [it] may only be a few hours where they are absent from school/home/care, yet they are still at significant risk and harm.”<sup>14</sup>*

**The Children’s Society**

<sup>10</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.4

<sup>11</sup> Police and Crime Committee, [Response from Met to London Assembly meeting](#), January 2023

<sup>12</sup> The Met explained: “There are a number of further cases which are historic and which present in an alternative context; such as homicides where the body has not been located and parental child abductions where a child has been taken outside of the UK. The figure quoted therefore gives a far more realistic count of cases of missing children in London remaining open beyond seven days.”

<sup>13</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.6

<sup>14</sup> The Children’s Society, [written evidence](#), February 2023



On 9 June 2022, the London Assembly agreed a motion that the Mayor and MOPAC should implement a vision zero strategy for missing children.<sup>15</sup> In response to the motion, the Mayor said: “We should have aspirations of zero children going missing, just like we have an aspiration for zero homicides as well and I am really keen to work with partners to make sure we can fulfil that aspiration”.<sup>16</sup>

### Why children in London go missing

The Committee was told that the children most at risk of going missing are those who face significant instability or challenges in their lives, such as poverty, conflict in the home or experience of the care system.

The majority of respondents to the written call for evidence said challenges at home were a reason for a child to go missing.<sup>17</sup> Susannah Drury, Missing People, told the Committee that the most common reason for a child to go missing is that they have experienced conflict, abuse or neglect at home.

Several respondents to the written call for evidence cited a desire to make money as a reason for a child to go missing.<sup>18</sup> Beverley Hendricks, London Borough of Haringey, said that children from impoverished and poor backgrounds are most at risk of going missing.<sup>19</sup> Sarah Parker added that the cost-of-living crisis made poor children vulnerable to missing incidents and exploitation, as they were more likely to want to earn money to support their family.<sup>20</sup>

Almost all respondents to the written call for evidence discussed the overrepresentation of care experienced children in missing figures, and several cited a breakdown of a care placement as a reason for a child to go missing.<sup>21</sup>

Several respondents to the written call for evidence cited poor mental health as a main reason for a child to missing.<sup>22</sup> Sarah Parker, Catch 22, said early childhood trauma and poor mental health put children at greater risk of going missing.<sup>23</sup>

The Committee was also told some missing incidents may simply be a result of a child breaking a curfew to see friends or attend a party.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> London Assembly, [Implement a vision zero strategy for London’s missing children](#), 9 June 2022

<sup>16</sup> MQT, [Missing Children](#), 6 July 2022

<sup>17</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>18</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>19</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>20</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>21</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>22</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>23</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>24</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

All children who go missing are highly vulnerable to exploitation. For example, missing children can be exploited by gangs and organised crime groups to carry drugs and weapons from one area to another as part of drug-supply chains; steal cars or alcohol; cultivate cannabis; and carry out forced begging.<sup>25</sup> Many respondents to the Committee's call for evidence also highlighted the threat of criminal exploitation for children at risk of going missing. Missing People said that nearly one in ten children who completed its Return Home Interviews had been a victim of criminal exploitation.<sup>26</sup>

In written evidence, the London Safeguarding Children Partnership said young people don't always understand the risks they face when they go missing. A Peer Outreach Worker reflected on their own experience of going missing:

*"You meet some really crazy, really lovely but sometimes quite dangerous people when out. And it's just sometimes being so vulnerable and just sitting in a café somewhere and just talking to a stranger and then finding out these things. And then they offer you something and you're like, 'Yes, that's great. I don't have anywhere to stay tonight,' or, 'I don't have money to buy food. If you can offer that to me, that's great.' But what they really want is something in exchange for those services, right? You make those little connections, whether they be really good or really harmful for you."*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

They also explained that children face peer pressure from others who have become victims of exploitation.

*"I think peer pressure is definitely very real, especially when you are transitioning between secondary [school] and college or wherever you may be in life. You will come across people who might be influenced in drugs and gangs and all sorts and county lines and everything. And I think that's part of, as well, why a lot of children go missing, potentially with criminal exploitation."*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

Several respondents to the Committee's call for evidence discussed the risks of child sexual exploitation amongst missing children.<sup>27</sup> In written evidence, Barnardo's said, "Girls in particular are being sexually exploited for money, including getting money in exchange for

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<sup>25</sup> Barnardo's, [written evidence](#), February 2023. See also this [briefing](#) for the APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, reporting on children who go missing and are criminally exploited by gangs.

<sup>26</sup> Missing People, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>27</sup> The Committee uses [the Met's definition of child sexual exploitation](#): "Child sexual exploitation involves situations, contexts or relationships in which a person under 18 is given something, such as food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts or money in return for performing sexual activities or having sexual activities performed on them. It can also involve violence, coercion and intimidation, with threats of physical harm or humiliation."

sex acts and for sharing self-generated indecent imagery”. It said children who are sexually exploited can “often can go missing multiple times a day”.<sup>28</sup>

There is no central data source on the reasons children in London go missing. In written evidence, Missing People said it was difficult for the Met to fully capture the reasons children go missing, as children themselves may be reluctant to disclose those reasons to the police in Police Prevention Interviews.<sup>29</sup> It said the Met’s statistics therefore show an “under-representation of different risks and harms that children are experiencing”.<sup>30</sup> Missing People said London boroughs were likely to have fuller records on the reasons children go missing, as they are often able to collect more data through Return Home Interviews.<sup>31</sup>

Other respondents also said that data collection could be improved in this area. Commander Kevin Southworth told the Committee that the Met is working with MOPAC’s Evidence and Insight Unit to jointly produce a “problem profile for missing children” which will: “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”.<sup>32</sup>

The Committee welcomes this work, but suggests there is a need for a comprehensive new approach to data collection across agencies to improve understanding of the driving factors behind missing-child incidents; and to help services adapt, in the long term, towards delivering effective preventive interventions.

**Recommendation 1: MOPAC should work with the Met and London boroughs to agree a standardised process for reporting data from each missing-child report, and from Police Prevention Interviews and Return Home Interviews conducted in London, with the aim of publishing a ‘missing children in London’ dataset by the end of 2023, and annually thereafter. The dataset will improve understanding of the causes of children going missing and help services to better allocate resources towards prevention.**

## Children most at risk of going missing

Older children have accounted for more missing incidents than younger children in London in recent years. Children aged 17 have consistently accounted for the most missing

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<sup>28</sup> Barnardo’s, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>29</sup> A Police Prevention Interview (formerly known as the Safe and Well Check) is conducted by the Met within 24 hours of a child’s return from a missing incident. It aims to establish whether the child has come to harm whilst missing, and what can be done to prevent future missing incidents.

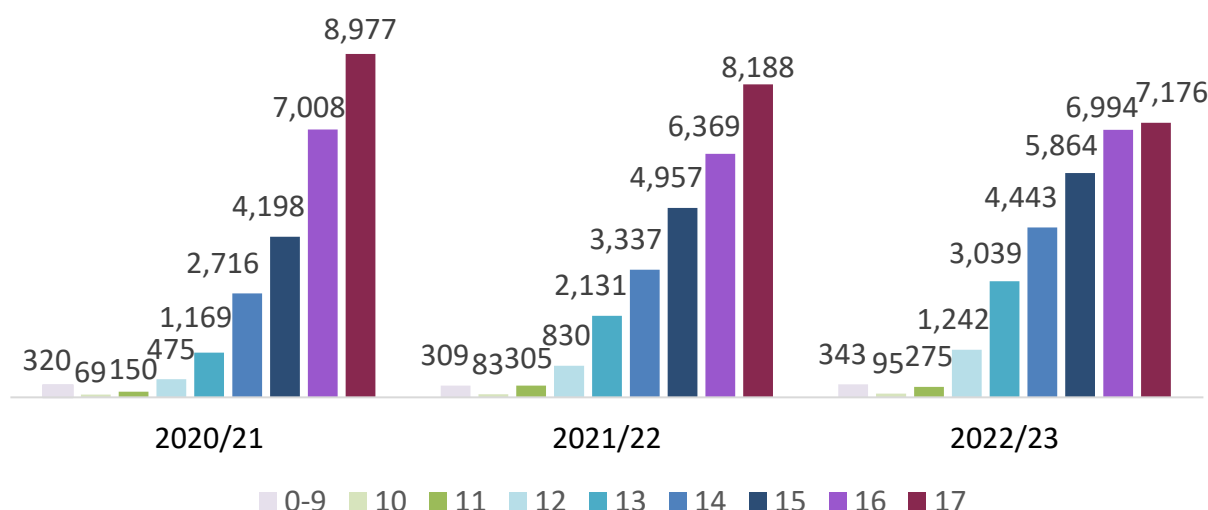
<sup>30</sup> Missing People, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>31</sup> A Return Home Interview is conducted by an agency independent of the Met within 72 hours of a child’s return. It aims to uncover information to protect the child from the risk of going missing again. It is the statutory responsibility of the local authority to ensure each child receives a Return Home Interview, but they are often delivered by a voluntary sector partner.

<sup>32</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.1

incidents, followed by those aged 16 and 15 respectively.<sup>33</sup> In 2022-23, 68 per cent of missing child incidents related to children 15-17; and only 2.4 per cent related to children aged 11 and under.<sup>34</sup> However, Sarah Parker told the Committee that “the average age of children going missing in our services is just slowly decreasing” and that younger children are being increasingly affected by exploitation.<sup>35</sup>

Missing children in London, incidents by year and age



Source: data provided to the Committee by the Met<sup>36</sup>

There were slightly more incidents of boys going missing in London compared to girls. In 2022-23, boys accounted for 14,655 of missing child incidents, and girls accounted for 14,581 incidents. There were also 200 incidents related to transgender children.<sup>37</sup>

Black children are overrepresented amongst children who go missing in London compared to the proportion of Black children in the population. In 2022-23 there were more missing incidents related to Black children (12,618, 43 per cent of the total) than White children (10,891, 37 per cent of the total), despite Black children making up only 17 per cent of the child population of London.<sup>38, 39</sup> In every financial year since 2016-17, Black children have consistently accounted for the highest number of missing incidents compared to other ethnic groups.<sup>40</sup>

The Committee heard evidence to suggest there may be several contributing factors to the overrepresentation of Black children in missing cases. Susannah Drury said the higher

<sup>33</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See here.](#)

<sup>34</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See here.](#)

<sup>35</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>36</sup> Graph includes only three years of data for display purposes. Please see full data here.

<sup>37</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See here.](#)

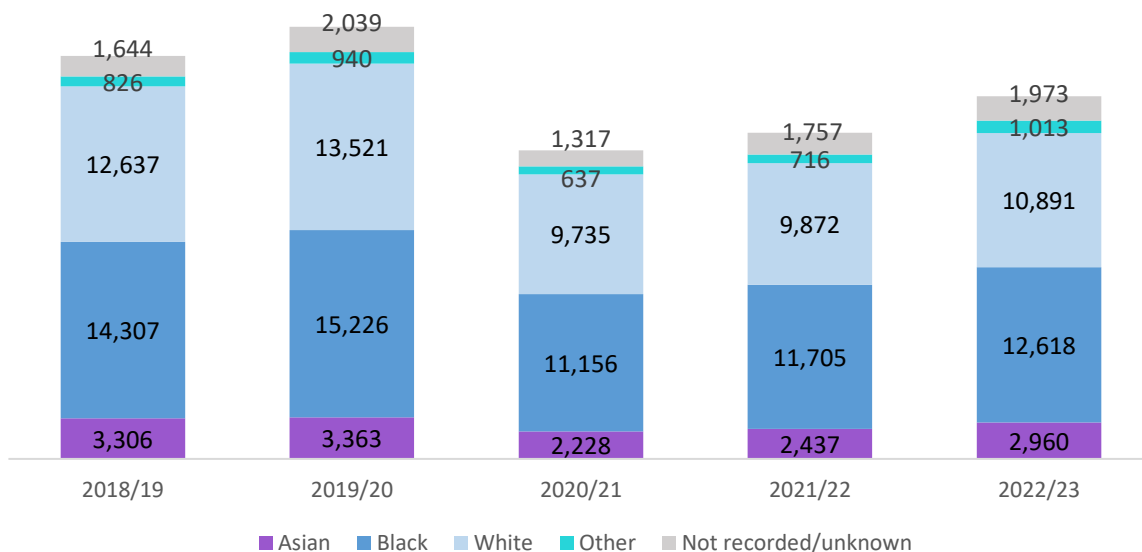
<sup>38</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See here.](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Data combining multiple variables, England and Wales: Census 2021](#), Ethnic group by age and sex

<sup>40</sup> Data provided by the Met to the Committee. [See here.](#)

proportion of school exclusions amongst Black children may be placing them at greater risk of exploitation.<sup>41</sup> A Peer Outreach Worker said that Black children are disproportionately exposed to poverty, and are therefore more likely to be exposed to risks that could cause them to go missing.

Missing children in London, incidents by year and ethnicity



Source: data provided to the Committee by the Met.

The Committee was also concerned to hear from a Peer Outreach Worker that Black children are less likely to reach out for support as they don't believe they will be taken seriously by services. Another Peer Outreach Worker said that the adultification of Black children, especially girls, means that some Black children are not always seen to be in need of protection in the way that non-Black children are.

*“I think that the real big issue when it comes to race and racism is that a lot of people in the world, in life, don't see Black people as human beings. So, because they don't see Black people as human beings, it's OK to do all of these things and get away with it. And then the system helps them by not persecuting and, when we do ask for help, not taking us seriously because, to them, our voice doesn't matter.”*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

**Recommendation 2: By December 2023, MOPAC should conduct research to understand the overrepresentation of Black children in reported missing-children figures. The review should inform targeted interventions to reduce the number of Black children going missing.**

<sup>41</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

## Chapter two: preventing children from going missing

### City-wide safeguarding

On 9 June 2022, the London Assembly agreed a motion that the Mayor and MOPAC should implement a vision-zero strategy for missing children.<sup>42</sup> In response to the motion, the Mayor said: “We should have aspirations of zero children going missing, just like we have an aspiration for zero homicides as well and I am really keen to work with partners to make sure we can fulfil that aspiration”.<sup>43</sup>

The Committee heard different views on the value of a vision zero strategy for missing children. Sherry Peck, Safer London, told the Committee: “I endorse the fact that we should all be aspiring that no child goes missing [...] although I realise we have a very long road to travel”.<sup>44</sup> Susannah Drury said that while she supported the aspiration for zero missing children, it was also important to recognise that: “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”. She warned that any target or ambition towards zero missing children needs to take this into account.<sup>45</sup>

The varied reasons children go missing means efforts to prevent missing children must be wide-ranging. Sherry Peck said the “biggest protective factor” from risks of a child going missing was in the family.<sup>46</sup> She said there was a need for greater investment in services to support families as a preventative measure. Beverley Hendricks told the Committee that prevention for missing children: “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”.<sup>47</sup>

The Committee was told by a Peer Outreach Worker: “Going missing is usually a result of frustration, hopelessness, desperation, fear, anger, a feeling of being left out or not being worthy, or a mixture of these thoughts felt by the child”.

The Committee was also told by a Peer Outreach Worker that children often go missing because they do not have a support system around them to help them when they are struggling.

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<sup>42</sup> London Assembly, [Missing children motion](#), 9 June 2022

<sup>43</sup> MQT, [Missing Children](#), 6 July 2022

<sup>44</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.24

<sup>45</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.26

<sup>46</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>47</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

*"Young people and children do go missing because they do not have the sufficient support systems around them [...] In cases where children go missing, obviously the structures are failing to support the young person and that speaks to the fact that young people and children are not being listened to as much as they should."*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

Another Peer Outreach Worker said it was important to consider all aspects of a child's life when preventing children from going missing; and that a child needed peace and security, both within and outside the home, to manage the pressures they may be facing.

Will Balakrishnan, Sarah Parker and Sherry Peck told the Committee that services should take a contextual safeguarding approach to children at risk of going missing.<sup>48</sup> Developed by Professor Carlene Firmin, contextual safeguarding aims to support practitioners to identify the full range of social influences, risks and pressures children face in their daily lives. The approach advocates for professionals to target a child's social conditions in the round; and use effective partnerships between children's services, young people, parents, wider communities and agencies to reduce the level of harm children are exposed to.<sup>49</sup>

In written evidence, Catch22, the Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership and the London Safeguarding Children Partnership supported the need for services to take a contextual safeguarding approach.<sup>50</sup> A Peer Outreach Worker said a contextual safeguarding approach should be embedded across all sectors that children have contact with.

*"Safeguarding is everyone's business and, the vulnerable people that exist in our community, we have a right and a power to look out for them and be there for them. So I think a measure that could be in place across health, education and all the different sectors that a young person has access to should be having more than one approach and a contextual safeguarding one would be fantastic to understand a young person's life holistically."*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

A Peer Outreach Worker suggested there should be more places in London for children to go when they are in trouble, where they can receive support or just spend time in a safe space.

*"When you go missing, that's a massive thing, so how do we create safe havens where children feel that they can be safe and supported in a way which isn't directly like, 'What are your problems? Why did you go missing? Where did you go?', all of these interrogations, but rather, 'Would you like to have a meal? Here are some toiletries. Here is some self-care. Let us watch a movie,' or something like that, somewhere where young people can go without it having to be so hostile."*

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<sup>48</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>49</sup> NSPCC Learning, [Contextual safeguarding: what is it and why does it matter?](#), 21 October 2019

<sup>50</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

### Peer Outreach Worker

Citizens UK previously ran a CitySafe scheme, which encouraged organisations and businesses to become safe havens for anyone who felt at risk, threatened or in danger. Many organisations registered as safe havens under the scheme, including the former City Hall. Several London boroughs now run their own safe haven schemes. Rebecca Palmer, Senior Children and Young People Participation Officer at the GLA, said that the current City Hall should be made into a safe haven to provide a place of safety for children who feel at risk.

**Recommendation 3: The Mayor should explore the opportunity to declare City Hall a safe haven for all children who feel at risk, threatened or in danger.**

### Prevention in schools

The Committee received evidence that stressed the importance of schools in preventing missing children. Beverley Hendricks said London boroughs understand the critical importance of schools to protect vulnerable children, and Sarah Parker told the Committee that prevention and early intervention work in schools should be prioritised.<sup>51</sup> Ten respondents to the call for evidence discussed the importance of schools in preventing children from going missing.

The Committee heard examples of excellent support offered by teachers and school staff to children at risk of going missing. A Peer Outreach Worker told the Committee that it was important for schools to focus not just on education but also on providing a supportive and safe environment for young people.

One Peer Outreach Worker said they had truanted a lot from school, but were well supported by teachers when they returned to school and were able to complete their education. Another Peer Outreach Worker said “fantastic practitioners” in schools can help protect children from harm.

*“I’m sure we can all remember a teacher in school whom we really loved, who really did their job very well and who changed our lives for today just in the way how they saw and the way how they looked after us in school. We need more people like that in these positions because they really are like gold dust. They can really prevent thousands of children going missing.”*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

They also said each school should have a good pastoral team staffed by people children feel comfortable approaching and that it was important for schools to employ Black teachers, and teachers from the area, so children and young people can have confidence that teachers understand the challenges they are facing.

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<sup>51</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022



*“Why are there barely any Black teachers in school or teachers of different ethnicities? I do not understand why when we live in one of the most diverse places ever, London. I feel that really will help simply because it’s somebody children can relate to.”*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

The Committee heard differing views on the roles of the Met’s Safer Schools Officers in safeguarding children at risk of going missing. Safer Schools Officers are police officers located in secondary schools. Each school in London is offered a Safer Schools Officer whose role is agreed with the local borough and school leadership.

At the end of September 2022, there were 373 Safer Schools Officers across the Met, primarily supporting secondary schools.<sup>52</sup> The Runnymede Trust, a race equality think tank, has recommended that all police services should withdraw Safer Schools Officers as they are failing to support a safer school environment, particularly for Black and ethnic minority children.<sup>53</sup> MOPAC has said that 91 per cent of Londoners support the use of Safer School Officers, but recognises that support falls to 87 per cent amongst Black respondents.<sup>54</sup>

There were mixed views among Peer Outreach Workers in relation to Safer Schools Officers, although one Peer Outreach Worker said that they had had an excellent relationship with the officer in their school:

*“I had a police officer in my secondary school [...] He not only had a safeguarding role but he was a person. He was a human. He was someone you could talk to and, if you didn’t have anyone at the home or have anyone in the community, I knew that I could go to him. So I know that that’s very positive and I’m very grateful and lucky to have had that and I know a lot of young people don’t.”*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

However, another Peer Outreach Worker told the Committee that the officer in their school was shared across three schools and was rarely seen.

The Committee similarly received mixed views among respondents to the written call for evidence. The London Safeguarding Children Partnership, the Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership and the Hammersmith and Fulham Local Safeguarding Children Partnership all said that Safer Schools Officers needed to work more closely with other partners, including multi-agency missing-children forums and youth offending services.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> MQT, [Safer Schools Officers](#), 16 November 2022

<sup>53</sup> Runnymede Trust, [Over-policed and under-protected: the road to Safer Schools](#), January 2023

<sup>54</sup> MOPAC, [Mayor’s Action Plan for Improving Transparency, Accountability and Trust in Policing update](#), June 2022

<sup>55</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

The Committee is concerned that the provision of Safer Schools Officers is inconsistent across London and they do not always work effectively with partners to safeguard children at risk of going missing. In February 2023, the Committee discussed Safer Schools Officers with the Met and MOPAC.<sup>56</sup> The Committee was told that the Met has prepared a report reviewing the role of Safer Schools Officers, and MOPAC is currently considering the recommendations. As part of this ongoing review, MOPAC should ensure that Safer Schools Officers are equipped to respond to children at risk of going missing.

**Recommendation 4: As part of its review into Safer Schools Officers, MOPAC should assess whether all Safer Schools Officers are fully trained to recognise risk factors for missing children; and are able to deliver an effective safeguarding response to at-risk children in partnership with children’s services.**

### Trafficked and unaccompanied children

In 2018, Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT) UK (a children’s rights organisation working to protect children from trafficking and transnational exploitation) and Missing People reported that trafficked and unaccompanied<sup>57</sup> children are 30 times more likely to go missing than other children their age. It also reported that trafficked and unaccompanied children went missing from care on average seven times.<sup>58</sup>

In January 2023, the Home Office confirmed that over 4,600 unaccompanied children have been accommodated in hotels since July 2021. During that time there had been 440 missing episodes, and 200 children were still recorded as missing.<sup>59</sup> According to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, the Home Office has used six hotels to accommodate unaccompanied asylum-seeking children since July 2021, including one in London.<sup>60</sup>

Sarah Parker told the Committee that “it is completely inappropriate that any unaccompanied child should be placed in hotel accommodation” and that doing so made them more vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>61</sup> Both Barnardo’s and The Children’s Society said, in written evidence, that not enough is being done to protect unaccompanied asylum-seeker children from exploitation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 22 February 2023

<sup>57</sup> Child trafficking is defined in the United Nations Palermo Protocol as the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt” of a child for the purpose of exploitation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines an unaccompanied child as a “child who has been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so” (see: ECPAT, [definitions](#)).

<sup>58</sup> ECPAT, [Still in Harm’s way](#), December 2018, p.5

<sup>59</sup> Hansard – Lord’s debate, [Children seeking asylum: safeguarding](#), 23 January 2023

<sup>60</sup> Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, [An inspection of the use of hotels for housing unaccompanied asylum-seeking children – March-May 2022](#), October 2022

<sup>61</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>62</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

The Committee also heard that services faced specific challenges in preventing trafficked and unaccompanied children from going missing. Susannah Drury said traffickers tell children not to trust professionals when they arrive, making it harder for services to build rapport with children. She praised “independent child-trafficking guardians”, currently delivered by Barnardo’s in London, that “help build up that trust with a young person as soon as they arrive because we know often they go missing really quickly”. She also said it was important to make sure that young people get information in their own language when they arrive, “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”.<sup>63</sup>

Sherry Peck told the Committee that trafficked and unaccompanied children are fearful about what will happen to their immigration status at the point of transitioning into adulthood. She said this could be a trigger for young people to go missing or be exploited into criminal activity.<sup>64</sup>

**Recommendation 5: The Mayor, government and relevant partners should work to minimise the use of hotels to accommodate unaccompanied children seeking asylum, in a way that protects them from exploitation.**

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<sup>63</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>64</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

## Chapter three: responding to children going missing

### Reporting a child missing

A joint written response from Specialist Safeguarding Team Sutton and Jigsaw4u (voluntary-sector provider of Return Home Interviews in Sutton) said that “parents and foster carers have shared experiencing long wait times when they are calling to report their child missing”.<sup>65</sup> Sarah Parker told the Committee that some parents experience long waits on telephone lines to the Met when trying to report a child missing, but added that there had been recent improvements.<sup>66</sup>

In written evidence, Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board also said there were long waits through 101 to report a child missing. It said that some parents faced language and translation difficulties when trying to report a child missing, and the Met needed to make missing-child reports easier for families in which English is not the first language.<sup>67</sup>

The Committee also heard how low trust and confidence in the Met led to some parents and carers deciding not to report their child missing. Sherry Peck told the Committee: “For many people within London, the fact that parts of the Met have issues around misogyny and racism will impact on a community’s engagement with the police at all sorts of times”.<sup>68</sup> In written evidence, Catch22 said: “Anecdotally, some communities lack confidence in the police and are more likely to involve relatives and friends in the search for a missing child, especially if they have concerns that their child will get into trouble”.<sup>69</sup>

A Peer Outreach Worker said that low levels of trust in the Met amongst certain communities made some people less likely to report a missing child.

*“If there are certain communities that do not feel trusted or do not feel trust associated with the police, does that make it more or less likely that – if a child goes missing, how quickly are the parents likely to report them to the police, which then has a direct impact on the likelihood that the child is able to be found.”*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

The Committee was also told by a Peer Outreach Worker that there was a “recurring cycle” between some people “not trusting the police, and police not showing that they can be trusted”. They suggested that the Met could demonstrate to people that it can be trusted by

<sup>65</sup> London Borough of Sutton and Jigsaw4u, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>66</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.28

<sup>67</sup> Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>68</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.27

<sup>69</sup> Catch22, [written evidence](#), February 2023

responding in an appropriate way to each child that goes missing and ensuring “that every case has that equal reaction and is dealt with dignity and care and respect”.

In written evidence, Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board said parents often do not feel listened to when reporting a child missing:

*“Parents report that they do not feel listened to and are regularly told, if they have had contact with their child, they are not missing. We know that having contact with a child does not mean it is known where they are or that they are safe. We know that children who are missing and being exploited are likely to be told what to say and do by someone they are missing with.”*

**Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board**

In November 2020, the Mayor published his Action Plan to improve trust and confidence in the Met, and to address community concerns about disproportionality in the use of certain police powers affecting Black Londoners.<sup>70</sup> The plan highlighted the safeguarding of Black children, and that Black parents were worried about protecting their children from both crime and the Met. However, the plan does not address specific concerns over how a lack of trust might reduce the number of missing child reports made, or the impact this has on the response received by different children who go missing.

**Recommendation 6: By December 2023, MOPAC should conduct a review of the experiences of parents, carers and staff in reporting children missing in London. The results of this review should be used to shape a joint MOPAC-Met strategy to improve the process for reporting missing children, including how it will upskill 999 and 101 call handlers to provide appropriate and accurate advice.**

## The Met’s response to a missing child

Susannah Drury told the Committee that the Met’s response 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”.<sup>71</sup> The Bromley Safeguarding Children Partnership said that the Met had insufficient resource to develop an effective partnership response to missing children.<sup>72</sup>

In September 2021, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published its findings from its 2021 assessment of the progress made by the Met against recommendations and findings from its 2016, 2017 and 2018 child protection inspections.<sup>73</sup> While it found some improvements had been made, it also highlighted continued challenges, including in relation to the investigative response to missing children.

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<sup>70</sup> Mayor of London, [Action Plan: Transparency, Accountability and Trust in Policing](#), November 2020

<sup>71</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.29

<sup>72</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>73</sup> HMICFRS, [National Child Protection Inspection – assessment of progress: Metropolitan Police Service 11 January–12 February 2021](#), September 2021

In her 2023 review into standards of behaviour and culture of the Met, Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB said the Met “has not listened and it has not learned” to HMICFRS in relation to child protection. She said, “Six years on, the force themselves know they are still not gripping child protection”.<sup>74</sup>

In written evidence, the London Children Safeguarding Partnership said some BCUs had improved how they work with partners to safeguard missing children. It also said (as did Bromley Healthcare and Barnardo’s) that the Met had improved its attendance and engagement with multi-agency meetings to discuss high-risk young people. Hackney Children and Families Service said daily meetings between police leads for missing children and children’s social care were working well in Hackney.<sup>75</sup>

However, several respondents to the written call for evidence said the police needed to increase its attendance at multi-agency meetings to support missing children.<sup>76</sup> The Children’s Society said officers fail to confirm attendance for strategy meetings, and don’t always turn up. The London Safeguarding Children Partnership summarised the challenges reported by safeguarding partnerships across London:<sup>77</sup>

*“There are ongoing issues with lack of attendance of police officers at strategy meetings which hinders developing a multi-agency approach to missing children in a local area [...] There appears to be a lack of staff and a regular change of staff which means keeping up to date and maintaining regular communication is a challenge. This can lead to inconsistent responses across missing police teams. As a statutory safeguarding partner it is vital that there is a police presence at every missing child strategy meeting.”*

**The London Safeguarding Children Partnership**

In addition, Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board said police officers had attended missing strategy meetings less frequently since the creation of the North East BCU. It said this had resulted in “meetings being cancelled, and at times not being convened because of the lack of confidence with police attendance”.<sup>78</sup>

The Bromley Safeguarding Children Partnership said police officers do not have sufficient capacity to commit to strategy meetings. The Committee recognises that resource constraints are likely to be impacting attendance at multi-agency meetings, including causing short-notice cancellations and no-shows. However, the Committee thinks such meetings should be prioritised. They offer an important opportunity to address underlying

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<sup>74</sup> Met, [Baroness Casey review final report](#), 21 March 2023, p.140

<sup>75</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>76</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023; The Children’s Society, Bexley Safeguarding Partnership for Children and Young People, Hammersmith and Fulham Local Safeguarding Children Partnership, Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Partnership, Specialist Safeguarding Team Sutton and Jigsaw4u, London Children Safeguarding Partnership, Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership and Bromley Safeguarding Children Partnership.

<sup>77</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>78</sup> Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, [written evidence](#), February 2023

drivers of missing incidents and to prevent future incidents, potentially reducing police resource demands further down the line.

**Recommendation 7: The Met should attend all multi-agency strategy meetings for children who are missing or at risk of missing, or who have a history of missing incidents.**

Susannah Drury told the Committee that some families “feel that not much is done to find the missing person in those first 48 hours”. She suggested this was partly a problem with how the Met communicated to families.<sup>79</sup>

*“They [parents] 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 [...] 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.”*

**Susannah Drury, Missing People**

Sherry Peck said “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” could be difficult. She also highlighted challenges related to staffing including “a reduced number of officers”, officers being “desperately overstretched” and the “turnover of young, inexperienced officers”.<sup>80</sup> Sarah Parker said each area of the Met works differently in response to missing children, and that “achieving consistency of practice across such a large and complex organisation is really difficult”.<sup>81</sup>

The London Children Safeguarding Partnership said the Met “work[s] well with local authorities on missing children on the whole” but that “health and education services do not regularly receive information on missing children, which needs to be reviewed as they are key safeguarding partners who can help prevent children going missing”. It also said, as did the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, that the Met could do more to collaborate with other external partners, including charities.<sup>82</sup>

Susannah Drury told the Committee that Missing People offers a range of free services to help the police find and safeguard missing children. This includes providing support to a family and a “text-safe service” which lets a missing child know they can contact Missing People for independent and 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”.<sup>83</sup> A police officer needs to request a text-safe message, but

<sup>79</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.27

<sup>80</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.27

<sup>81</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.28

<sup>82</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>83</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.25

Susannah Drury said currently only 10 per cent of missing children in London receive a text-safe message.

**Recommendation 8: By December 2023, MOPAC should develop comprehensive guidance on how BCUs can work with voluntary sector services to enhance responses to missing children, including more active use of the text-safe service.**

### Assessing risk of missing children

The Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership said the Met can refuse to open missing reports, sometimes on an incorrect assumption that the child was not at risk. It gave several examples, including:<sup>84</sup>

- care placements reporting a child missing, only for the 101 call handler to refuse to log a missing report and instead advise that the child is likely to be at an address included on their “grab pack”,<sup>85</sup> without requiring evidence that a child is indeed in a safe place
- 101 call handlers giving “dismissive” responses to staff, carers and parents when trying to report teenagers missing
- parents attempting to report teenagers missing, and being told by 101 call handlers that they should go out and look for their children or that they are not missing
- the Met failing to communicate to social workers and care placements that it has decided not to open a missing child case following a missing report being made.

Sarah Parker told the Committee, “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”. She said the police can refuse missing reports for children who frequently go missing, despite the fact that frequent missing incidents may be a sign of exploitation and grooming.<sup>86</sup>

Hackney Children and Families Service said the Met has refused missing-children reports in cases where a child has said they are with friends, despite no checks being made to ensure that child is actually where they say they are.<sup>87</sup>

Commander Kevin Southworth said he was not aware of the Met refusing missing-children reports. He said: “This concept of refusing a report of a missing child I need to look into more closely, perhaps with partners offline [...] 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 Chiefs’ Council [...] We do not treat a child who is simply absent from care as being anything other than a missing child”.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>85</sup> A grab pack is formally known as the Looked After Child Information Sharing form. It should contain relevant information to assist the Police in locating and returning the child. A copy of the form can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>86</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.29

<sup>87</sup> Hackney Children and Families Service, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>88</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.29



The Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership said the Met should contact social workers when missing reports are made, regardless of whether the report results in a case being opened or not. It said without this intelligence, social workers may never know that a child has been reported missing, which makes it hard for them to ensure the child is safeguarded and to ensure care placements are suitable. It said this would also help the borough to better understand the prevalence of missing-children reports and which reports are most likely not to result in cases being opened.<sup>89</sup>

Written evidence from the Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, the Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership and the London Borough of Havering suggested that a rapid response from the Met was dependent on the child being deemed ‘high risk’. Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board said: “There is a view that police will only investigate missing cases that are deemed high risk. Some local officers have advised that for medium or low-risk cases, attempts to find these children won’t be made”.<sup>90</sup>

Several respondents to the call for evidence said the Met’s assessment of risk differed to that of other agencies, meaning that children at risk of harm were not receiving a sufficient response from the Met to their missing incident. The London Safeguarding Children Partnership said: “Some partnerships are concerned that the threshold determined by the Met to achieve high risk status is higher than for local authorities and they are concerned that some children categorised as medium risk are not being supported as effectively as they should be”.<sup>91</sup>

The London Safeguarding Children Partnership said, “It would be helpful if the Met shared their scoring system for prioritisation of children with partners and developed a better shared understanding of the risk factors”. The Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership also said it would be useful for the Met to share its risk thresholds; and that it would help children’s services to challenge cases where they think a child is particularly vulnerable, but is not considered as such by the Met.<sup>92</sup>

**Recommendation 9: By December 2023, the Met should review how it assesses risk in missing child cases and how different thresholds trigger different police responses. This review should be conducted with London boroughs, care providers and relevant voluntary organisations, with the aim of producing a jointly agreed risk assessment that is made available to all relevant services.**

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<sup>89</sup> Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership, [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>90</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>91</sup> London Safeguarding Children Partnership, [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>92</sup> Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership, [Written evidence](#), February 2023

## Responding to victims of criminal exploitation

Susannah Drury told the Committee that an initial missing episode may be the first sign that a child is being exploited. She said the response to the first missing incident was therefore vital in preventing the exploitation from becoming further entrenched.<sup>93</sup>

*“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 [...] The most important thing is to see a first missing episode as perhaps the first sign of exploitation.”*

**Susannah Drury, Missing People**

Commander Kevin Southworth told the Committee that the Met has stopped prosecuting children who have been victims of criminal exploitation into county lines work, unless there is evidence of “wilful criminality”. He said the Met now recognises children in county lines as being “vulnerable rather than criminals”; and seeks to divert children away from county lines work and into a safer lifestyle, without them being criminalised.<sup>94</sup>

Since 2018, MOPAC has also funded efforts to safeguard young victims of criminal exploitation through the Rescue and Response service. Rescue and Response supports vulnerable young people up to the age of 25, who are victims of criminal exploitation, particularly related to county lines drug-distribution networks. Since its creation, Rescue and Response has engaged 454 young people. MOPAC reported that, after engaging with the project, young people experienced a 77 per cent reduction in missing episodes, amongst other positive outcomes.<sup>95</sup>

Commander Kevin Southworth said Rescue and Response was “fundamental” in the move away from criminalising children involved in county lines. However, he said he has discussed with MOPAC about the need for the Met to increase its referrals into Rescue and Response.<sup>96</sup>

The Committee agrees that children who are missing and victims of criminal exploitation must be seen first and foremost as victims. However, evidence received by the Committee suggests that this is not always happening in practice. Hackney Children and Families Service said there should be “greater clarity about safeguarding procedures when children are being classed as ‘wanted’ by police rather than ‘missing’”.<sup>97</sup> Similarly in written evidence, both Catch22 and the Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership said there were

<sup>93</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.11

<sup>94</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.9

<sup>95</sup> MOPAC, [Rescue and response county lines project: supporting young Londoners affected by county lines exploitation](#), December 2021

<sup>96</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.4

<sup>97</sup> Hackney Children and Families Service, [written evidence](#), February 2023

cases where a missing child is also ‘wanted’ by the police as a suspect for a criminal offence, and the Met has closed the missing case. Catch22 said it was concerned this might have an impact on the resources deployed to locate the vulnerable child.<sup>98</sup>

**Recommendation 10: The Met should write to all London boroughs, children’s care services and relevant voluntary organisations to clarify its policies that inform safeguarding and operational responses to children who are both missing and wanted.**

## Improving responses to looked-after children

Evidence received by the Committee suggests some improvements have been made in the way the Met manages children who go missing from care settings.

The Philomena Protocol is a police-led scheme that asks carers to identify children and young people who are at risk of going missing; and to record vital information about them that can be used to help find them quickly and safely, and improve information-sharing between partner organisations.<sup>99</sup> It was rolled out to all BCUs in October 2020 and is designed to ensure a proportionate response to missing child incidents from all agencies. The Met has Philomena Protocol agreements in place with just under 400 care homes across London.<sup>100</sup> In July 2022, the Mayor said that the protocol had led to a “50 per cent reduction in missing incidents in some care placements and an average of a 29 per cent reduction across all targeted placements”.<sup>101</sup>

Commander Kevin Southworth said that the Philomena Protocol has helped the Met and carers to better manage children who frequently go missing, and 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”.<sup>102</sup>

In addition, Commander Kevin Southworth, Will Balakrishnan and Beverley Hendricks all praised the impact of the Philomena Protocol in supporting better joint responses between the Met and care homes.<sup>103</sup>

Will Balakrishnan told the Committee that the implementation of the Philomena Protocol was an example of “brilliant joint working”.<sup>104</sup> Beverley Hendricks also praised the Philomena Protocol: “Where we have seen it working, it works really well. It does not just

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<sup>98</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>99</sup> The Met, [MPS Missing Persons Process & Partnership: Local Policing & Children’s’ Care Home – Joint Responsibility Agreement](#)

<sup>100</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.15

<sup>101</sup> MQT, [Missing Children](#), 6 July 2022

<sup>102</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.15

<sup>103</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>104</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.24

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.”<sup>105</sup>

In written evidence, Missing People also praised the Philomena Protocol. It said it helped to ensure children in care are not over-reported to the police and that unnecessary reports to the police can be harmful for relationships between children and carers. However, it also warned that the protocol could have unintended consequences if used in the wrong way.<sup>106</sup>

*“When the focus in their implementation is on reducing the number of care experienced child missing reports, rather than a child-centred response focused on risk and harm, then there is a clear risk of children falling through the safeguarding net, from under-reporting and under-recording of missing children.”*

#### **Missing People**

The Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership also said in written evidence that the protocol can be used by the Met to push back on missing reports, which made multi-agency responses to missing children more difficult.

The Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership said this issue had become more acute since the Met stopped using the term “absent” for certain children who didn’t meet the risk threshold for being recorded as “missing”.<sup>107</sup> A record of an absent incident would have previously triggered a notification to children’s services. Now however, if a missing-child report is not accepted, or does not meet the threshold, no absent incident is recorded and no notification is made. The Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership said this has created a “gap in our intel”, since “if the social worker does not know that the placement tried to report them missing, they are not able to follow up and quality assure the placements follow up actions”.<sup>108</sup>

Both Missing People and the Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership recommended that the Met should review the implementation of the Philomena Protocol.<sup>109</sup> The Philomena Protocol provides an excellent example of how strong partnership working and data sharing can improve outcomes for children. However, the protocol should be subject to a review to ensure it is working as intended and to identify practical areas for further improvement.

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<sup>105</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.17

<sup>106</sup> Missing People, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>107</sup> Previously, if a child was reported missing the Met would either determine them as ‘missing’ (when the child’s whereabouts can’t be established and there is concern for their safety) or ‘absent’ (when the child is not at the place they are expected or required to be). According to Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership, the use of the term ‘absent’ is no longer used, and Children are recorded only as absent or missing. See more [here \(section 4\)](#).

<sup>108</sup> Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership, [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>109</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

**Recommendation 11: By December 2023, MOPAC and the Met should review the implementation of the Philomena Protocol to assess whether it is having its desired impact and whether any improvements can be made.**

### Working across boundaries

Many children in London are placed in care outside of their home area. Sarah Parker and Commander Kevin Southworth said this was partly due to the fact that high property prices in London meant a significant volume of care placements are in areas where property was cheaper.<sup>110</sup>

Commander Kevin Southworth said that moving children to a different local authority adds 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”.<sup>111</sup> Barnardo’s said:<sup>112</sup>

*“Children placed out of area can feel lonely and isolated and miss friends and family in their home community which can act as a significant push factor to run away. Out of area placements have grown significantly in recent years. The number of looked after children placed outside their home local authority increased by around 17,800 (28 per cent) between the years ending March 2010 and March 2020, rising from 23,000 (37 per cent of all placements) to 32,850 (41 per cent of all placements).”*  
**Barnardo’s**

The Committee received evidence that suggested the Met’s response to missing children who have been placed in care settings outside their home borough could be improved. Beverley Hendricks identified several challenges over how information about children at risk of going missing is shared by the police between different boroughs.<sup>113</sup> The Children’s Society said information is not shared between BCUs when children are moved to a new area. Sarah Parker said there were challenges with police sharing data across police service boundaries.<sup>114</sup> The London Borough of Tower Hamlets said missing-children protocols between BCUs are inconsistent – for example, whether police officers are expected to attend strategy meetings in cases where the child has returned.<sup>115</sup>

Commander Kevin Southworth said that the Met needed to work more closely with children’s services to improve coordination between BCUs when children are moved out of their own local authority area.<sup>116</sup> In written evidence, the Hammersmith and Fulham Local Safeguarding Children Partnership said BCUs from both the home and destination areas

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<sup>110</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>111</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.15

<sup>112</sup> Barnardo’s, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>113</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.17

<sup>114</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.18

<sup>115</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>116</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.22

should maintain close working relationships. The London Safeguarding Children Partnership and Bromley Healthcare said police officers from both the home and placing BCUs should attend strategy meetings to ensure a joined-up understanding of the levels of risk and responsibilities.<sup>117</sup>

**Recommendation 12: For children in care who are placed within London, but outside their home area, the Met should establish clear processes between the home BCU and the destination BCU, or neighbouring police service, to facilitate effective information exchange and joint attendance at strategy meetings; and to ensure that, in the event of any future missing incident, there is an effective joint response.**

In written evidence, The Children’s Society, the Bexley Safeguarding Partnership for Children and Young People, and the Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board all said there are additional challenges when a child is moved outside of London completely. Catch22 said there have been cases where a child has gone missing from one police service area and is suspected to be in another, but both police services have refused to lead the missing case.<sup>118</sup>

Sarah Parker told the Committee: “If a child goes missing across a local authority or a police service border, there are then issues about whose responsibility that child is and who picks that up”. She said there have been incidents where: “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’”.<sup>119</sup>

In written evidence, the Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership, and Hackney Children and Families Service both said that social care teams find it hard to find contact details for missing-children’s teams in services outside of London. The Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership said there should be a clear phone and email list for missing units across the country.<sup>120</sup>

**Recommendation 13: The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) should maintain a national directory of phone numbers and emails for missing-children’s teams in each police service across England and Wales. MOPAC should write to the NPCC to request this.**

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<sup>117</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>118</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>119</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022

<sup>120</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

## Chapter four: supporting returning children

### Police Prevention Interviews

The process for supporting a child who returns after going missing can be vital to prevent future missing incidents. The Met's London Child Exploitation Operating Protocol 2021 sets out two stages to the process: the Police Prevention Interview (formerly known as the Safe and Well Check); and the Return Home Interview, which is the statutory responsibility of the local authority responsible for the care of the child.<sup>121</sup>

The purpose of a Police Prevention Interview is to establish whether the child has come to harm whilst missing, and what can be done to prevent future missing incidents. The London Child Exploitation Operating Protocol states that the Met should conduct interviews within 24 hours from the time a child is located or returned home. Interviews can be conducted by speaking to the relevant care professional or the child on the phone or speaking to the child face-to-face. The outcome of the prevention interview is recorded on the Met's Merlin investigation report and automatically shared to the relevant local authorities.<sup>122</sup>

In 2021, HMICFRS found that the preventative interviews conducted by the Met generally focused on "checking that the child has returned and establishing where they have been".<sup>123</sup> It said the Met "should also explore more widely any particular factors that led to the child going missing and any ongoing risk".<sup>124</sup> Hackney Children and Families Service said in written evidence that interviews consist of "formulaic questions leading to simple feedback" that were not useful to understand "why a child went missing and what might help them to not go missing in the future". The Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership said that a child "usually responds that they are fine as they are not prompted any further" and that the Met should be "more proactive to identify any signs of distress or injury".<sup>125</sup>

In 2021, HMICFRS said the Met conducted the interviews over the phone, "which means officers can't see a child's demeanour or physical state".<sup>126</sup> In written evidence, Hackney Children and Families Service said too many Police Prevention Interviews are conducted over the phone; and the Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership said they are conducted on the phone "more often than not". Specialist Safeguarding Team

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<sup>121</sup> The Met, [The London Child Exploitation Operating Protocol 2021](#), p.43

<sup>122</sup> The Met, [The London Child Exploitation Operating Protocol 2021](#), p.44

<sup>123</sup> HMICFRS, [National Child Protection Inspection – assessment of progress: Metropolitan Police Service 11 January–12 February 2021](#), September 2021, p.7

<sup>124</sup> HMICFRS, [National Child Protection Inspection – assessment of progress: Metropolitan Police Service 11 January–12 February 2021](#), September 2021, p.7

<sup>125</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>126</sup> HMICFRS, [National Child Protection Inspection – assessment of progress: Metropolitan Police Service 11 January–12 February 2021](#), September 2021

Sutton and Jigsaw4u said they are sometimes conducted with a parent or carer only, rather than the child themselves. The prevailing view across these responses was that Police Prevention Interviews are more effective when delivered face-to-face and directly with the child.<sup>127</sup>

Commander Kevin Southworth suggested to the Committee that the Met was looking at the effectiveness of its Police Prevention Interviews: “I do not think we have empirical evidence to say how successful it has been [...] 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”.<sup>128</sup>

In written evidence, Catch22 said the Met should review how Police Prevention Interviews are being delivered, including looking at the number of interviews conducted face-to-face versus by phone.<sup>129</sup>

**Recommendation 13: By December 2023, the Met should conduct a review of Police Prevention Interviews delivered in 2022-23, to include:**

- the number of children who received an interview
- whether they were conducted face-to-face or over the phone
- whether they were conducted with the young person, or the parent or guardian
- whether a child willingly engaged
- whether a child made a significant disclosure
- the outcome of the interview.

**The Met should share its findings with the Police and Crime Committee.**

Respondents to the Committee’s call for evidence acknowledged the challenges for the Met in conducting Police Prevention Interviews. In written evidence, both Barnardo’s and the Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership said children can be reluctant to engage in Police Prevention Interviews, especially when they have been victims of child criminal and/or sexual exploitation. Barnardo’s said child victims of exploitation “do not want to disclose details of where they have been, who they have been with, and what they were doing”. The Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership said victims of exploitation do not want to be known as a “snitch”.<sup>130</sup>

The Children’s Society said children don’t want to speak to the police “as they haven’t got a trusted/positive relationship with them and may fear they’re in trouble for going missing, as opposed to viewing it as a safeguarding mechanism”.<sup>131</sup> Despite these challenges, evidence

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<sup>127</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>128</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.36

<sup>129</sup> Catch22, [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>130</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>131</sup> The Children’s Society, [Written evidence](#), February 2023



received by the Committee also suggested several improvements could be made to the delivery of prevention interviews to maximise the likelihood of a child engaging.<sup>132</sup>

- The Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership and Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership said officers delivering Police Prevention Interviews should be in plain clothes rather than in uniform.
- Hackney Children and Families Service said a consistent officer should conduct interviews for children with repeated missing episodes, so a relationship can form between officers and a child over time.
- The London Borough of Tower Hamlets said officers conducting Police Prevention Interviews needed to be more joined-up with social care professionals, so they are better able to identify the underlying causes of the missing episode.
- The London Safeguarding Children Partnership said all interviews with missing children should be delivered by specialist and skilled officers.
- The London Safeguarding Children Partnership also said that the Met should consider conducting the interviews jointly with social workers where it would be helpful to the young person involved.

**Recommendation 14: By December 2023, the Met should establish standardised principles for effective delivery of Police Prevention Interviews. This should include:**

- **specialist, trained officers in plain clothes to conduct each interview**
- **a child who goes missing on multiple occasions to receive an interview with the same officer, wherever possible**
- **interviews conducted alongside a child’s social worker/support worker where appropriate**
- **improved sharing of information with borough safeguarding teams and social care partners.**

## Return Home Interviews

Following a Police Prevention Interview, statutory guidance states that all children who return from a missing episode should have access to a Return Home Interview.<sup>133</sup> These provide an “opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home”.<sup>134</sup> The interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting.

It is the responsibility of London boroughs to offer Return Home Interviews, and they often partner with voluntary organisations to deliver them. Sarah Parker told the Committee that there are several delivery partners across London; and that there is neither “uniformity of practice” nor “a nationally recognised package or even a London-wide package of training” for Return Home Interviews.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>133</sup> DFE, [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#), January 2014

<sup>134</sup> DFE, [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#), January 2014, p.14

<sup>135</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.39

In written evidence, the London Safeguarding Children Partnership said, “The quality of reports differs, possibly depending on the cooperation of young people and their families as well as the training and understanding of the officers involved”.<sup>136</sup> Catch22 said there needs to be more consistency in the delivery of Return Home Interviews and better understanding of effective delivery. Catch22 also said the term ‘interview’ was too “formal and heavy-duty”, and that the process was fundamentally about identifying what happened and how they can support the child to prevent it happening again.<sup>137</sup>

Sarah Parker told the Committee that it is important that children who repeatedly go missing are offered Return Home Interviews with the same professional, in order to help build trust that can lead to significant disclosures.<sup>138</sup>

*“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.”*

**Sarah Parker, Catch22**

A Peer Outreach Worker told the Committee that when a child returns, it is necessary to gain an understanding of: “how that young person ended up in that situation and listening to their needs to make sure that they never have to go through that ever again, and also continuously checking up on them to see if they’re OK”.

Based on the evidence received by the Committee, existing processes do not appear to be achieving this.

**Recommendation 15: In 2023, MOPAC should work with the Met, London boroughs and organisations involved in the delivery of Return Home Interviews in London to establish a standardised approach to this delivery, to ensure every returning child is guaranteed a consistent experience that is based on best practice.**

## Long-term support

Several respondents to the call for evidence stressed the importance of information from Police Prevention Interviews and Return Home Interviews being shared across relevant

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<sup>136</sup> London Safeguarding Children Partnership, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>137</sup> Catch22, [written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>138</sup> GLA, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.40

agencies, to inform the delivery of long-term support for children to prevent future incidents of going missing.<sup>139</sup>

Susannah Drury told the Committee that Return Home Interviews “can be a really incredible way of finding out that there is something seriously wrong in that child’s life” but are only useful if they lead to “follow-on support specifically for a returned child or referrals into other services that the child is then able to access”.<sup>140</sup> Sherry Peck said that Return Home Interviews should lead directly to the implementation of a support plan to prevent future incidents, but that this was not always happening due to a lack of resources in the system.<sup>141</sup> Sarah Parker said it was “crucial” that information gathered through a Return Home Interview was acted upon.<sup>142</sup>

In written evidence provided to the Committee, The Children’s Society said that when information is shared and not acted upon, it “reinforces the feeling that people don’t care and therefore may not help reduce further missing episodes”.<sup>143</sup> Missing People said children could further lose trust in services if they didn’t receive meaningful support on their return.<sup>144</sup>

*“Children often make significant disclosures following their return from being missing. If action is not taken following these disclosures children are likely to lose faith in the professionals around them, and may be less likely to share information in the future. The response at the point of return should be seen as of equal importance to the response while young people are missing.”*

#### **Missing People**

A Peer Outreach Worker told the Committee that a returning child needs to have a relationship with a trusted person offering consistent support, who understands the reasons for them going missing.

*“Having somebody there whom you see as a safe person is so important in making sure that it never happens again and so important in making sure that the person goes on to use this experience as a pivot to a better life, check-ins and really having a good understanding of why the person ended up going missing and listening to them and making sure that there are precautions in place.”*

#### **Peer Outreach Worker**

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<sup>139</sup> [Written evidence](#), February 2023: the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and Hackney Children and Families Service referred to good examples of information from Return Home Interviews being used by police and social care teams effectively. London Safeguarding Children Partnership, Catch22, Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership, Specialist Safeguarding Team Sutton and Jigsaw4u and Missing People all highlighted challenges with how information is shared between Return Home Interview providers, London boroughs, social care teams and the Met.

<sup>140</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.37

<sup>141</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.37

<sup>142</sup> London Assembly, [Police and Crime Committee – transcript](#), 29 September 2022, p.40

<sup>143</sup> The Children’s Society, [Written evidence](#), February 2023

<sup>144</sup> Missing People, [Written evidence](#), February 2023

The Committee was also told by a Peer Outreach Worker that there should be opportunities for returning children to engage in positive activities that don't focus on them as missing children, but that provide them with something interesting and fulfilling to engage with.

*“When I returned home and back into education [...] out of the blue there was an opportunity for the Jack Petchey Speak Out competition and they were doing it on that day. I came into school feeling like I did not want to be there, but [...] I think it speaks to wider opportunities that young people have. If there is something that a young person can get engaged with without it centring on the fact that they have just gone missing, whilst developing their personal skills and care and stuff like that [...] could be a really great thing.”*

**Peer Outreach Worker**

The Mayor's Police and Crime Plan states: “The Met will work with partners to increase even further the speed with which missing children and adults are located, taking account of an individual's specific circumstances and risks to shape the response and contributing to wider safeguarding planning for their longer-term safety”.<sup>145</sup>

The Committee believes further focus must be placed by MOPAC on the final part of this commitment to ensure that returning children have access to support and services that can prevent repeat missing incidents and protect them from harm.

**Recommendation 16: To fulfil commitments in the Mayor's Police and Crime Plan, MOPAC should fund projects designed to provide longer-term support for children who have returned from a missing incident.**

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<sup>145</sup> MOPAC, [Police and Crime Plan 2022-25](#), 24 March 2022

## Committee activity

### London Assembly Police and Crime Committee (formal meeting) – Wednesday 29 September 2022<sup>146</sup>

- Commander Kevin Southworth, Head of Profession, Safeguarding, Metropolitan Police Service
- Will Balakrishnan, Director of Commissioning and Partnerships, MOPAC
- Susannah Drury, Director of Policy and Development, Missing People
- Sarah Parker, Research and Development Officer, Catch22; and Co-Chair, the English Coalition for Runaway Children
- Marc Stevens, Senior Service Manager, Catch22
- Beverley Hendricks, Assistant Director for Safeguarding and Social Care, London Borough of Haringey
- Sherry Peck, Chief Executive, Safer London

### London Assembly Police and Crime Committee (informal meeting) – Wednesday 8 February 2023<sup>147</sup>

- Five Peer Outreach Workers, GLA
- Mark Mouna, Children and Young People Participation Co-ordinator, GLA
- Rebecca Palmer, Senior Children and Young People Participation Officer, GLA

### Respondents to written call for evidence, February 2023<sup>148</sup>

- Barnardo's
- Bexley Safeguarding Partnership for Children and Young People
- Bromley Healthcare
- Bromley Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Catch22
- Central London Community Healthcare Trust
- Hackney Children and Families Service
- Hammersmith and Fulham Local Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Haringey Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Islington Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership
- London Borough of Havering
- London Borough of Tower Hamlets
- London Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Missing People
- Specialist Safeguarding Team Sutton and Jigsaw4u (joint submission)
- The Children's Society
- Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board

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<sup>146</sup> Meeting information and transcript can be found [here](#).

<sup>147</sup> No transcript of this meeting has been published, to protect the privacy of young people.

<sup>148</sup> [All written responses are published here](#).

## Other formats and languages

If you, or someone you know needs this report in large print or braille, or a copy of the summary and main findings in another language, then please call us on: 020 7983 4100 or email [assembly.translations@london.gov.uk](mailto:assembly.translations@london.gov.uk)

### Chinese

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### Vietnamese

Nếu ông (bà) muốn nội dung văn bản này được dịch sang tiếng Việt, xin vui lòng liên hệ với chúng tôi bằng điện thoại, thư hoặc thư điện tử theo địa chỉ ở trên.

### Greek

*Εάν επιθυμείτε περίληψη αυτού του κειμένου στην γλώσσα σας, παρακαλώ καλέστε τον αριθμό ή επικοινωνήστε μαζί μας στην ανωτέρω ταχυδρομική ή την ηλεκτρονική διεύθυνση.*

### Turkish

Bu belgenin kendi dilinize çevrilmiş bir özetini okumak isterseniz, lütfen yukarıdaki telefon numarasını arayın, veya posta ya da e-posta adresi aracılığıyla bizimle temasa geçin.

### Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਸ ਦਸਤਾਵੇਜ਼ ਦਾ ਸੰਖੇਪ ਆਪਣੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਲੈਣਾ ਚਾਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਇਸ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ ਜਾਂ ਉਪਰ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਡਾਕ ਜਾਂ ਈਮੇਲ ਪਤੇ 'ਤੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

### Hindi

यदि आपको इस दस्तावेज का सारांश अपनी भाषा में चाहिए तो उपर दिये हुए नंबर पर फोन करें या उपर दिये गये डाक पते या ई मेल पते पर हम से संपर्क करें।

### Bengali

আপনি যদি এই দলিলের একটা সারাংশ নিজের ভাষায় পেতে চান, তাহলে দয়া করে ফো করবেন অথবা উল্লিখিত ডাক ঠিকানায় বা ই-মেইল ঠিকানায় আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করবেন।

### Urdu

اگر آپ کو اس دستاویز کا خلاصہ اپنی زبان میں درکار ہو تو، براہ کرم نمبر پر فون کریں یا مذکورہ بالا ڈاک کے پتے یا ای میل پتے پر ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

### Arabic

الوصول على ملخص لهذا المستند بلغةك،  
فجراء الاتصال برقم الهاتف أو الاتصال على  
العنوان البريدي العادي أو عنوان البريدي  
الإلكتروني أعلاه.

### Gujarati

જો તમારે આ દસ્તાવેજનો સાર તમારી ભાષામાં જોઈતો હોય તો ઉપર આપેલ નંબર પર ફોન કરો અથવા ઉપર આપેલ ટપાલ અથવા ઈ-મેઈલ સરનામા પર અમારો સંપર્ક કરો.

## Connect with us

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